INSTANCES AND PRINCIPLES OF DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP: A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY OF ILLINOIS MIDDLE SCHOOL PRINCIPALS’ LEADERSHIP PRACTICES

BY

JON PATRICK GRENDA

DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in Educational Organization and Leadership with a concentration in Educational Administration and Leadership in the Graduate College of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2011

Urbana, Illinois

Doctoral Committee:

Associate Professor Donald G. Hackmann, Chair
Professor Janet S. Gaffney
Associate Professor Daniel J. Walsh
Assistant Professor Anjalé D. Welton
Abstract

In today’s era of high-stakes accountability in education, the challenges of leadership for learning may be too great for one leader. Today’s public school principals may benefit from the support of teachers and others to serve as additional instructional leaders. Many schools are adopting a distributed leadership approach to address this issue, and middle level schools may be well suited for the adoption of a distributed form of leadership.

This multiple-case study examined how three successful principals of middle schools in Illinois utilized distributed leadership practices within those schools, examining the actions or activities of the principals that helped to facilitate distributed leadership practices, the barriers or challenges encountered when attempting to implement distributed leadership practices and what strategies or practices have been put into place to overcome them, and how the presence of interdisciplinary teaming influenced distributed leadership practices in middle level schools. Three schools were examined, utilizing data from a total of 23 interviews of teachers and principals, observations of building leadership and interdisciplinary team meetings during 9 visits, and document analysis.

Findings from this research show that organizational structures have to be developed that permit the schools’ faculty and staff to be engaged in multiple groups, letting tasks be distributed and permitting democratic governance of the school. Findings also demonstrated how the development and communication of a common vision for student learning was important. Teachers were regarded as experts and were engaged as leaders to advance curricular goals, professional development, and building management. Most importantly, distributed leadership appeared to be significantly strengthened by a school’s adherence to the middle school philosophy. In schools in which interdisciplinary teams formed the backbone of the
organizational structure, the teams were able to operate as a mechanism for participatory
decision making and teacher leadership development. It appears that the highly collaborative
nature of teaming, and the middle school philosophy in general, may be a factor contributing to
the success of a distributed form of leadership.

As distributed forms of leadership are becoming more common in schools, this study
provides some insight into the creation and support of this type of leadership in middle schools.
The collaborative nature of interdisciplinary teams that is a signature practice of the middle
school concept, as well as the trust and relationships necessary to engage in effective teaming,
also seem to be factors in the success of developing distributed leadership.
This work is dedicated to my family. Without the support from everyone, it would not have been possible. Tyler, I hope to make you proud and to show you that you can accomplish anything if you put your mind to it. Laura, you are my best friend and I love you more than I can express with words. You are my inspiration.
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank each member of my committee, Donald Hackmann, Janet Gaffney, Daniel Walsh, and Anjalé Welton, for their continued support and encouragement. Don, I especially want to thank you for your patience and mentoring. This has been a long road, and you never doubted I could finish. I would like to thank Kristina Hesbol for providing me with a spark that managed to be kept alive for many years. I have appreciated your friendship throughout this process. I would like to acknowledge Steve Jones and Craig Eckert for providing the inspiration that moved me toward a career in education. I would also like to thank the principals and faculty of my case schools for the time they provided me during my study and the experiences they shared. Thank you all!
Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction ......................................................................................1
  Distributed Leadership .......................................................................................3
  Statement of the Problem ....................................................................................4
  Purpose of the Study ............................................................................................6
  Research Questions ...............................................................................................7
  Author’s Statement ...............................................................................................7
  Significance of the Study ......................................................................................8
  Assumptions of the Study ...................................................................................10
  Delimitations .........................................................................................................10
  Limitations of the Study ......................................................................................11
  Definition of Terms ..............................................................................................11
  Summary ...............................................................................................................12

Chapter Two: Literature Review ............................................................................14
  Conceptual Framework .........................................................................................16
  Distributed Leadership .........................................................................................21
  Middle Level Education .......................................................................................43
  Summary of the Literature ..................................................................................75

Chapter Three: Methodology ...............................................................................78
  Research Questions ..............................................................................................78
  Research Design ...................................................................................................79
  Institutional Review Board Approval and Ethical Considerations .......................85
  Data Collection Procedures ...............................................................................86
  Data Analysis Procedures ...................................................................................89
  Summary .............................................................................................................92

Chapter Four: The Cases .....................................................................................94
  Case A: John Adams Junior High School .............................................................99
  Case B: Blue Trail Middle School .......................................................................115
  Case C: Cardinal Middle School .......................................................................129
  Summary ............................................................................................................146

Chapter Five: Cross-Case Analysis and Findings ...............................................148
  Research Question One: Facilitating Distributed Leadership Practices ..........149
  Research Question Two: Distributed Leadership’s Barriers, Challenges, and Strategies ........................................................................................................164
  Research Question Three: Influence of Teaming on Distributed Leadership ....172
  Summary of Findings .........................................................................................177

Chapter Six: Summary, Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations ............179
  Summary of the Problem Statement and Methodology ....................................179
  Findings .............................................................................................................181
  Limitations .........................................................................................................183
Chapter One

Introduction

If there ever was a time when the principal could ride in alone on a white horse, like John Wayne or Joan of Arc, and save a troubled school, those days are certainly over. I don’t know of any administrator who doesn’t need help in fulfilling his or her impossible job description. (Barth, 2001, p. 445)

In this era of high-stakes accountability, public school educators face considerable challenges to demonstrate continuous student achievement gains. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) has created a culture of test-driven accountability that has become the norm in schools across the United States, with annual requirements to show increases in student learning and to achieve adequate yearly progress (AYP). Consequently, the principalship has become increasingly demanding and complex over the past few decades (Grubb & Flessa, 2006; Murphy, 1991; Whitaker, 1998). As school leaders attempt to negotiate the countless demands placed upon them, curricular decisions, best instructional practices, and assessment strategies are placed at the forefront, as schools are required to evidence improvements in student learning.

School leadership is a topic examined continually by the educational research community, with empirical findings evolving along with the organizational challenges and changes seen in schools. Past research has concluded that strong principal leadership is essential to programmatic change and instructional improvement (Camburn, Rowan, & Taylor, 2003). Much of the early literature on school leadership focused specifically on the characteristics and behaviors of principals (Harris, 2005). This view of leadership success portrayed an individual who created new organizational routines and structures that transformed the school’s culture, contributing to increased teacher satisfaction, higher teacher expectations for students, and improved student achievement (Gronn, 2002; Spillane, 2005). It was suggested that principals would need to possess the characteristics and skills needed to remedy all the deficits of the
schools in which they worked (Elmore, 2000). However, as over two decades of school reform mandates have placed increasing demands on building leaders, the notion of the principal as the single, heroic leader has become obsolete (Lashway, 2003; Timperley, 2005).

Numerous responsibilities, including managerial tasks, instructional monitoring, fiscal responsibilities, student issues, parental and community partnerships, and accountability to raise student achievement, have overwhelmed today’s school leaders. Current research suggests that organizational models being reconceptualized, with a shift away from traditional, hierarchical models of school leadership to those that support the practice of distributed leadership (Elmore, 1999b; Gronn, 2000; Smylie, Mayrowetz, Murphy, & Seashore-Louis, 2007; Spillane, Hallett, & Diamond, 2003; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). Scholars argue that school leadership no longer should be defined by position of the principalship but instead by the product of the interactions of school leaders, followers, and their situations (Spilllane et al., 2001). This perspective is valuable because past literature on school leadership overwhelmingly has focused on the principal’s singular role as the formally appointed building leader (Blase & Blase, 1999; Dwyer, Lee, Barnett, Filby, & Rowan, 1985; Heck & Hallinger, 1999; Leithwood & Duke, 1999; Murphy, 1988a; Smith & Andrews, 1989). Although the importance of the principalship is well documented, building leaders can neither achieve nor sustain improvements in student learning by themselves (Elmore, 1999a; Leithwood et al., 2007; Marzano, 2003; Spillane et al., 2003).

Some scholars assert that a restructured conception of school leadership is needed because principals do not work in isolation to lead schools to success. In a knowledge-intensive and complex enterprise like teaching and learning, leadership roles must extend beyond the principalship. This approach encompasses a more achievable and sustainable leadership practice
that requires wide distribution of essential leadership responsibilities across the organizational structure (Elmore, 2000; Timperley, 2005).

**Distributed Leadership**

Distributed leadership theory is an emerging conceptualization that relies on the guidance and direction of multiple human resources. This view of leadership allows the organization to benefit from the combined expertise and joint interaction of school leaders and professional colleagues. Together, this group can work in concert toward a common goal so that the outcome is greater than the sum of their individual actions (Elmore, 2000; Gronn, 2000; Spillane, 2005). Distributed leadership moves beyond the philosophy that leadership emanates solely from the formal position of the principal and instead frames leadership as a practice that involves an array of individuals whose dynamic interactions mobilize and guide teachers in the process of instructional change and learning improvements (Harris, 2005; Spillane, 2005; Timperley, 2005).

Distributed leadership does not take the responsibility and authority of leading the school away from the principal. Most importantly, distributed leadership does not mean that there is not anyone responsible for the overall organization. Instead, it requires the principal to understand the synergistic relationship between leadership and organizational structures, school vision, and school culture (Elmore, 2000). The concept of distributed leadership postulates that the job of administrative leaders is primarily about recognizing and enhancing the skills and knowledge of people in the organization, in the process creating and enriching human capacity, or leadership density (Mayrowetz, Murphy, Seashore-Louis, & Smylie, 2007; Murphy, 2005; Spillane, Camburn, & Lewis, 2006). Lastly, distributed leadership means cultivating a system that holds various pieces of the organization together in a mutually interdependent and productive
relationship with one other, and holding individuals accountable for their contributions to the collective result (Harris, 2005).

**Statement of the Problem**

Although effective principal leadership has been accepted as a significant contributor to school success (Lieberman & Miller, 2004; Marzano, 2003; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003), in the current accountability era, public school principals have had many more complex and varied job responsibilities thrust upon them. Because the challenge of leadership for learning may be too great for one leader, the addition of these innumerable tasks to principals’ growing list of responsibilities may require the support of teachers and others to serve as additional instructional leaders (Camburn et al., 2003; Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Elmore, 2000; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998; Lambert, 2003; Lambert, Walker, Zimmerman, Cooper, & Lambert, 1995; Schmoker, 1999; Spillane et al., 2001). School principals often report feeling overwhelmed, because they are unable to accomplish the numerous managerial duties inherent in their positions and still have sufficient time to focus on improving the curricular program and student learning outcomes (Danielson, 2007). Providing leadership for learning in this landscape requires a collaborative effort, involving all members of the learning community. Consequently, many schools are adopting a distributed leadership approach to address this issue (Camburn et al., 2003; Neuman & Simmons, 2000).

As a growing body of research on distributed leadership has begun to influence the policy and practice of school leadership, a gap appears to be forming in the literature. Initial studies focused on elementary schools (Heller & Firestone, 1995; Spillane et al., 2001; MacBeath, 2005) and subsequent studies have been centered on school systems and high schools (Bennett, Harvey,
However, there is a notable lack of empirical research related to distributed leadership practices in middle level schools. Although some case study research has examined distributed leadership in the context of a junior high school’s adoption of middle school practices (Burke, 2003; Polite, 1993) and others have examined distributed practices of curriculum leaders in middle level schools (Pustejovsky, Spillane, Heaton, & Lewis, 2009), there is a dearth of research investigating how distributed leadership practices are facilitated by middle level principals.

Middle level schools may be well suited for the adoption of a distributed form of leadership. Those schools that have implemented the research-based characteristics of the middle school philosophy may operate with an interdisciplinary teaming structure, which is an effective mechanism for teacher discussion and decision making. For example, Scribner, Sawyer, Watson, and Myers (2007) have documented how the use of teacher teams can promote distributed leadership practices within a high school setting. Other middle school elements, such as common planning time, flexible scheduling, common adjacent classrooms for team teachers, and team autonomy, encourage collaboration and growth among teachers (Valentine, Clark, Hackmann, & Petzko, 2004). These practices also may facilitate the development of leadership roles among teachers and foster the formation of professional learning communities within teams (Scribner et al., 2007). Although not all middle level schools may implement a middle school philosophy, or do so to varying degrees, Valentine, Clark, Hackmann, and Petzko (2002) found that as many as 79% of middle level schools may practice some form of interdisciplinary teaming.

Several practices and elements constitute the middle school philosophy or middle school concept, but interdisciplinary teaming is considered a hallmark of exemplary middle schools (Beane, 1993; Felner et al., 1997; Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 1999; George & Alexander,
2003; Merenbloom, 1991; Mertens, Flowers, & Mulhall, 1998). Valentine, Clark, Irvin, Keefe, and Melton (1993) identified teaming as a “signature practice” (p. 49) of this school level. As middle level educators attempt to create programs that serve both the academic and emotional needs of young adolescents, additional structures often are advocated that encourage small learning communities and opportunities for teachers to accept and demonstrate leadership among their peers and within their buildings (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development [CCAD], 1989; Jackson & Davis, 2000; National Association of Secondary School Principals [NASSP], 2006; National Middle School Association [NMSA], 1995). Although these programs and structures may provide the potential for the distributed leadership in schools, few empirical studies have examined the distributed leadership practices of middle level principals. Given the unique organizational features of middle level schools, it is important to examine the ways in which middle level principals have been effective in implementing distributed leadership practices within their schools.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the distributed leadership practices of principals in selected successful middle level schools, focusing on instances or principles of distributed leadership practices. In addition, the barriers and challenges that the school principal encounters when attempting to implement these practices also were examined, identifying specifically how these issues were resolved or overcome to promote effective distributed practices that support student learning. This study also sought to determine how various elements of interdisciplinary teaming may influence a distributed form of leadership in effective middle level schools.
Research Questions

This study examined the following overarching question: How do successful middle level principals utilize distributed leadership practices within their schools? Three ancillary questions for the study were as follows:

1. What actions or activities of the principal help to facilitate distributed leadership practices?
2. What barriers or challenges do principals encounter when attempting to implement distributed leadership practices and what strategies or practices have been put into place to overcome them?
3. How does the presence of interdisciplinary teaming influence distributed leadership practices in middle level schools?

Author’s Statement

My interest in this topic stems from my personal experiences as an administrator in a middle-level school. For three years, I served as the principal of a 7-9 grade junior high school, where long-standing practices and traditions in the school district resisted the adoption of a middle school philosophy. During my tenure as principal, a change in district superintendents allowed me to explore the implementation of additional middle school practices, including the use of interdisciplinary teaming. Although the school structure was far from modeling Turning Points recommended strategies of the middle school concept, the staff truly was dedicated to the education and interests of their students and several middle school elements were in place, including exploratory programs and advisory periods. I left the junior high school before significant strides were taken to fully embrace the middle school philosophy, but my research into middle-level education and the middle school concept has had a lasting impact on my view of educational practices for early adolescents.
Significance of the Study

This qualitative, multi-case study was intended to improve the understanding of how distributed leadership practices can be facilitated successfully in middle level schools, as well as the understanding of strategies that principals utilize to negotiate through barriers and challenges that may restrict the implementation of these practices. This study has the potential to be useful to policymakers who develop leadership preparation programs for teachers and principals, as well as faculty members who teach within leadership preparation programs. In addition, this study has the potential to inform the middle level community as to specific strategies that may positively influence the implementation of distributed leadership practices.

Although numerous studies are beginning to shed light onto this emerging style of leadership, very few studies specifically address middle school principals and the issues faced by those who educate emerging adolescents. This study begins to fill a gap in the literature by specifically focusing on distributed leadership in middle level schools. As distributed forms of leadership, including teacher leadership, are becoming a more common expectation of building leaders (CCAD, 1989; Council of Chief State School Officials [CCSSO], 2008; Jackson & Davis, 2000), this study can provide insight into the creation and support of this type of leadership.

Distributed leadership practices and the incorporation of teachers and other members of the school community into the leadership of schools have been advocated by many organizations for years. The Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy (1986) argued that teachers not only should be experts in curriculum and instruction but also should be key leaders in facilitating programmatic changes, professional development, and school reform. In 1996, the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards for school leaders promoted teacher
leadership within a school, calling for leaders to develop and implement a vision and mission collaboratively, and to develop the leadership capacity of staff (CCSSO, 1996). The revised 2008 ISLLC standards have overtly addressed this concept, adding specific language that relates directly to the school leader’s ability to “develop the capacity for distributed leadership” (CCSSO, 2008, p. 14).

Middle level schools have additional frameworks in place that advocate for a distributed form of leadership, including the foundational model for middle school education that was advocated in *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* (CCAD, 1989). This document focused national attention on the academic and social needs of adolescent youth, which the Carnegie task force asserted had been neglected in middle level schools. *Turning Points* provided a framework to guide the restructuring of middle level schools that were developmentally appropriate for emerging adolescents. Several years later *Turning Points 2000* realigned the original *Turning Points* recommendations, to ensure that student learning was at the core of the model (Jackson & Davis, 2000). One of the seven *Turning Points 2000* characteristics is “Democratic Governance to Improve Student Learning,” which is intended to give all stakeholders in the school a voice in planning and implementing school improvement efforts. The *Turning Points 2000* authors advocated for the involvement of teachers in this process, asserting that “the principal’s role is to cultivate teachers’ intrinsic motivation–their inner voice–and to create a culture of continuous improvement” (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 157).

Although several studies of distributed leadership have been conducted, these studies primarily have focused on elementary schools, high schools, or entire school districts (Leithwood, Steinbach, & Ryan, 1997). Furthermore, although leadership practices of teacher teams have been examined (Scribner et al., 2007; Timperley, 2005), these teams were not
interdisciplinary middle school teams. One large-scale middle-level investigation recently was completed, but the focus of the study is on content area specialists, rather than on the practices of middle level principals (Pustejovsky et al., 2009). Principals of middle level schools face a unique set of challenges as they work to ensure their schools are “developmentally responsive to the special needs of the early adolescent learner” (Clark & Clark, 1994, p. 4). It is important to examine the practices of middle level principals who have been effective in distributing leadership responsibilities throughout their school structures, so that other educators can gain insights from their experiences as they strive to more fully involve their staff members in leadership activities.

Assumptions of the Study

The following assumptions were present in this study:

1. The respondents interviewed understood the scope of the study and the language used by the interviewer and responded honestly, objectively, and accurately to interview questions.

2. The knowledge of the respondents with regard to distributed leadership and the middle school concept varied based upon their formalized training, preparation, and/or experiences. It is possible that some individuals may have intuitively embraced distributed leadership principles within their administrative practice, without having become formally exposed to this concept.

Delimitations

The following delimitations were present in this study:

1. This case study was delimited to a small sample of inclusive Illinois public middle level schools that served at least two grade levels, with no lower than grade 5 and no grade higher than grade 9, with an average of at least 100 students per grade level.
2. Special-focus middle level schools, such as charter schools, private schools, parochial schools, and alternative schools, were not included in the study due to the various differences in setting, structure, and goals these schools seek to achieve with students.

Limitations of the Study

The following limitations were present in this study:

1. The subjects included in this purposive sample may not be representative of the entire population and also may have introduced unknown bias into their responses. Therefore, the findings may not be generalized to the entire population of schools meeting the criteria for inclusion in this study.

2. This study was based on a single means of investigating distributed leadership in middle level schools and these findings may not have precisely reflected the current situation in all public schools.

3. The presence of interdisciplinary teams and their characteristics was used as an indicator of schools’ adherence to the middle school concept. Although teaming represents a “signature practice” of the middle school concept, it may be implemented with varying degrees of school commitment and effectiveness. Schools with high levels of teaming implementation and fidelity may not necessarily adhere to other aspects of the middle school concept. It may also be possible to implement other aspects of the middle school concept and Turning Points recommendations while not implementing teaming practices.

4. Case study sites were identified through recommendations made by representatives of multiple statewide organizations familiar with leaders of middle level schools, as well as by snowball sampling techniques from nominated subjects. These methods may not have comprehensively identified all principals within the state of Illinois who exercise the most extensive levels of distributed leadership practices.

5. This study was limited to the information acquired from a review of the literature, data gathered through interviews, observation, and artifact review.

6. The results were limited in accuracy to the reported perceptions of the respondents.

Definition of Terms

The following working definitions were utilized in this study:

*Distributed Leadership*  Distributed leadership is a leadership practice that utilizes multiple sources of guidance and direction in order to benefit from the combined expertise in an organization;
connects the interactive web of school actors’ interactions, their use of artifacts, and their situation; and relies on an organization to work in concert to pool their initiative and expertise so that the outcome is greater than the sum of their individual actions through spontaneous, intuitive, or institutionalized interactions (Elmore, 2000; Gronn, 2002; Spillane et al., 2001).

Interdisciplinary Teams  Groups of two or more teachers working with the same group of students in a given grade level, representing different core content areas (typically some combination of language arts, social studies, science, and mathematics), whose purpose is to cooperatively design and implement curriculum for a common group of students. The teacher teams typically have common planning time, and students assigned to the team typically will have a common school schedule (George & Alexander, 2003; Valentine et al., 2002; Valentine et al., 1993).

Middle Level School  A school between elementary and high school designed specifically to serve young adolescents that serve at least two grade levels, with no lower than grade 5 and no higher than grade 9, and with an average of at least 100 students per grade (Valentine et al., 2004).

Successful School  An Illinois public middle level school that has demonstrated continuous progress toward meeting and exceeding State standards for meeting Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Trend data from the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) scores were used to determine this measure. Through the analysis of trends or linear regression of ISAT data, a school that showed progress toward or maintaining AYP was considered a successful school. It was acceptable for the school to have scores that were lower than the previous or subsequent year, or that failed to meet AYP in a given year, as long as the overall trend was toward making progress or maintaining AYP.

Summary  This chapter discussed the increasing demands thrust upon today’s school leaders and noted how research on distributed leadership is beginning to influence the policy and practice of
school leadership. It detailed the purpose of the study, which was to examine distributed leadership in successful middle level schools, focusing on the behaviors and activities of principals that facilitate distributed leadership practice. Also described was an explanation indicating how distributed leadership practices may be influenced by the presence of interdisciplinary teaming in middle level schools. Chapter Two provides a conceptual framework and review of literature relative to distributed leadership and middle level schools. Chapter Three contains information on the research design and methodology including research questions, design of the study, population and sampling procedures, data collection, and data analysis. Chapter Four describes each of the cases in the study. Chapter Five discusses the data findings from the research questions as well as a cross-case analysis. Chapter Six concludes the study, providing a summary of the research, methodology, as well as a discussion of the findings, implications, and recommendations for additional research.
Chapter Two

Literature Review

Research examining the link between effective leadership practices and improved student achievement has concluded that successful educational leaders have a powerful influence on school effectiveness and student learning. In fact, the building principal has been found to have a significant effect on student learning, second only to the effects of the quality of curriculum and teachers’ instructional methods (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003).

Researchers traditionally have assumed that leadership was derived from the school principal (Riordan, 2003), with many studies examining specific characteristics and behaviors of the principal (McEwan, 2003; Rossow, 1990). However, the notion that one single heroic leader is responsible for leading and transforming a school has become obsolete. More than two decades of school reform mandates have resulted in increased workloads and expanded responsibilities for the school principal (Lashway, 2003). Consequently, the task of leading today’s schools has become so multifaceted and complex that one individual cannot be expected to accomplish this task alone.

School leadership literature overwhelmingly has focused on the role of principals, likely because, as the formally appointed leaders of their schools, effective principals generally are associated with successful efforts for preparing students to attain local, state, and federal standards (Blase & Blase, 1999; Dwyer et al., 1985; Heck & Hallinger, 1999; Leithwood & Duke, 1999; Murphy, 1988a; Smith & Andrews, 1989). However, the multitude of demands placed on principals’ time draws resources away from a focus on curriculum, instruction, and assessment, as numerous tasks from the school, district, state, and federal government require the attention of these school leaders (Cuban, 1998; Elmore, 1999b). Today’s principals can neither
achieve nor sustain improvements in student learning by acting in isolation (Elmore, 1999b; Grenda, 2006; Spillane et al., 2003). The current climate of high-stakes accountability requires principals and teachers to work together to help all students achieve. These interdependent relationships necessitate a distributed perspective on leadership, whereby leadership responsibilities are shared by multiple individuals at different levels of the school organization (Elmore, 1999b; Johnson et al., 2004; Riordan, 2003). This form of distributed leadership may be effective in middle level schools, where an interdisciplinary teaming structure and other elements of middle school reform may help facilitate such practices.

Middle level schools may be well suited for the implementation of distributed leadership due to the unique characteristics of this organizational model. Interdisciplinary teaming and other attributes of the middle school concept provide mechanisms that encourage collaboration, professional learning communities, and distributed leadership practices among team members and throughout the school (Scribner et al., 2007; Valentine et al., 2004). As middle level educators strive to create programs that serve the academic and emotional needs of young adolescents, structures are advocated that encourage small learning communities and opportunities for teachers to accept and demonstrate leadership among their peers and within their buildings (CCAD, 1989; Jackson & Davis, 2000; NASSP, 2006; NMSA, 1995).

This review of literature explores, categorizes, and summarizes the literature on distributed leadership, as well as the unique elements of middle level schools that can affect efforts to implement distributed leadership practices. The literature review also includes elements of teacher leadership and middle level education, including interdisciplinary teaming.

The theory of distributed leadership is an emerging concept, and in recent years a growing number of scholars have begun to investigate this topic. However, much of the
published literature to date is limited to descriptive studies or theoretical position papers. It is important to note that there is not currently a universally accepted definition of distributed leadership, and often the terms distributed, shared, collaborative, democratic, and teacher leadership are used interchangeably to address this concept.

**Conceptual Framework**

School leadership has been defined in many ways. There are multiple ways that people think about the work of school leaders, such as participative, democratic, transformational, moral, strategic, and administrative (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). School principals lead many aspects of the school organization. The focus of this work is grounded in the literature of distributed leadership and the middle school concept, borrowing from Spillane’s (2006) definition of leadership:

activities tied to the core work of the organization that are designed by organizational members to influence the motivation, knowledge, affect and practice of other organizational members or that are understood by organizational members as intended to influence their knowledge, affect, and practices. (pp. 11-12)

This theoretical lens pushes researchers to expand the study of leadership to elements beyond the characteristics and beliefs of individual leaders. Leaders build their practice in many ways and continually are influenced by internal and external factors. As they respond to these factors, they use their own internal resources (expertise, human and social capital) as well as external resources (outside experts, current research) to make decisions. The tools leaders use in their practice and the routines they create or perpetuate are elements of their ongoing construction of leadership practice. The roles they play, the priorities they define, and the tasks they undertake also influence leaders’ construction of their practice.
Distributed leadership. Distributed leadership is a framework with which to view leadership practice. Distributed leadership is not an answer to how to lead well—but instead is a way of looking at leadership practice. Using the distributed leadership framework to study leadership shifts the focus of analysis from leaders to leadership activity (Gronn, 2000; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001, 2004). Although these factors are important, they do not form the entire picture. According to Spillane et al. (2004), leadership practice is situated in the interactions of leaders, followers, and elements of the situation. Through the use of this framework, this study seeks to show that leadership does not rest solely on individual leaders and their characteristics but instead lies within a multitude of leaders within their organization. Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework developed to guide this study of distributed leadership practices in middle level schools. As noted within this framework, leadership practices involve elements of leaders, followers, and the situation.

![Figure 1. Framework for distributed leadership in middle level schools.](image)

Leaders and followers. Although the principal of a school is clearly a leader, there are many other individuals who take on leadership roles within the organization. In this study, several terms are used to differentiate between different kinds of leaders. *Formal leaders* are
considered not only to be administrators but also others within the organization with formal
titles, such as language arts coordinators or interdisciplinary team leaders. The term *follower* is
used to denote individuals who, in a particular activity, do not take on a leadership role yet but
participate in ensuring that the activity is accomplished (Spillane, 2006). It is important to note
that leadership roles are fluid. An individual may be a leader when serving as the chair of a
building-wide committee meeting and then walk down the school hallway to participate as a
follower in a grade-level team meeting.

*Situation* is a main concept within the distributed leadership framework. To study
leadership practice, one has to study the interplay between leaders, followers, and elements of
the situation (Halverson, 2003; Spillane, 2005). Although situation has many elements, this study
focused on three aspects of the situation: structures, routines, and tools.

*Structure* has many definitions across different disciplines. For the purposes of this study,
structure was defined as a formally defined or recognized way of organizing. In this sense,
structure is distinct from routine and tools in that it is the frame within which the routines and
tools exist (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). The use of structure in this sense focuses on the concept
of institutional structure that “refers to the cultural or normative ideas that organize how people
interact with one another; structure as a cultural phenomena that guides social action–roles,
positions, expectations” (Spillane, 2005, p. 386).

*Routines* are “a repetitive, recognizable pattern of interdependent actions, involving
multiple actors” (Feldman & Rafaeli, 2002, p. 311). Because routines are an important part of the
work that organizations do (Feldman, 2000; Feldman & Pentland, 2003; March & Simon, 1958),
literature on routines is utilized to help frame the ways in which the activity of leadership is
studied. Although some theorists believe that routines have inertia that inhibits growth and
change (Hannan & Freeman, 1984), others assert that routines are actually a source of flexibility and change (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). Much of the work of schools, like any other organization, happens in multiple routines that coexist simultaneously.

The concept of tool is an important one in socio-cultural theory and has many definitions. Borrowed from the work of Norman (1988) and Wertch (1991), tools can be defined as externalized representations of ideas and intentions used by practitioners in their practice that serve as mediating devices that are used to shape action in certain ways.

The origins of structures, routines, and tools vary (Halverson, 2003). Sometimes, schools design their own structures, routines, and tools from scratch. Other times, schools receive structures, routines, and tools from external agencies or agents, such as the local school district. Often, these elements are inherited. For instance, when a new leadership team enters a school, these individuals assume the structures, routines, and tools of the previous administration. This study focused on the routines and tools used by school leaders, as well as their participation within school activities. In doing so, this study expanded the notion of leadership beyond the actual leaders and begins to develop an understanding of how they lead (through the routines they build and sustain as well as through their participation) and what tools they use to lead.

The middle school concept. For more than four decades, the middle school movement has advocated for and sought to develop a unique school structure between the elementary and high school organizations, which is focused on the educational and developmental needs of young adolescents. However, even before the conceptualization of the phrases middle school and middle level education in the 1960s, educators worked to develop innovative curriculum, instructional strategies, organizational structures, and support systems to support young adolescents (Manning, 2000). Advocates for the middle school philosophy argue that school
settings and practices must be developed that meet specific developmental and educational needs of emerging adolescents (CCAD, 1989).

A discussion of the middle school concept as described in the original *Turning Points* report (CCAD, 1989) and the subsequent follow-up publication, *Turning Points 2000* (Jackson & Davis, 2000), provides a necessary lens for viewing the middle schools in this study. The Carnegie Corporation of New York established the Task Force on the Education of Young Adolescents to examine the conditions of young adolescents (youths 10-15 years old), which resulted in recommendations for the educational improvement of these youth and their development. Recommendations from this task force centered on eight principles: (a) small learning communities, (b) a core of common knowledge, (c) an organizational structure for success, (d) teacher and principal responsibility for decision making, (e) expert teachers for this age group, (f) promotion of adolescent health, (g) alliance with families, and (h) partnerships between school and community (CCAD, 1989).

These recommendations took shape in the nation’s middle level schools in the form of interdisciplinary teaming, advisory groups, common planning time for teachers, and instruction emanating from a core curriculum. Jackson and Davis (2000) furthered these ideas through their discussion of alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, as well as an emphasis on relationships for learning, shared decision making, the importance of professional development, and representative participation in school governance. The National Middle School Association (NMSA) also identified these characteristics in two influential position papers on middle school education, *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents* (NMSA, 2003a) and *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* (NMSA, 2010).
Distributed Leadership

The concept of distributed leadership has entered the field of education because the demands on school administrators are intensifying and because leadership research has shifted the focus from leader to leadership as a property of the organization (Ogawa & Bossert, 1995). Leadership scholars have documented important gaps and flaws in school leadership conceptual frameworks, which have limited their ability to efficiently address the current needs of U.S. school systems. Consequently, distributed leadership has emerged as a viable strategy to address these needs (Gronn, 2000; Harris, 2004; Lashway, 2003; Spillane, 2006).

There are competing and sometimes conflicting interpretations of what distributed leadership actually means (Leithwood et al., 2007); consequently, the definition and conceptualization of this leadership practice varies. Harris (2004) defined distributed leadership as “a form of collective agency incorporating the activities of many individuals in a school who work at mobilizing and guiding other teachers in the process of instructional change” (p. 14). Spillane et al. describe distributed leadership as a way of thinking systematically about leadership practice. “It is not that leadership is distributed but how it is distributed. And, how it is distributed over leaders, followers, and their situation (2001, p. 5). Although there is no universally accepted definition of distributed leadership, a simplified definition is that it is the delegation and redistribution of the principal’s responsibilities and authority to other staff members, so that professional colleagues share leadership roles and responsibilities in an interdependent fashion. Other views move beyond this simplistic analysis and call for a fundamental shift in organizational thinking, redefining school leadership as the responsibility of everyone in a school (Elmore, 2000, 2002; Harris, 2002a, 2004; Lashway, 2003; Spillane, 2006; Spillane et al., 2003; Spillane et al., 2004). Although some ambiguity remains, Spillane’s
definition and concept of distributed leadership recently has guided other studies in exploring the
distribution of leadership.

Highlighting the fact that this concept has attracted a range of meanings and is associated
with a variety of practices, Mayrowetz (2008) examined the use of distributed leadership in
more than 40 journal articles to inventory the multiple usages of the term. He identified four
common themes, including a theoretical lens and three recommendations for how sharing
leadership in schools can improve practice. The four usages include the following: a theoretical
lens for looking at the activity of leadership, distributed leadership for democracy, distributed
leadership for efficiency and effectiveness, and distributed leadership as human capacity
building. Noting that one universal usage for the term distributed leadership may not be found,
Mayrowetz stated that

it is unadvisable to seek it given the proliferation of definitions that have emerged.
Instead, as distributed leadership initiatives in schools and empirical research continue to
flourish, the field will benefit from scholarship that clearly articulates what is meant by
distributed leadership in studies that are both responsive to central problems of practice
and anchored in relevant theory. (p. 433)

The central tenant behind distributed leadership is that the complex nature of instructional
practice requires individuals to function in networks of shared and complementary expertise
rather than in a traditional bureaucratic structure with a hierarchical division of labor (Elmore,
2000). Bennett et al. (2003) stated that “it is best to consider distributed leadership as a way of
thinking about leadership, rather than as another technique or practice” (p. 13).

Leadership expertise is sought throughout an organization, rather than bestowing it upon
a single individual or individuals in a formal position or role (Harris, 2004). Spillane, Diamond,
Walker, Halverson, and Jita (2001) argued that school leadership should be viewed as the
cumulative activities of a broad set of formal and informal leaders within a school, rather than as the work of one individual, such as the principal.

Distributed leadership is characterized as a form of shared or collective leadership in which expertise is developed by working collaboratively. Elmore (2000) noted that in a knowledge-intensive enterprise like teaching and learning there is no way to perform these complex tasks without widely distributing the responsibility for leadership among roles in the organization. Distributed leadership becomes the glue of a common task or goal, improvement of instruction, and a common frame of values for how to approach that task. (p. 2)

The critical issue, according to Spillane (2006), is not that leadership is distributed, but how it is distributed. It is not simply the actions of the principal or other school leaders. Leadership practice “takes shape in the interactions of people and their situation, rather than from the actions of an individual leader” (Spillane, 2004, p. 5). Spillane et al. (2001) explained that effective principals do not just string together a series of individual actions but systematically distribute leadership by building it into the fabric of school life. Leadership is not merely delegated or given away, but instead it weaves together people, materials, and organizational structures in a common cause.

The concept of distributing leadership roles among the others in the organization does not, however, suggest that there is no one responsible for the overall performance of the school. The job of the principal in this environment is to hold the pieces together and maintain a productive relationship among the actors (Harris, 2004). The National Association of Secondary School Principals (2006) insists that the principal should provide leadership by building and maintaining a vision, direction, and focus for student learning but also argues that the principal of a school should never act alone. In addition, NASSP recommends that all schools establish a
governing council for key decisions to promote student learning and an atmosphere of participation, responsibility, and ownership.

**Components of distributed leadership.** Distributed leadership has been described as “a form of collective agency incorporating the activities of many individuals in a school who work at mobilizing and guiding other teachers in the process of instructional change” (Harris, 2004, p. 14). Therefore, the foundation in a distributed conceptual framework lies in the relationship between leaders, followers, and the leadership practice. In order to understand day-to-day leadership practices within schools, Spillane et al. (2004) created a Distributed Leadership Framework (Figure 2). Under this conceptualization, leaders are the individuals within the school who work either together or separately to organize the school community to improve instruction. Followers are individuals who are influenced by leaders to improve their instructional practices, and, who, in turn, influence the leaders. It is important to remember that leaders and followers are dynamic and fluid terms, meaning that an individual who is a follower in one activity could be a leader in another activity. Consequently, the traditional hierarchical organizational chart, in which power flows down from the formally appointed administrator, becomes flattened, as individuals work collaboratively to accomplish the organization’s goals.

In school settings, leadership therefore is extended to individuals other than the principals. Spillane’s (2006) research addresses this concept and includes the situation as another important element in the leadership dynamics, expressing that a “distributed view of leadership shifts the focus from the school principals and other formal and informal leaders to the web of leaders, followers, and their situations that gives form to leadership practice” (p. 3). A network of leaders, followers, their situations and leadership practices, then, describe leadership through a distributed lens.
The major framework components of distributed leadership are presented by Spillane (2005, 2006) and have been expanded upon by other scholars in the field (Gronn, 2000; Harris, 2004; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Spillane et al., 2001). A description of these aspects follows.

**Leaders and followers.** An essential component in a distributed leadership framework is the expansion of leadership functions and roles to various individuals in the organization. Citing a blind spot in the literature, Harris (2004) noted that research has focused primarily on formal and traditional leadership roles in schools, while neglecting “the kinds of leadership that can be distributed among many roles and functions in the school” (p. 12). A distributed model represents an important shift from the traditional view of educational leadership, as it recognizes the importance of other individuals in the leadership process. Coined by Spillane (2006) as “the leader-plus aspect,” the framework recognizes that managing and leading schools involves a net of individuals beyond those in formal leadership roles (Elmore, 2000; Frost, 2005; Spillane & Diamond, 2007). An important component in this model is the inclusion of teachers into this net. Empirical evidence adds to this aspect, as it documents the critical importance of incorporating teachers’ expertise in school leadership practices (Heller & Firestone, 1995; Marzano, 2003).
Along with leaders, the role of followers is vital because it shapes the interaction that occurs within the school and, therefore, helps define leadership practice. The dynamics in the relationship and interactions between leaders and followers is more fluid than in traditional approaches, encouraging the mobility and transfer of these roles according to the emerging needs of the organization. Regarding the influence and relevance that leaders and followers exercise on each other, Spillane and Diamond (2007) noted:

Leaders influence followers by motivating actions, enhancing knowledge, and potentially shaping the practice of followers. These influences are connected to the core work of the organization—teaching and learning in classrooms—through teachers leadership connects to classroom practice through followers. (p. 9)

Understanding the role of followers is important not only to develop a deeper understanding of leadership interactions and practices but also to learn how leadership evolves at both the school and classroom levels. Moreover, given the fluidity inherent in a distributed perspective, followers are potential leaders in development.

**Situation.** The situation involves tools, organizational routines, structures, and other aspects of the organization. Spillane and Diamond (2007) stated that the “situation is both the medium for practice and outcome of practice. As the medium for practice, aspects offer both affordances and constraints. In turn, leadership practice also can transform aspects of the situation over time” (p. 10). Situation and practice are intertwined closely in a distributed leadership approach. Moreover, the situation represents the capability to enhance or deprive leadership ability, motivation, and actions among leaders, potential leaders, and followers. Spillane and Diamond (2007) stressed the importance of identifying and researching aspects of the situation that limit and facilitate practice, while also documenting the forms in which these aspects are changed in practice.
In research sponsored by the National College for School Leadership in England, Oduro (2004) identified factors, which he coined *push* (promoters) and *pull* (inhibitors), that affect the situation and, consequently, the incorporation of distributed leadership practices in schools. This qualitative study investigated the practical implications of distributed leadership in 11 schools in England and involved data gathered from questionnaires, shadowing, and interviews of 302 teachers and 11 head teachers. Oduro concluded that distributed leadership may be either promoted or inhibited by internal and external factors. Favorable factors make distributed leadership attractive, “pulling” leaders, teachers, and students toward implementation. Undesirable factors make distributed leadership less appealing, acting to “push” leaders, teachers and students away from distributed practices. The most common “pull” or promoter was trust, while the most common “push” or inhibitor was distrust. Figure 3 provides a visual representation of the 12 promoters and 9 inhibitor factors in Oduro’s findings.

**Practice.** An elemental component of a distributed leadership model, yet one commonly misunderstood, is the process and development of leadership practices. Scholars caution against the tendency to use “additive models” to analyze and grasp this type of leadership practice, whereby the actions of various leadership activities are summed up and the results conceptualized as distributed leadership practices (Gronn, 2002; Spillane, 2006; Spillane, Diamond, & Jita, 2003). The *interaction* represents the core of the practice in this leadership approach. Therefore, the form of the practice must be analyzed and researched as a form of collective leadership. The distributive practice is a complex process and it is encompassed across leaders, followers, their situation, and their interactions. Understanding what happens in and between these interactions is expressed by Spillane (2006): “A critical challenge involves
unpacking how leadership practice is stretched over leaders. One way to do this is by analyzing the interdependencies among leaders’ actions” (p. 57).

![Distributed Leadership Diagram]

**Figure 3.** Distributed leadership’s promoters and inhibitors factors.

Distributed leadership involves social activity shaped by the interrelationships and interactions that form the practice. Scholars provide various and diverse components to the distributed leadership concept; therefore, some school leadership researchers have been critical of the concept due to the lack of conceptual agreement (Harris, 2005; Mayrowetz, 2008). Nonetheless, the literature does present important social elements that both help enhance understanding of the distributed framework and guide the needed empirical research in the practice of this form of leadership.

Within the social arena of the school setting, scholars agree that the teacher is a major leadership component within a distributed model. Elmore (2000) defined leadership as distributed through the educational organization and represented by its members’ knowledge, expertise, attitudes, and skills. Thus, teachers as well as administrators add to the multiple leader effect of the organization, as they bring in a diverse array of capabilities and experiences that
complement the leadership process toward a common culture of expectations (Elmore, 2000; Spillane & Diamond, 2007). The social distribution of leadership, then, helps anchor the leadership practice.

**Types of leadership distribution.** Gronn (2000) proposed the reconceptualization of leadership as a socially distributed activity theory, in which the activity connects the organizational structures with the agency, or actions, and agents. Activity theory encourages the separation of labor for the maximization of expertise in the social constructs, while fostering influence and interdependence. Gronn stated:

> Organizational influence is frequently reciprocal. The explanation for this feature lies in the division of labour. Inherent in the division of labour is a duality between specialization and interdependence. That is, tasks are broken down into their detailed specialist components, which are then performed by different individuals. But this fragmentation of effort leaves each worker dependent upon others for the completion of an overall task. Paradoxically, then, labour has to be reintegrated at the same time as it is differentiated. Influence is one means of reintegrating work tasks to achieve cooperatively generated outcomes. (p. 330)

Influenced by and building on Gronn’s (2000) socially distributed activity principles and Elmore’s (2000) social distribution perspectives of leadership, Spillane (2006) identified three categories of leadership practice distribution: collaborated distribution, collective distribution, and coordinated distribution. These descriptions of distributed leadership were developed as part of a study involving 15 K-5 and K-8 schools in Chicago, Illinois utilizing a mixed-methods procedure to unpack distributed leadership in practice. The categories help clarify essential practices in a distributed perspective and, more importantly, aid in setting this conceptual framework apart from other types of leadership.

**Collaborated distribution.** Collaborated distribution is characterized by two or more leaders working together in the same place and time to accomplish the same leadership routine. This approach “involves a reciprocal interdependency, in which the actions of different leaders
involves input from one another in co-performing a leadership routine. Reciprocal interdependencies involve individuals playing off one another” (Spillane, 2006, p. 61). An important effect of collaborative distribution is the potential for leaders to limit or facilitate, through the actions, motivation, capacity, and agency of those co-performing with them. The converse is equally valid due to the reciprocal interdependency nature of this type of distribution. Spillane noted that collaborated distribution more commonly is found in routine activities, such as staff development, grade-level meetings, and curriculum committee meetings, than in evaluative types of leadership tasks. This type of distribution facilitates co-practice stretched over interacting leaders.

**Collective distribution.** Collective distribution involves leaders co-performing and working toward a shared leadership routine in a separate fashion, although their actions are interdependent on each other. This interdependency of thinking is not confined to a common place or time. This type of distribution holds great potential to provide a conceptual lens into the leadership motivation, ability, and action of teachers. Teachers work independently, yet toward the shared mission and goals of the school culture. Collective distribution of leadership parallels many of the organizational routines carried out by teachers on a daily basis, including evaluation of curriculum, analysis and assessment of student performance, and participation in various school-level management committees. These activities have the capability of stretching co-performance leadership more effectively, inciting teacher motivation and capacity, and developing leadership skills and performance (MacBeath, 2005; Spillane, 2004; Spillane & Diamond, 2007).

**Coordinated distribution.** Coordinated distribution describes leadership practices formed by tasks that are to be completed sequentially in order for the leadership routine to be performed.
The leaders can co-perform independently or together. Interdependence is maintained, because completion of an activity by a leader or group of leaders is a prerequisite for initiating the task that follows. Thus, the school leadership process is embedded in coordinated distributed practices, as dictated by the interactions of leaders, followers, and their situation (Spillane, 2006).

Permeating distributed practices of leadership is the concept of heedfulness, defined by Spillane (2006) as the “way in which a set of behaviors is performed: groups act heedfully when they act carefully, intelligently, purposefully, and attentively” (p. 59). Leaders do not have to agree, but they must be both attentive and alert to other leaders’ actions (Spillane, 2006; Spillane et al., 2001). Leadership in educational contexts is abundant with structures and activities that are marked by isolation, independence, inattentiveness by other leaders, and lack of consensus (Hartley, 2007). Distributed leadership offers a conceptual lens to better understand, unify, and coordinate leadership within the school context. The performance of leadership activities can be maximized and become more effective as they are stretched across organizational leaders and become more permeable, its components and principles are better understood, and it becomes anchored in solid and abundant literature.

**Dimensions of distributed leadership theory.** The emergence of distributed leadership has brought about great interest from scholars in the field of school leadership, and with it, inquiry over the novelty and applicability of the theory and its principles. Elements of distributed leadership have been analyzed and described by scholars, who have identified important features of the distributed conceptual framework that make it unique (Gronn, 2000, 2002; Harris, 2004; Spillane, 2006; Spillane & Diamond, 2007; Spillane et al., 2003). Woods, Bennett, Harvey, and
Wise (2004) identified three distinctive elements specific to the concept of distributed leadership: emergent property, openness of boundaries, and leadership according to expertise.

**Emergent property.** As distributed leadership is shaped by the evolving interactions of various leaders, at different times and under various situations, the nature of the leadership is emergent; it also has fluidity and plasticity (Harris, 2004; Woods et al., 2004). This fluidity and plasticity make it a promising concept, as there is give-and-take between leaders and followers, defined by their exchanges and heedfulness, capable of producing positive organizational change. Moreover, distributed roles are not static and are less hierarchical than in traditional approaches, allowing for more flexible dynamics of top-down and bottom-up leadership, eventually producing a convergence that influences both forms of leadership. Central to the emergent property of distributed leadership is Gronn’s (2002) notion of “concertive action,” defined as the additional dynamic which is the product of conjoint activity. Where people work together in such a way that they pool their initiative and expertise, the outcome is a product or energy which is greater than the sum of their individual actions. (p. 441)

**Openness of boundaries.** One of the key components of a distributed perspective is the principle that leadership is shared and stretched across various members of the organization (Smylie et al., 2002). This characteristic differentiates distributed leadership from other conventional types of leadership. It also widens the scope of the leadership team to include other members of the school community. Woods et al. (2004) noted that the model of distributed leadership raises the question of which groups and individuals are to be brought into leadership or seen as contributors to it. Of itself, the notion of distributed leadership does not suggest how wide that boundary should be set. Equally, however, there are no limits built into the concept. (p. 442)
This dimension complements the emergent property described above, as the interactions between leaders, followers, and their situation create interdependence of thinking and actions, which allow for fluidity and change over time. Thus, openness of boundaries encourages the leadership team to adapt to the changes and expand its membership accordingly.

**Leadership according to expertise.** A distributed leadership framework has plasticity built in, associated with the emergent property and openness of boundaries dimensions mentioned earlier, that calls for the expertise of diverse individuals at various times. This characteristic makes this framework a viable option in which to anchor leadership practices, as the knowledge, skills, and expertise of the members of the educational community are spread across a wide range of individuals. As expressed by Woods et al. (2004), “Initiatives may be inaugurated by those with relevant skills in a particular context, but others will then, within a mutually trusting and supportive culture, adopt, adapt and improve them” (p. 442). Teachers, for instance, who have the greatest school influence on student achievement (Marzano, 2003), can transfer their expertise to others through leadership practices. Effective ways in which teachers accomplish this expertise transfer is an area in need of further research (Elmore, 2000; Hallinger, 2005; Harris, 2004; Hartley, 2007; Woods et al., 2004).

These three dimensions of distributed leadership evolve and transcend into the school system through the organizational structures and individuals’ actions, or agency, and thus shape and influence the distribution of leadership. Scholars have stressed that structure and agency are equally important and are affected by contextual pull and push factors (Gronn, 2000; Oduro, 2004), which also help determine how leadership is dispersed. These dimensions also extend to the components of the theory presented earlier, which involves leaders and followers, situation, and practice. Therefore, delineating and understanding all aspects of the distributed framework,
through empirical work, is crucial in determining the scope of its effectiveness. This field of study is particularly relevant to the motivation, ability, and practice of teachers, because “there are some important connections and overlaps between distributed leadership and teacher leadership” (Harris & Lambert, 2003, p. 313).

**Teacher leadership as a distributed practice.** Teacher leadership is not a new strategy or model for distributed leadership. Although the teacher in the 18th century one-room schoolhouse was certainly an organizational and educational leader (Fullan, 2001), teacher leadership formally appeared as a school improvement concept early in the 20th century (Smylie et al., 2002). Recently, there has been renewed interest in the potential that teacher leadership holds in improving instructional practices in schools (Frost & Durrant, 2003; Riordan, 2003; Teasley, 2006). Teacher leadership is a subset of distributed leadership, and although distributed leadership is a more expansive concept, teacher leadership represents a valuable resource to principals and is a necessary component of any school improvement effort.

Teacher leadership initiatives in the past have been perceived as a means of school improvement and as a vehicle to empower and professionalize the teacher workforce. Although teacher isolation traditionally has developed as the norm in many schools, teacher leadership practices may help to create an environment more conducive to the development of a professional community. Liebermann and Miller (2004) described teaching as a “flat profession, requiring the same of neophytes and veterans and offering little support for professional growth and career differentiation” (p. 10). They asserted that the practice of teaching was not considered a profession, but rather “technical work” that could be honed through management, supervision, and evaluation. Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001) suggested that the application of teacher leadership could foster a professional community within the teaching profession focusing on
learning and leadership, rather than the act of teaching as a technical function, and by acting as advocates for new approaches to accountability, assessment, norms of achievement, and student expectations.

*Teacher leadership tasks*. The tasks performed by teacher leaders are numerous and varied (Frost, 2005; Harris, 2002b; Harris & Lambert, 2003; Heller & Firestone, 1995; Little, 1988; Lord & Miller, 2000; Silva, Gimbert, & Nolan, 2000; Smylie & Denny, 1990; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). This variation in the literature regarding the many functions and responsibilities of teacher leaders supports two notions: that many teacher leaders find their role is unclear (Lieberman & Miller, 2004; Little, 1988; York-Barr & Duke, 2004), and many are overwhelmed by the scope of their leadership duties in addition to their teaching responsibilities (Barth, 2001; Little, 2003). After reviewing the empirical research related to teacher leadership, Lieberman and Miller (2004) concluded that most research on this topic centers on the issue of leadership roles and activities.

Several studies have examined teacher leadership activities within the context of school improvement (Harris, 2002a; Lieberman & Miller, 2004; Miller, Moon, & Elko 2000; Silva et al., 2000; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). From these studies have emerged categories of tasks that commonly are discussed by teacher leaders regarding their work. Harris (2002a) identified four mutually supporting themes of teacher leadership: the manner in which teacher leaders influence practice, the promotion of empowerment and ownership of change or development, the mediating role of teacher leaders in seeking and obtaining resources and expertise, and the development of relationships to support mutual learning. Miller et al. (2000) identified six critical themes often identified by teacher leaders in their work: developing expertise, negotiating new relationships, dealing with resistant colleagues, building support among administrators,
securing resources and policy support, and developing a critical mass for change. Through in-depth analysis of three teacher leader cases, Silva et al. (2000) asserted that teacher leader tasks fell into five categories, including navigating the structures of schools, nurturing relationships, encouraging professional growth, helping others with change, and advocating for children. York-Barr and Duke (2004) identified seven dimensions of teacher leadership practice that address what teacher leaders do in their work. These dimensions included coordination and management, school or district curriculum work, professional development of colleagues, participation in school change or improvement, parent and community involvement, contributions to the profession and preservice teacher education.

The research of Miller et al. (2000), Silva et al. (2000), Harris (2002a), and York-Barr and Duke (2004) is summarized in Table 1, and indicates that teacher leaders engage in work and tasks that fall into seven categories: coordination and management, engaging in school or district curriculum work, promoting professional development, promoting change, navigating the school organization, nurturing and negotiating relationships, and advocating for children. It is important to note that these categories are not mutually exclusive but instead are mutually supportive and interrelated. Miller et al. (2000) stated that their set of teacher leadership themes “is not comprehensive, but it does represent the kinds of issues that teacher leaders encounter as they engage in leadership work in a school or district-wide context” (p. 6).
## Table 1

**Teacher Leader Categories of Tasks**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coordinating and managing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Coordinating schedules, materials, and events.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Participating in administrative tasks and disturbances.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging in curriculum work</td>
<td>Developing own expertise</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Selecting and developing curriculum/defining outcomes and standards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mentoring other teachers/peer coaching.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promoting professional development</td>
<td>Developing a critical mass for change</td>
<td>Encouraging/modeling professional growth</td>
<td>Influencing practice</td>
<td>Leading workshops.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dealing with resistant colleagues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Participating in professional organizations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promoting change</td>
<td>Building support among administrators</td>
<td>Helping others with change</td>
<td>Promoting empowerment and ownership of change</td>
<td>Taking part in school-wide decisions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Confronting barriers and challenging the status quo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Working with peers for school change and facilitating communities of teacher learners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Participating in research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Building partnerships with colleges and universities to prepare future teachers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(table continues)
Table 1 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Navigating the school organization and securing resources and support</td>
<td>Securing resources and policy support</td>
<td>Mediating role in seeking and obtaining resources and expertise</td>
<td>Encouraging parent participation/working with the community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurturing and negotiating relationships</td>
<td>Negotiating new relationships</td>
<td>Nurturing relationships</td>
<td>Developing relationships</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocating for children</td>
<td>Advocating for children</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Despite the wealth of information suggesting the positive gains from teacher leadership, there continue to be barriers to the implementation of such leadership in many schools. In fact, as Barth (2001) asserted, “Something deep and powerful within school cultures seems to work against teacher leadership” (p. 444).

*Barriers to teacher leadership.* Smylie and Denny (1990) found that “research has often attributed leadership failure to conflict or incompatibility between leadership and prevailing patterns of belief, power, and practice in organizations” (p. 238). For instance, teachers themselves may be one of the most significant barriers to the success of any program that encourages them to assume leadership roles. They may need to be persuaded not to resist new role relationships with administrators, as well as with other teachers. Some teachers fear that when they take on more leadership tasks and become closer to administrators, they will jeopardize the close relationships that they have established with other teachers (Griffin, 1995; Hart, 1995; Heller & Firestone, 1995; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001). Smylie and Denny (1990) explained:

> the appointment of teacher leaders created status differences that undermined professional equality and faculty working relationships . . . these roles created an elitist organization in which teachers are competing against other teachers for position . . .
however well-intended, setting up a hierarchy among teachers is counterproductive to fostering high staff morale. (p. 250)

Time is also an issue, as educators add leadership responsibilities and activities onto their already full workloads (Fullan, 1993; Griffin, 1995; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; Smylie & Denny, 1990). Tackling school-wide issues on top of regularly assigned duties can cause teachers to feel overwhelmed and overworked. This concern was affirmed by one teacher: “true, true, overload. We’ve got too much in front of us already . . . in some cases teachers believe they are drowning in a sea of information” (Griffin, 1995, p. 42). Teachers do not have the luxury of giving up one responsibility to assume these extra leadership tasks. They also cannot necessarily simply shift precious minutes from one task into another task, particularly when they have instructional responsibilities for students who are assigned to their classrooms.

The teachers’ union also can be an impediment to teachers moving into new responsibilities. The typical union contract applies the same set of rules, responsibilities, and privileges to all teachers equally. This set of beliefs is “antithetical to the flexibility, variety, and dispersed expertise on which many of the innovations rely” (Hart, 1995, p. 11). Mentor teacher arrangements, career ladder initiatives, and merit pay programs can create an imbalance in status and rewards to teaching. These programs are designed to benefit some teachers, which may cause others to feel excluded. Although these initiatives may be considered to be incentives, they can threaten collegial relationships that have been established among teachers and can splinter their professional work communities (Hart, 1994, 1995). As new teacher leaders emerge, they may continue to grow and learn professionally, while non-leaders perceive that they are left to languish. Learning for non-leaders has come to a halt, as they are no longer invited to be involved on decision-making teams (Darling-Hammond, Bullmaster, & Cobb, 1995).
Principals also can be a barrier to teachers opting for leadership roles, particularly when they are reluctant to devolve their formal authority and decision-making powers to teacher leaders. Principals have received extensive information through their leadership preparation programs that there are legal issues related to school activities, personnel matters, and budgeting. They know they ultimately are responsible for all the actions and decisions made by the people under their guidance. Many may feel uncomfortable sharing their responsibilities, due to these legal and fiscal burdens that they must shoulder (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001).

**Distributed leadership and teacher teams.** The literature focusing on distributed leadership, as it pertains to teacher teams, suggests that this leadership practice contributes to improved teacher team performance. Research has disclosed an additive learning effect of teacher teams that practiced distributed leadership to solve a problem or complete a task (Leithwood et al., 1997). The studies, however, have devoted limited attention to how the school’s organizational structure supports distributed leadership, as well as how the principal effectively facilitates the distribution of leadership. Furthermore, the studies were mainly descriptive in nature and did not link the distributed leadership practice within teacher teams to school performance.

Using Spillane’s (2006) framework, Timperely (2005) investigated how distributed leadership was performed. The researcher observed the interaction of literacy leaders and a team of teachers who were responsible for first-grade students at reading meetings. This longitudinal study took place over four years, focusing on seven schools in New Zealand. Principals also were interviewed to gain an understanding of how their responsibility for more macro leadership tasks contributed to the distributed leadership practices in these schools. Timperely identified how the principal developed and managed a school culture that was conducive to instructional
communication, developed capacity, and monitored instructional decisions. Analysis of the minutes of meetings and interview transcripts showed differences in meeting activities, use of material artifacts, and articulation of cultural artifacts between higher achieving schools and lower achieving schools. Furthermore, the distribution of leadership activities was “stretched over” more people in the higher achieving schools, where data analysis and exploring the instructional implications was done collaboratively by the principal, literacy leader, and teachers. Although all of the schools in this study convened meetings to discuss reading achievement, differences between the two groups of schools were documented in the presentation of achievement data, communication of the schools’ vision, and meeting activities.

Scribner et al. (2007) also explored distributed leadership as it related to teacher teams, conducting an ethnographic case study involving two teacher teams in a high school located in a midsized Missouri community. Data were collected using field notes, tape recordings, and video recordings during 18 team meetings over a 16-week semester. The researchers used the data from meetings to describe how purpose and autonomy shaped the pattern of active or passive discourse that characterized the interaction of the team members. They discovered that perceived purpose and autonomy within a teacher team can, in part, create differing contexts for the social distribution of leadership. Scribner et al. studied moment-to-moment interactions between individuals that constituted socially distributed leadership, which they documented had not been examined prior to this study. Thus, the research contributed to a depth of understanding about this evolving topic. The two teams that were selected for this study had different purposes, which influenced their effectiveness. The team that was given the more challenging problem was perceived to be less successful than the other.
Leithwood et al. (1997) sought to learn about distributed leadership as it related to the nature of teacher teams’ collective learning and the conditions that influenced such learning. The researchers used semi-structured group interviews to collect data on six teacher teams in five secondary schools in Canada. Leithwood and colleagues also surveyed 48 individuals, using an 11-item questionnaire. Based on the interview results, the researchers placed the teams into two categories: *high potential* and *low potential*. The researchers found that high potential teams had a shared purpose, shared beliefs, and a shared culture. In addition, these teams expressed that they increased member capacity because they learned from one another. The researchers concluded that distributed leadership can make a significant difference to a team’s learning, and more importantly, described that conditions did not have to be positive for team learning or problem solving to occur. As observed in this study, new perspectives, ideas, and leaders can emerge from conflict and discourse. It was concluded that there only needs to be a balance between generating diversity and building consensus in order to promote collective learning.

Investigating teacher teams provides a lens through which to understand how one aspect of leadership is distributed among multiple individuals. The extent to which the teams were viewed as successful was determined by a clearly communicated vision or purpose, shared norms, and how they embraced divergent thinking (Scribner et al., 2007). Although the qualitative studies presented were mainly descriptive and contained various limitations, together the research establishes a pattern that suggests distributed leadership can positively influence the effectiveness of teacher teams.

**Summary of distributed leadership.** Without question, the role of the principal has become more demanding over the past few decades. Current policy holds schools accountable for results that are evidenced through students’ yearly performance on standardized achievement
tests. The expectations of continuous annual academic progress cannot be accomplished by one leader working in isolation (Elmore, 2000). Instead, the distributed leadership perspective has emerged as a leadership practice portraying an organizational structure in which school personnel work collaboratively to meet expectations. Thus, the frameworks for distributed leadership have been developed to potentially give all members of the organization an opportunity to participate in leadership tasks as they work toward a common goal.

This section of the literature review focused on defining distributed leadership. Featured in this review were three components of distributed leadership, including leaders and followers, situation, and practice. Three types of leadership distribution were discussed, including collaborated, collective, and coordinated distribution. The dimensions of distributed leadership theory were outlined, including elements of emergent property, openness of boundaries, and leadership according to expertise. In addition, literature was highlighted that focused on distributed leadership and teacher teams.

**Middle Level Education**

Young adolescents face significant turning points. For many youth 10 to 15 years old, early adolescence offers opportunities to choose a path toward a productive and fulfilling life. For many others, it represents their last best chance to avoid a diminished future. (CCAD, 1989, p. 8)

For more than four decades, the middle school movement has advocated for and sought to develop special schools between elementary and high school, which are focused on the educational and developmental needs of young adolescents. However, even before the conceptualization of the phrases *middle school* and *middle level education* in the 1960s, educators have worked to develop innovative curriculum, instructional strategies, organizational structures, and support systems to support young adolescents (Manning, 2000). It has been
apparent that emerging adolescents require school settings and practices that meet their specific developmental and educational needs.

During a 1963 conference for Cornell University’s Junior High School Project, William Alexander, often regarded as the father of the middle school, defined a new direction and organizational structure for the school bridging the gap between the elementary and high school: the middle school. Both educators and citizens were in favor of developing schools and school atmospheres that were more responsive to the needs of young adolescents (Alexander, 1991).

Under Alexander’s vision, the major components of the middle school included a comprehensive curriculum plan, a home-base advisory class, team planning and team teaching, numerous exploratory courses, health and physical education programs aimed at adolescents, planning evaluation systems for teachers, and instruction through a variety of instructional plans. The school would address specific topics relevant to young adolescents, provide educational support and guidance to students, and allow students to participate in innovative teaching and learning experiences that would provide additional opportunities for success (McEwin, 1992).

Other middle school curriculum plans were developed, based on the principles of providing more responsive curriculum options specifically for early adolescent students (Alexander & George, 1981; Eichhorn, 1966; Lounsbury & Vars, 1978; Moss, 1969).

A major professional organization, the National Middle School Association, was founded in 1963 and subsequently has become a powerful advocate for middle level education through its conferences, journal, and other publications (Lounsbury, 1992). In 1977, the NMSA adopted and published a set of goals that was the first in a series of reports listing specific goals, characteristics, components, and recommendations for the middle school structure and
philosophy. With a foundation in the new NMSA goals, Alexander and George (1981) provided a more comprehensive middle school concept:

This concept of a bridging school is not enough, however, because children of middle school age have their unique characteristics and needs which cannot be subordinated to the impact of the elementary school nor to the demands of the high school. An effective middle school must not only build upon the program on earlier childhood and anticipate the program of secondary education to follow, but it must be directly concerned with the here-and-now problems and interests of its students. Furthermore, the middle school should not be envisioned as a passive link in the chain of education below the college and university, but rather as a dynamic force in improving education. (p. 2)

Although the terms junior high and middle school sometimes are used interchangeably, they are distinct organizational conceptions. The concept of the junior high school dates back to 1903; this organizational structure was created for the purpose of bridging the gap between the elementary and high school. Although junior high schools attempted to embrace adolescent psychology at the turn of the 20th century and provide a unique educational model that addressed the developmental needs of students, by the 1960s much of the literature on the junior high noted that such schools simply had turned into miniature versions of high schools (Johnson, Dupuis, Musial, & Hall, 1994). Junior high schools traditionally are organized into academic departments that operate largely independent of one another. This approach is in stark contrast to the middle level model that promotes the use of an interdisciplinary teaming structure. The middle school movement was spawned because this departmentalized model was considered to inadequately address the needs of the young adolescents attending this grade span. The terms junior high and middle school may not adequately describe the organizational structure of a given school, as many schools labeled junior high implement aspects of the middle school concept and some schools labeled middle school have not embraced these essential elements. The term middle level schools is now being utilized to describe schools of all organizational structures that serve
students between grades 5 through 9, regardless of whether they function under the middle school or junior high school philosophy (Valentine et al., 2002).

**Influential documents.** Three significant publications have helped shape and define what middle level educators today believe to be effective middle schools. These seminal works were developed in three different segments of the educational community, two of which subsequently underwent revisions and issued additional reports. *An Agenda for Excellence at the Middle Level* was authored by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (1985). *This We Believe*, the first NMSA position paper (1982), was followed by their benchmark publication, *This We Believe: Developmentally Responsive Middle Level Schools* (1995), and with a subsequent follow-up, *This We Believe…and Now We Must Act* (Erb, 2001). *Turning Points* was written by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989) with a second report written a decade later, *Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21st Century* (Jackson & Davis, 2000). These publications have become the foundation upon which middle school programming, philosophies, policies, and practices are based (Williams-Boyd, 2003).

During the 1980s, a number of publications called for significant educational reforms in the United States; however, because the focus of many of these reports was on secondary schools, middle level schools had been virtually overlooked. The CCAD appointed a 16-member task force, including several educators and then-Governor Bill Clinton, to examine the developmental needs of young adolescents and the specific school conditions that had been established to educate them. The *Turning Points* report emphasized not only the perils young teens face but also the potential they could reach. The council concluded with the following:

*Middle grade schools—junior high, intermediate, or middle schools—are potentially society’s most powerful force to recapture millions of youth adrift. Yet too often they exacerbate the problems the youth face. A volatile mismatch exists between the*
organization and curriculum of middle grades schools, and the intellectual, emotional, and interpersonal needs of young adolescents. (CCAD, 1989, p. 32)

*Turning Points* advanced eight recommendations to guide schools in their work of developing needs-responsive programs for young adolescents.

1. Divide large schools into small, caring communities of learning.
2. Teach a core, rigorous, academic curriculum to all students.
3. Organized to ensure success for all students, through effective instructional strategies and program components.
4. Teachers and administrators are empowered to transform middle grade schools through site-based decision making.
5. Teachers are specifically prepared to teach young adolescents.
6. Improve the academic performance of young adolescents through good health.
7. Re-engage families in the education of young adolescents.
8. Connect schools with communities.

The *Turning Points* report has had a more widespread effect on middle grades education than any other source (Mertens et al., 1998; Mulhall, Flowers, & Mertens 2002). Perhaps this effect is because of the diverse task force responsible for its preparation, which included political leaders, policy specialists, researchers, and lay leaders whose interests represented corporate America (Williams-Boyd, 2003). The publication of *Turning Points* brought national attention to middle level education and supported the principles of earlier publications and efforts by the NASSP and NMSA.

Eleven years after *Turning Points*, the Carnegie Corporation released its second report, *Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21st Century* (Jackson & Davis, 2000), which made numerous suggestions that expanded upon the initial eight principles. There are a few changes when comparing the second document with recommendations from the original *Turning
First, there is a change in that ensuring success for every student now was stated as the overall goal of every effective middle school, rather than being noted as a recommendation or a goal equal with the others. All recommendations have an impact on ensuring success for all students in *Turning Points 2000* (Erb, 2001; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Williams-Boyd, 2003).

1. Teach a curriculum grounded in standards, relevant to adolescents’ concerns, and based on how students learn best; and use a mix of assessment methods.

2. Use instructional methods that prepare all students to achieve high standards.

3. Organize relationships for learning.

4. Govern democratically, involving all school staff members.

5. Staff middle grades schools with teachers who are expert at teaching young adolescents, and engage teachers in ongoing professional development.

6. Provide a safe and healthy school environment.

7. Involve parents and communities in supporting student learning and healthy development.

Secondly, recommendations reflect a significant change in that teaching and learning have moved to become the primary force from the classroom perspective. The focus on teaching and learning should guide all other decisions, including teacher preparation, organization, governance, bridges to the family and community, culture, environment, and ongoing professional development (Jackson & Davis, 2000; Williams-Boyd, 2003). However, Jackson and Davis (2000) noted that this order should not imply a recipe for successful middle school implementation. All of the recommendations in *Turning Points* and *Turning Points 2000* are interrelated and intended to meet schools “where they are and help take them where they need to go to ensure success” (p. 25).

The third difference moved terminology that describes what should be taught away from a core of knowledge that all students should know. *Turning Points 2000* focuses on the
expanding body of knowledge, addressing the skills and habits of mind young adolescents should know, accounting for their changing concerns, and incorporating the expanding body of knowledge regarding how young adolescents learn (Jackson & Davis, 2000; Williams-Boyd, 2003). A fourth difference adds an instructional piece calling for the use of varied teaching techniques to help all students succeed. This addition highlights changes in refocusing the importance of teaching and learning throughout the Turning Points 2000 recommendations. Jackson and Davis (2000) noted that curriculum, assessment, and instruction are intertwined, and any effort to modify curriculum and assessment practices without changing instruction, or vice versa, will fail.

There are also parallels between Turning Points 2000 and the NMSA publication, This We Believe…and Now We Must Act (Erb, 2001). Where Turning Points called for a standards-based curriculum relevant to adolescents’ world of experience and the use of varied assessments, This We Believe suggested using assessment and evaluation to promote learning and curriculum that are challenging, respectful, exploratory, and integrative. Both documents advocated for the use of varied instructional and learning strategies, the importance of educators with specialized training to work with young adolescents, the engagement of families and communities in the work of the school, and the importance of programs that provide a safe and healthy environment for young adolescents. Turning Points noted the necessity of organized relationships to successful learning, and This We Believe accented flexible organizational structures, the importance of an adult advocate for every student, and the use of comprehensive guidance and support services. Although Turning Points called for schools to be democratically governed by all school personnel, This We Believe noted the importance of a shared vision, high expectations for all students, and a positive school climate (Erb, 2001). These and other publications, along
with the research and writings of four decades of middle level educators and scholars have provided a model and identity for an educational structure designed for young adolescents—the middle school.

**Core practices of the middle school concept.** The middle school concept is flexible, responsive, and integrated, with an aim of providing a safe, secure, and appropriate environment for young adolescents to learn challenging content that will enable them to explore self, others, and the larger world (Ames & Miller, 1994; George & Alexander, 2003; Stevenson, 1998; Stevenson & Erb, 1998). This middle school philosophy has gained support from a significant number of empirical studies, particularly in support of the research-based *Turning Points* recommendations.

A longitudinal study conducted by Felner et al. (1997) examined the level in which schools were implementing middle level educational reforms. The findings suggest that schools with higher implementation levels of *Turning Points* recommendations demonstrate increased student achievement, fewer behavior problems, and easier student adjustment to school. Lee and Smith (1993) found that students in restructured middle schools (schools using team teaching, interdisciplinary curriculum, and other middle school concepts) scored significantly higher in the areas of achievement and engagement than students attending traditional junior high schools. Feldhaufer, Midgley, and Ecles (1987) concluded that self-contained classrooms (similar to the structure provided by teaming and flexible or block schedules prescribed for middle schools) provided more correlation of learning and learning opportunities than departmentalization. Proponents of student-centered curriculum assert that moving away from departmentalization and the use of integrated curriculum makes learning more meaningful (Pitton, 2001). Examining studies from the prior 60 years, Vars (1996) concluded that students involved with a combined
curriculum of any form perform academically as well as, and often better than, students in a traditional disciplined-based instructional program.

Middle school reformers have recommended a number of practices that have become key components to the structure of middle schools. There are several core practices in particular that help characterize and shape middle schools; however, these practices are not unique to middle level education and many are practiced in both elementary and secondary schools. The middle level research clearly shows that middle level educators desiring to implement a middle school philosophy cannot simply select a few reforms at random from a checklist. For a significant, positive effect on student achievement, varying combinations of middle school structures must be implemented (Felner et al., 1997). Stevenson and Erb (1998) indicate that each Turning Points factor is interdependent and must work in concert with other recommendations in order to create a developmentally responsive environment for young adolescents (Figure 4).

A number of practices and elements constitute the middle school philosophy; however, some key practices that should be noted specifically are the use of flexible scheduling, advisory programs, and interdisciplinary team teaching, with interdisciplinary team teaching being described as a “signature practice” (Valentine et al., 1993, p. 49). Although other instructional and organizational practices have been developed with responsiveness to young adolescents in mind, these three elements frequently are mentioned in the literature and are promoted by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (CCAD, 1989; Jackson & Davis, 2000), the National Middle School Association (1982; 1995; 2003a), and the National Forum to Accelerate Middle School Reform (2004).
Flexible scheduling. Organizing time in the middle school needs to follow the same approach of meeting the needs of early adolescents, as does every other component of the middle school concept, in order to provide a unique and transitional approach that is developmentally responsive (George & Alexander, 2003). As described by Behevino, Snodgrass, Adams, and Dengel (1999), alterations in the structure of the school day (from several equally divided periods to a format that provides fewer, but longer flexible periods) is called flexible scheduling. Anfara (2001) noted that within these longer periods of time, a number of learning components may be altered. Curricula may be delivered in an integrated manner, more individualized instruction may occur, and students can be provided with expanded time for reflection and collaboration in their learning. With such a flexible scheduling format, teachers on an
interdisciplinary team can make changes daily or weekly in altering students’ movement between classes based on their progress in areas of integrated study (Anfara, 2001; Spillane et al., 2001).

Several advantages in designing optimal learning environments for young adolescents have been identified with the implementation of flexible scheduling arrangements. Caine and Caine (1994) argued that the simple gift of time is the primary advantage that ensures meaningful learning. Sizer (1992) suggested a need for extended class sessions to promote greater student understanding. Wolf and Brandt (1998) reported that students need extended periods of time for hands-on and minds-on learning experiences to occur.

Meaningful learning also requires that students have time to make connections between background schemata and prior knowledge (Caine & Caine, 1994). Anfara (2001) noted that the factory approach model (deliverance of six to eight academic disciplines in a disconnected manner in a short amount of time) does little to promote genuine understanding. Learners who are forced into what has been previously described as traditional scheduling patterns, receive information in concise formats that Caine and Caine (1994) referenced as “surface knowledge” (p. 101). The assurance that students have time to make connections among separate content areas is another advantage that Anfara (2001) noted. Perkins (1992) explained,

> teaching of the subject matter involves much more than the teaching of bits and pieces of content. Learners need an integrative sense of the subject matter. They need an overarching mental image of its structure, so that they see how its strands interweave to make a whole fabric. (p. 117)

Beane (1993) contended that, in order for a middle school to be effective, educators need to design and deliver curricula in an interdisciplinary format to permit students to make the connections among concepts and principles. In This We Believe, NMSA (1995) advocated varied teaching and learning approaches and assessment and evaluation that promote learning for young adolescents. Anfara (2001) presented possibilities for strengthening curriculum, instruction, and
assessment by extending instruction past 60 minutes. Students can engage in a multitude of active learning processes when additional time is available, such as collaborating with other students to improve knowledge, reflecting on and developing hypotheses, completing primary research investigations, gathering primary and secondary data to answer research queries, and designing and presenting elaborate final projects. Anfara (2001) asserted that these instructional methods allow active learning processes to occur. This process permits teachers to address students’ social, emotional, cultural, and cognitive learning domains in a much more significant way than these areas can be addressed in short, isolated time periods. Dental and George (1999) reported that along with an increase of hands-on activities and increased learning opportunities, the adoption of more creative and innovative teaching methods was the most frequently reported outcome of flexible scheduling.

In an era of high-stakes testing, when standardized test scores seem to factor into many restructuring initiatives, block scheduling often is considered. With this type of schedule it is possible to devote more time to areas such as reading, writing, and mathematics. McLeod (2001) indicated that many educators attested to an increase in their students’ scores when involved in a block schedule. Hackmann (1995) noted that schools using alternating block schedules have reported an improvement in general school culture because students and teachers are provided with additional time to try to understand and complete assignments. Other middle level leaders assert that intrinsically motivated students are often an outcome of this type of scheduling. One potential reason for this increased motivation, as indicated by George and Alexander (2003), may be the ability to provide additional time for independent practice by students during class, thereby avoiding the classic middle school student problem of not completing or turning in homework.
A flexible schedule provides opportunities for allotting different time periods to various subjects on the basis of teacher and student need while allowing options for team teachers to group and regroup children (Klemetson & Williams-Boyd, 2003). Implementation of interdisciplinary instruction, along with large- and small-group instruction, also can be managed easily through flexible scheduling.

**Advisory programs.** Schools in the early 20th century appeared to be based on the assumption that all pupils were very much alike (Clark & Clark, 1994). Tyack and Cuban (1995), however, noted that children have different abilities, interests, and destinies in life; hence, school structures should treat them differently. Improvements in teaching and learning are most effective when focused directly on the relationships that are formed between teachers and students (National Education Association, 2002). Advisory programs are premised on the assumption that, characterized by warmth, concern, openness and understanding, every student needs to have a relationship with at least one adult in the school (George & Alexander, 2003).

According to some middle level scholars, the single most important aspect of middle level education is the quality of the relationship between teachers and students (Van Hosse, 1991; Williams-Boyd, 2003). The CCAD (1989), NASSP (1985), NMSA (1995), and Phi Delta Kappa (Wayson et al., 1982) all supported the establishment of an adviser-advisee relationship in which every middle grades child has an adult advocate. An advisor-advisee program assigns a teacher a small group of students to whom the teacher provides guidance based on mutual respect (George & Alexander, 2003). Teachers meet regularly with their advisees to mentor, guide, and provide support. Although advisory programs can have differing objectives and goals, most aim to promote smaller communities of learners and provide individual attention to students (Anfara & Brown, 2001). By providing a more positive psycho-social climate, student
learning can be enhanced (Goh, 1995). Advisory programs have a different goal from that of flexible scheduling and interdisciplinary team teaching, in that the focus of advisory models is to develop positive relationships among teachers and students, rather than to directly improve student achievement.

The rationale for an advisor/advisory program is supported by research involving parents, students, and teachers (Galassi, Gulledge, & Cox, 1997). Connolly, Dowd, Criste, Nelson, and Tobias (1995) reported that children cannot advocate for themselves due to the lack of an influential lobbying group or societal power. Garvin (1987) found that parents called for a supportive adult in the school who could serve as an advocate for their child.

Stevenson’s (1998) research identified four generalizations that one can trust in working with young adolescents: (a) every child wants to believe in himself or herself as a successful person, (b) every young adolescent wants to be liked and respected, (c) every young adolescent wants physical exercise and freedom to move, and (d) young adolescents want life to be just. Advisory programs can bring about an influential relationship between the young adolescent and an adult, satisfying many of Stevenson’s generalized needs. Additional research by Beane and Lipka (1987) and Conners (1986) support different aspects of these generalizations. Beane and Lipka (1987) asserted that the advisory program is designed to directly deal with the needs of the student. A broad range of activities can be addressed, from informal interactions to the use of systematically developed curricular units whose organizing objectives are drawn from the common problems, needs, interests, or concerns of the students. The ideal advisory program allows the opportunity for students to form a relationship with one adult advocate, to feel a sense of security within the school, and to learn what it means to be a physically and emotionally healthy human being. Conners (1986) found evidence that advisory programs helped students
learn about school and develop positive relationships with their peers, helped students to grow socially and emotionally which contributed to a positive school climate, and enhanced the teacher-student relationship. Students who do not feel attachment to school personnel tend to drop out or have poorer attendance than those who perceive that they are part of a school environment in which they feel supported (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989). George and Oldaker (1985) suggested that when advisory programs are combined with other components of the middle school concept, school climate becomes more positive, dropout rates decrease, and student self-concept improves. Moreover, a “positive psychosocial climate between teachers and students appears to improve academic achievement” (Galassi et al., 1997, p. 335).

Although research points to the positive results of advisory programs (Conners, 1991; MacIver, 1990; Putbrese, 1989; Southern Regional Education Board, 2004; Vars, 1989), it remains one of the most difficult of the middle school concepts to implement (Anfara & Brown, 2001; Fenwick, 1992; Lounsbury & Clark, 1990). Although 57% percent of responding middle school principals indicated that their schools had regularly scheduled advisory programs (Valentine et al., 2002), there is evidence that advisory programs and interdisciplinary team teaching often are enacted only superficially (MacIver & Epstein, 1991). Yet, the benefits of advisory programs to both teachers and students, as well as to a positive school climate, are significant (Anfara & Brown, 2001). Alexander and George (1981) offered some insightful thoughts to consider:

Teachers need this type of involvement no less than students do. Because most teachers really do seem to have a deep felt need to make a significantly positive difference in the lives of their students, and the daily demands of the classroom often seem to make this difficult or impossible, the advisor-advisee program provides the teacher with an opportunity to get to know some manageable number of students in a meaningful way. (p. 90)
**Interdisciplinary team teaching.** Interdisciplinary teaming is considered as a critical component of the middle school philosophy, so that teachers can meet the developmental needs of early adolescent learners. Introduced by Gruhn and Douglas (1971) and later endorsed as a foundational component of successful middle schools by Lipsitz (1984), interdisciplinary teaming has grown into a standard practice in most middle level schools (Alt & Choy, 2001; Hackmann et al., 2002; McEwin, Dickinson, & Jenkins, 2003). The exploratory, advisory, and flexible scheduling characteristics of middle school support a key tenet of the middle school philosophy: the creation of smaller learning communities.

Most often, learning communities are strengthened by placing a shared group of students with the same set of teachers (Wallis, Miranda, & Rubiner, 2005). The small learning communities, also known as interdisciplinary teams in which a group of teachers is responsible for the academic and social requirements of a smaller primary group of students (Daniels, Madden, & Slavin, 2004) create a sense of family and a feeling of belonging (Bunting, 2004). As defined by George and Alexander (1993), an interdisciplinary team is

> a way of organizing the faculty so that a group of teachers share (1) the same group of students; (2) the responsibility for planning, teaching, and evaluating curriculum and instruction in more than one academic area; (3) the same schedule; and (4) the same area of the building. (p. 249)

Despite the organization and size of the school, all students can benefit from the community established as a result of an effective interdisciplinary team (McEwin, Dickinson, & Jacobson, 2004). Students are the beneficiaries when the strengths and weaknesses of the teachers balance each other out and they are exposed to various teaching styles (Greorgiady & Romano, 1974; Muth & Alverman, 1999). When students are members of a team, they can more readily comprehend the connection of curriculum content across the disciplines with the assistance of their teachers (Muth & Alverman, 1999). Because a shared group of teachers is
responsible for the same students throughout the day for an entire school year, relationships are formed and strengthened among students and their fellow teammates, among the team of teachers, and among the teachers and the students. Essentially, students and teachers on a team form one cohesive unit (George, 2000).

An examination of the literature on interdisciplinary team teaching reveals four major areas. First, a focus on organizational structure dominates the literature. Second, there are significant materials on the functions of teams, including management issues, curriculum and instruction, student centered issues, and communication issues. Third, findings in several studies refer to teaming benefits for both teachers and students. Fourth, there is discussion of the barriers that hinder the implementation of teaming.

Organizational issues. A critical handful of organizational items deemed necessary to the success of interdisciplinary teaming are identified in middle grades literature. These items include the following: (a) team size, defined as the number of students assigned to a team, (b) common planning time, (c) longevity of team members, and (d) goal planning (Brown, 2001; Crow & Pounder, 2000; Day, 1996; Flowers et al., 1999; Lipitz, 1984; Oakes, Hunter, Ryan, & Lipton, 2000; Polite, 1994; Warren & Payne, 1997; White, 1997).

Team size refers to the number of students assigned to a team, as well as the number of teachers assigned to the interdisciplinary team. Although an optimal team size has not been established in the research, Flowers, Mertens, and Mulhall (2000) recommended that teams consist of 90 or fewer students. Their research has disclosed that the size of the team correlates directly with the amount of team activities that can be accomplished successfully. Although not specifying a specific number of students, work by Lipsitz (1984), Crow and Pounder (2000), and Ehman (1995) indicated that the size of the team is critical because as a team expands,
coordination and communication grow more difficult and the ability to know the students as individuals decreases.

Common planning time is identified as an essential element to the success of interdisciplinary teaming (Flowers et al., 1999; 2000). Common planning time is defined as a block of time during the instructional day in which all team teachers come together to conduct team functions and is recommended in addition to the teachers’ individual planning time. Abundant claims are made in the literature that adequate common planning time is necessary for team teachers to develop relationships, discuss students, communicate with parents, plan team activities, and integrate curriculum (Brown, 2001; Crow & Pounder, 2000; Flowers et al., 1999, 2000; Hackmann et al., 2002; Lipitz, 1984; McTague, 1996; Oakes et al., 2000; Warren & Payne, 1997).

Flowers et al. (2000) determined that, in order to function effectively as a team, teachers needed a minimum of four sessions weekly of common planning time, with each session lasting at least 30 minutes. In addition to the types and frequencies of activities, Warren and Payne (1997) found that teachers with common planning time have significantly higher personal efficacy than non-teamed teachers, noting, “Personal efficacy was the degree to which teachers believed that they have the ability to affect student performance” (p. 301).

Longevity, defined as how many academic years teachers on the team are assigned to work together, is another critical component researchers claim is necessary for effective interdisciplinary teaming. Many researchers acknowledge that effective team development is a process that evolves over time, and the length of time together affects the quality, duration, and frequency of team activities that are attempted (Brown, 2001; Cooper-Shaw, 1993; Day, 1996; Flowers et al., 2000, 1999; McQuaide, 1994; McTague, 1996; Polite, 1994; White, 1997). Citing
various organizational theories to support their findings, researchers concur that teams go through several stages as they mature into highly functioning teams. In the initial phase, the team must form and develop routines and administrative procedures.

Once established, the team must work on social aspects of building trust and respect. Only after these initial phases are developed, which can take up to three years, can teams enhance their activities from mere administrative and managerial tasks to a more complex level of planning and integrating curriculum (Achinstein, 2002; Cooper-Shaw, 1993; Crow & Pounder, 2000; Day, 1996; George & Oldaker, 1985; McQuaide, 1994; McTague, 1996; Thomas, 1997; White, 1997).

The final category that emerges in the literature under organizational structure is the need for teams to establish goals and develop a shared vision in order to give focus and direction to their work (Crow & Pounder, 2000; Oakes et al., 2000). Goal setting is linked strongly with the concept of longevity, because the team’s state of development influences teachers’ abilities to set goals and develop a shared vision.

Team functions. The majority of team functions fall into one of the following four categories: management issues, student issues, communication, and curriculum and instruction. Management issues include administrative tasks such as scheduling classes and organizing field trips. Student issues address both behavior and academic issues, usually for students that have difficulty in either area. Communication covers both dialogues within the team regarding planning, goal setting or operating issues, and communications with the larger school community or with parents. Curriculum and instruction comprised functions that directly influenced classroom practice, such as teaching strategies and integrated curriculum.
Cooper-Shaw (1993) referred to discussions related to management issues and student issues as low-level concerns. These low-level issues dominated the agendas and conversations of team meetings within many teams that have been researched (Cooper-Shaw, 1993; Crow & Pounder, 2000; Ehman, 1995; McQuaide, 1994; McTague, 1996; Thomas, 1997; White, 1997). Discussions regarding goal setting, planning integrated curriculum, or philosophical conversations that explore the beliefs and values of team members are considered high-level functions, yet research indicates these conversations rarely are held during team meetings. With the dominance of discussion and team functions at the level of management and student issues, it is a rare team that progresses to the level of planning and implementing a highly integrated curriculum. However, research has uncovered some promising findings. Flowers et al. (1999, 2000) determined that interdisciplinary teacher teams containing 90 or fewer students, having high levels of common planning time, and that had worked together at least four years were significantly more likely to implement a more integrated curriculum. Studies by Polite (1994) and White (1997) also concluded that team maturity and the development of goals positively influenced the level of curriculum integration present on the team. The teams in both studies had been together or longer than three years, practiced open communication, possessed deep levels of trust and respect, and developed team goals that were monitored on a regular basis.

Polite (1994) and White (1997) have shown that teaming can add significantly to teaching effectiveness, providing teachers assistance with curriculum integration, broad-based generic concepts, and generalizations. Teaming also helps to answer questions that span disciplinary boundaries, as well as providing connections of topics to real life examples. As teams progress through a continuum, so does curriculum integration. Fogarty’s (1991) models of curriculum integration ranged through 10 stages: from “fragmented,” in which subjects are
planned and taught in isolation, to “networked,” in which learners united to form various expert
groups and the learner is proactive. Fogarty concluded that teams can have effective integrated
curriculum as early as the second level, which is described as connected curriculum. At this
level, key concepts and links are made across disciplines, yet still delivered within each separate
discipline. Fogarty concluded that there was no significant difference between an early stage of
team functionality and more developed models higher on the integration scale. This finding is
encouraging because middle level advocates have claimed that for students to have the full
benefit of an integrated curriculum, the practice needs to be fully integrated, on the upper end or
the “networked” level of the scale (Flowers et al., 2000; Jackson & Davis, 2000). These findings
indicate that students benefit at a much lower of integration, and thus the vision of an integrated
curriculum within a team is a more attainable goal.

Benefits to teaming. This section discusses both the social and interpersonal implications
for both teachers and students, as well as exploring the academic impact to students. Students did
not fully benefit from teaming until a team developed to a stage in which curriculum was
integrated. However, even at early stages of development, both students and teachers did identify
benefits to teaming.

The literature indicates mixed results when examining the benefits of interdisciplinary
teaming in relationship to students. Studies examining the social aspect of teams have found
positive outcomes, but the studies exploring the effects on student achievement have shown
inconclusive results. When fully operational, teaming works to personalize the environment for
students (Arhar, 1992; Everhart, 2001; Lipsitz, 1984; Oakes et al., 2000; Pounder, 1999).
Positive social lives, including a stronger sense of belonging, are identified as benefits for
students. Students place social interactions with both peers and adults as the most significant part
of their school day (Everhart, 2001). Students who are assigned to interdisciplinary teams report feeling safer and having significantly stronger relationships with teachers and adults within their school (Arhar, 1992; Pounder, 1999). However, there are contradictory findings when examining social bonds with peers. Arhar (1992) found no significant differences between teamed and non-teamed students when examining their formation of bonds with peers, although Pounder’s (1999) research concluded that students on teams reported greater levels of satisfaction with peer interactions.

When examining the effects of teaming on student achievement, the results also have yielded mixed outcomes (McEwin et al., 2003). Studies throughout the 1970s and 1980s were inconclusive regarding the effects of interdisciplinary teaming on student achievement (NMSA, 1997). Many researchers claimed it was difficult to isolate the impact of just one concept when several middle level reforms were implemented in combination with one another. However, in a meta-analysis of 10 studies examining the Pontoon Transitional Design, Clark and Clark (1994) did identify gains in student achievement. This model of teaming from the early 1960s involved teacher autonomy in the decision-making process, flexible scheduling using large blocks of time, correlated subject matter, common planning time, and teacher collaboration (Clark & Clark, 1992). More recent research reflects more positive findings. Russell (1997) surveyed 381 educators in 10 middle schools in one district and analyzed achievement scores for 2,372 students. This researcher concluded that interdisciplinary teaming was one of three concepts that had a greater potential for enhancing student achievement in the area of mathematics.

The Michigan Middle Start Initiative, a longitudinal study involving middle schools throughout Michigan, determined that teams with high levels of common planning time, 90 or fewer students, and team members who work together for at least four years implement effective
instructional practices more frequently, especially curriculum integration and interdisciplinary practices (Flowers et al., 2000). These researchers also found a positive correlation in all cases between student achievement gain scores on the Michigan Assessment Program. In an earlier study, results indicated that teaming schools show higher achievement scores than non-teaming schools, and teaming schools with high levels of common planning time had the greatest two-year gains on measures of student achievement (Flowers et al., 1999).

A second large-scale longitudinal study examined middle schools involved in the Illinois Middle Grades Network, examining the impact of the Turning Points design supported by the Carnegie Foundation. Several of the key recommendations in this study included small learning communities, a common core of knowledge focused on problem solving and critical thinking, teachers academically prepared to teach young adolescents, learning for young adolescents that must be inextricably linked, and strong partnerships with parents (Felner et al., 1997). Results indicated that team size and the amount of common planning time have a significant effect on the degree to which elements of Turning Points are accomplished. Felner et al. (1997) noted, “The data showed, that across subject areas, adolescents in schools that implemented more Turning Points recommendations achieved at much higher levels than those in non-implemented schools and substantially better than those in partially implemented schools” (p. 543).

The literature also cites benefits for teachers as a result of the interdisciplinary teaming structure. Historically, the practice of teaching has been recognized as an independent and individual venture. A teacher walked into the classroom, shut the door and taught class. The teacher decided what was taught and how it was taught, acting in relative isolation from her/his colleagues. The benefit most frequently cited concerning teaming is that collaboration reduces the sense of isolation that many teachers previously experienced. Pounder (1999) conducted a
A qualitative study involving teacher observations and interviews, confirming that teachers working on interdisciplinary teams reported a reduced sense of isolation. Pounder also reported that teamed teachers indicated that their work requires more skill. Teachers who were members of interdisciplinary teams reported having increased knowledge of their students and enhanced communication with parents, when compared with non-teamed teachers. Additionally, teamed teachers reported higher levels of job satisfaction, professional commitment, professional growth, and overall satisfaction with their careers.

Building interpersonal relationships is one of the key benefits teachers identify with teaming. A number of studies have shown that team longevity had significant positive impacts on perceptions of trust and respect among team members. The longer the teachers served as members of the same team, the better the chance that deeper bonds of trust and respect grew (Polite, 1994; Thomas, 1997; White, 1997). In many cases, deep friendships developed among teachers on the teams. Advocates for middle schools often discuss the importance of social connection for students; however, social connections are as meaningful and important to adults (Everhart, 2001).

**Influential research.** In his meta-analysis, Hough (2003) identified more than 3,700 studies related to the middle school concept that were conducted between 1991 and 2002. However, Hough noted that many topics and issues have not been addressed in the research to an adequate degree, and almost no middle level education studies were replications of prior research (NMSA, 2003b). Additional research, supporting and replicating earlier efforts, is needed to continue to examine the effectiveness and sustainability of the middle school reform movement (Felner et al., 1997; Hough, 2003; Van Zandt & Totten, 1995).
In addition to numerous studies examining individual elements of the middle school concept, several significant studies have examined the middle school concept as a comprehensive reform. The most expansive study was conducted by Felner et al. (1997), who developed a longitudinal study utilizing the network schools of the Association of Illinois Middle-level Schools. Lee and Smith (1993), and Mulhall, Flowers, and Mertens (2002) also conducted influential studies that examined the effectiveness of the middle school concept in promoting gains in academic achievement and students’ social-emotional development.

Lee and Smith (1993) examined middle school restructuring, focusing on how middle school policies and practices affected students, and specifically examined achievement, engagement, and equity. The sample for their study was drawn from the National Education Longitudinal Study, a large-scale national data set and ultimately included 8,845 eighth grade students in 377 schools, from a range of school types, sizes, and grade configurations. They delimited their analysis to the implementation of only three middle school restructuring elements: the use of heterogeneous grouping practices, less departmentalization, and more collaboration among teachers. The researchers determined implementation of these elements on the basis of self-reported data, so their conclusions may have limitations. Lee and Smith (1993) concluded that the elements of restructuring—heterogeneous grouping, less departmentalization, and more teacher collaboration—were linked positively to student achievement and engagement of eighth graders. These elements also appeared to promote greater equity among achievement and engagement of eighth graders. However, Lee and Smith identified an increase in at-risk behaviors among eighth-grade students at schools with the restructuring elements in place. They also found that adolescents in smaller grade groupings were more engaged and engagement was greater among a wider distribution of students. Lee and Smith concluded that students attending
restructured schools benefited from the changes and that engagement and achievement were more evenly distributed among all students. However, they cautioned that “adopting more elements of restructuring is not a reasonable way for schools to approach the task. Rather, which experiences of students are restructured and how profoundly these experiences are restructured is more important than how many experiences are restructured” (p. 181).

Felner et al. (1997) began their study out of a need for research “that directly addresses the process of middle-grades restructuring and its impact” (p. 5). The researchers sought to assess Turning Points implementation and its effects on student outcomes: academic achievement, socio-emotional development, and behavioral adjustment. The researchers conducted a longitudinal study involving 31 Illinois schools participating in the Project Initiative Middle Level restructuring effort. The schools represented a diversity of geographic and demographic characteristics and sizes. Data were collected through an annual survey and through student records, attendance data, and test score reports. The results were presented after three years of data collection and on the basis of several types of analyses. Based on initial data collection, schools were categorized by a level of implementation founded on the researchers’ understanding of middle school restructuring (Cuban, 1992; Epstein & Maclver, 1990). Felner et al. (1997) found that students in schools with highly implemented middle school restructuring performed better on standardized tests than those in non-implemented and partially-implemented schools. In the highly implemented schools, teachers reported fewer behavior problems and students reported feeling less fear and higher levels of self-esteem. The researchers concluded that the more deeply a school implements the Turning Points restructuring model, the greater the gains for students. Researchers also noted that schools that had implemented only some of the
structural aspects of the model experienced no positive effects, and in some cases experienced negative effects on student outcomes.

Mulhall et al. (2002) attempted to uncover the indicators related to academic performance of middle grades students. The authors discussed the role of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the increasing use of high stakes testing and the general public’s desire for greater accountability for schools. However, concerns also were raised that one test score should not be used as a single defining measure of success or failure for education. Mulhall et al. also shared a concern for continued low achievement among middle grades students despite new accountability mandates. They argued that educators must develop a better understanding of the many factors that affect middle grades students’ success but explained that such understanding cannot be gained solely from test score results. They criticized the use of disaggregating data, as practiced under NCLB, because it leaves educators without an understanding of why gaps among subgroups are present. In response, the researchers attempted to explore some of the indicators and student characteristics that affect student achievement in the middle grades.

Mulhall et al. (2002) gathered their data from self-study questionnaires administered through the Center for Prevention Research and Development at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. These surveys were given to students, teachers, parents, and administrators in order to better understand student and school experiences related to middle school reform. Their sample included 32,000 sixth, seventh, and eighth graders in middle schools participating in the Mid-South Middle Start Initiative in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas during the 2000-2001 school year. In their analysis, the researchers focused on five areas that have been linked to academic success: educational expectations, number of books read, academic efficacy, self-reported grades, and parent involvement.
Mulhall et al. (2002) found that, throughout their middle school years, boys experienced a decline in their expectations to attend college, and boys in lower socioeconomic groups reported even lower expectations for college throughout their middle school years. They also found that all middle grades students reported reading fewer books over the course of their middle school experience. In terms of academic efficacy, or students’ confidence and competence to complete academic tasks, the researchers found that all students showed a decline during the middle school years, with girls dropping most dramatically, beginning as the highest of all groups in efficacy in sixth grade but dropping below all other groups by the eighth grade. The researchers also observed that students’ self-reports of grades demonstrated an overall decline during the middle school years, with girls again showing the greatest drop. Finally, the findings revealed that parent communication also declined for all students during the middle school years, but particularly for girls.

The findings indicated the role that various factors play in contributing to students’ academic achievement. Mulhall et al. (2002) argued that NCLB reporting only provides a narrow glimpse of student performance and a very “limited understanding of potential causes, processes, and solutions for improving student achievement for differing student groups” (p. 61). The researchers urged educators to look more closely at other factors that influence academic achievement. They also suggested the need for systems, programs, and training that enable educators to use a wider set of data to inform instructional decisions.

This research, as well as numerous other studies that have examined specific aspects of middle level education, have helped to establish a link between the middle school concept and gains in student achievement and socio-emotional development. In addition, researchers stress the interrelated nature of the Turning Points school reform elements and how important it is to
enact all those recommendations in reform efforts. This foundation of research helps middle level educators, researchers, and policymakers link the practices of the middle school to the elements required for any successful reform movement—an increase in student achievement and doing what is best for students.

The role of middle level leadership. Writing about the importance of strong principal leadership in leading effective schools, Anfara et al. (2001) noted that “there is a lack of research focused on the middle level principalship” (p. 185). Nonetheless, George and Alexander (1993) viewed such research as essential because “middle schools are affected by many factors as they seek to become exemplary, but none is more significant than the quality of their leadership” (p. 497). They held the belief that effective leadership is comprised of three sets of global behaviors: (a) a clear understanding of the characteristics and needs of young adolescents that is translated into a vision of appropriate organization, (b) using knowledge of young adolescents to plan a school program with effective implementation and evaluation, and (c) engaging all stakeholders in a shared decision-making process aimed at continual improvement (p. 497).

This We Believe (NMSA, 1982) defined the characteristics of developmentally responsive middle schools and identified 10 characteristics of effective middle-level schools. These characteristics illustrate the need for principals to possess the qualities and characteristics to lead middle level teachers and also be prepared to understand the developmental and educational needs of young adolescents as they matriculate through the middle grades.

- Educators’ knowledge about and commitment to young adolescents
- A balanced curriculum based on the needs of young adolescents
- A range of organizational arrangements
- Varied instructional strategies
- A full exploratory program
- Comprehensive advising and counseling
- Continuous process for students
- Evaluation procedures compatible with the nature of young adolescents
- Cooperative planning
- A positive school climate

Valentine et al. (2004) conducted a national study of leadership in middle level schools in which the researchers reviewed more than 270 middle school programs and school practices across the United States that were nominated for their exemplary practices. This review revealed six highly successful middle schools, and site visits were conducted to investigate the personal leadership qualities of each school’s principal. In the analysis of these leaders’ data, the researchers found the principals provided vision, modeled behavior, fostered commitment, provided individualized support, and engaged communities effectively. These qualities contributed to the success of the middle school principals in the study.

In 2006 the NASSP published a comprehensive report on middle schools entitled *Breaking Ranks in the Middle: Strategies for Leading Middle School Reform*. The report was designed to provide middle level principals with a guide to school improvement and communicate strategies that support middle level reform initiatives. One of the primary recommendations emanating from this report centered on collaborative leadership.

Williamson and Johnston (1991) described the role of the middle school principal as being an inspirational leader, human resource developer, and change agent. Valentine et al. (2004) contended that principal leadership for highly effective middle schools has three elements: reflective practice, collaborative instructional leadership, and transformational
leadership. In *Turning Points 2000*, Jackson and Davis’ (2000) discussed the role of the middle level leaders:

No single individual is more important to initiating and sustaining improvement in middle grades school students’ performance than the school principal. One of the most consistent findings in educational research is that high-achieving schools have strong, competent leaders. (p. 156)

Jackson and Davis (2000) also discussed the importance of the principal nurturing trust and respect by making teachers feel valued, important, and supported. The principal is able to “nurture teachers’ development as school leaders” (p. 159) by developing a trusting attitude. Principals who are able to trust and support teachers by providing leadership opportunities are able to relinquish their own need for control, thereby empowering teachers to engage in collective decision making (Jackson & Davis, 2000).

The literature related to the middle school principalship documents the need to focus specific attention on strategies to lead schools in the 21st century. Among the common elements in the research is a specific need to understand the developmental and academic needs of young adolescents, as well as implementing appropriate structures and programs that are developmentally appropriate for those students. Additional commonalities are seen throughout the literature that support efforts to distribute leadership, including engaging in shared decision making, promoting collaborative leadership, providing for collective decision making, and nurturing teachers as school leaders. In addition to working in a highly collaborative environment that is mindful of the developmental needs of the young adolescent, the successful and effective middle level leader is also encouraged to engage in a distributed form of leadership, supported by the foundational documents that frame middle level education in the 21st century.

**Summary of middle level education research.** Throughout history, educators have struggled with meeting the academic and social-emotional needs of the early adolescent learner.
During the middle of the 20th century, educators looked for a new method to meet the unique needs of early adolescents. The result was the reorganization of the middle grades, the building of middle grades schools, and the implementation of the middle school philosophy to meet the needs of the adolescent (George & Alexander, 1993; Manning, 2000). This section has reviewed the documents that were most influential to the middle school movement, including a detailed discussion of *Turning Points* (CCAD, 1989), because those recommendations constitute a significant aspect of middle school reform today. This review of middle level education literature included an examination of the elements considered essential to the middle school concept, including flexible scheduling, advisory programs, and interdisciplinary team teaching. Within the discussion of teaming, the elements of organization, team function, benefits, barriers, and school culture were examined. The works of Felner et al. (1997), Lee and Smith (1993), Mulhall et al. (2002), were discussed at length, because these works are influential in understanding the influence of middle level education and student achievement, as well as the implementation of middle level reform efforts and the *Turning Points* recommendations. Finally, the role of the principal at the middle level was examined, identifying common themes among the recommendations for leadership at this level. Among these themes is a need for leaders to be knowledgeable about and provide programs in support of the developmental needs of the young adolescent. In support of the unique needs of the young adolescent, the middle level leader is encouraged to provide a highly collaborative working environment, whereby a distributed perspective on school leadership is promoted.
Summary of the Literature

Empirical research on the changing role of the principal has indicated that with ever increasing requirements to produce evidence of student learning, the demands placed upon today’s principal make that job very complex, and arguably, unmanageable for one individual despite his/her qualifications, experience, and levels of commitment. Principals acknowledge the need to strengthen their leadership for learning behaviors within their schools, but note that they often are too bogged down with other aspects of the job that they are unable to adequately attend to this need. As a result of school restructuring efforts and local, state, and federal regulations on student achievement and school improvement, different conceptual frameworks of school leadership have evolved. A distributed leadership framework shows promise as a systematic approach to contending with the current needs of school systems, and middle level schools in particular.

Although there is no universally accepted definition of distributed leadership, Spillane et al. (2001) have defined distributed leadership as a way of thinking systematically about leadership practice. A simplified definition is that it is the delegation and redistribution of the principal’s responsibilities and authority to other staff members. Spillane (2006) and others have contended that the foundation in a distributed conceptual framework lies in the relationship between leaders, followers, and the leadership practice. Harris and Lambert (2003) noted that this field of study is particularly relevant to the motivation, ability, and practice of teachers, because “there are some important connections and overlaps between distributed leadership and teacher leadership” (p. 313). As a form of distributed leadership, teacher leadership practices may help to create an environment more conducive to the development of a professional community among teaching staff. Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001) suggested that the application
of teacher leadership could foster a professional community within the teaching profession focusing on learning and leadership, and by acting as advocates for new approaches to accountability, assessment, norms of achievement, and student expectations.

Teachers and leaders in middle level schools may have increased opportunities to apply a distributed perspective of leadership, as the middle level structure has supports and characteristics in place that may encourage this leadership framework. *Turning Points 2000* (Jackson & Davis, 2000) calls for middle level leaders to practice democratic governance to improve student learning, advocating for the involvement of teachers in the process. This shared governance is intended to give all stakeholders in the school a voice in planning and implementing school improvement efforts, and is in support of distributed leadership.

Additional studies advocate the adoption of distributed leadership at the middle level, with the NASSP (2006) calling for middle level schools to utilize collaborative leadership, and George and Alexander (2003) encouraging middle level leaders to engage all stakeholders in a shared decision-making process. In addition to the elements specific to middle level schools, educational leaders in general are now being encouraged to take a distributed approach to their leadership. The 2008 Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium school leader standards specifically cite a need for principals to “develop the capacity for distributed leadership” (CCSSO, 2008, p. 14).

Middle level schools may be well suited for the adoption of a distributed form of leadership. Those schools that have implemented the research-based characteristics of the middle school philosophy may operate with an interdisciplinary teaming structure, which is an effective mechanism for teacher discussion and decision making. Research conducted by Scribner et al. (2007) has documented how the use of teacher teams can promote distributed leadership
practices within a school. Other middle school elements, such as common planning time, flexible scheduling, common adjacent classrooms for team teachers, and team autonomy, also encourage collaboration and growth among teachers (Valentine et al., 2004). These practices may facilitate the development of leadership roles among teachers and foster the formation of professional learning communities among teams (Scribner et al., 2007). Although not all middle level schools may implement a middle school philosophy, or do so to varying degrees, Valentine et al. (2002) noted that as many as 79% of middle level schools may practice some form of interdisciplinary teaming. Therefore, many middle level schools may have components in place that support distributed leadership practices.

Because the conceptual and elemental aspects of middle level schools support a framework for distributed leadership, this study sought to discover how middle level principals utilized distributed leadership practices within their schools. This area of research represents a gap in the current literature on distributed leadership and middle level schools, and as the distributed framework of leadership rises in favor, more research is needed, from both an academic and practitioner perspective. This study seeks to add to this body of knowledge. As noted by Harris (2005):

The ascendancy of distributed leadership as a powerful concept and a theory represents a significant shift in thinking about leaders, leadership, and leadership development. It not only challenges the mythology of individualistic leadership but also reclaims leadership for teachers and others working in schools. Undoubtedly, more research is needed to give this new leadership perspective greater legitimacy. (p. 264)
Chapter Three
Methodology

Distributed leadership practices are conceptualized as a mechanism to address the expanding responsibilities and duties of today’s school leadership. In middle level schools, the configuration and practices that have been developed to address the needs of the early adolescent learner may influence the implementation of distributed leadership in these schools. The practices of effective middle level principals and how they are able to navigate the barriers and challenges associated with the implementation of distributed leadership were examined in this multiple case study. This chapter describes the methods and research design employed in this study. The chapter begins with the research questions and rationale for a multi-case study qualitative research design, followed by a description of the study’s methodology, population and sample selection, instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis procedures used to study this issue.

Research Questions

This study examined the following overarching question: How do successful middle level principals utilize distributed leadership practices within their schools? Three ancillary questions for the study were as follows:

1. What actions or activities help to facilitate distributed leadership practices?

2. What barriers or challenges do principals encounter when attempting to implement distributed leadership practices and what strategies or practices have been put into place to overcome them?

3. How does the presence of interdisciplinary teaming influence distributed leadership practices in middle level schools?
Research Design

The research design for this study used qualitative methods, through the use of a multi-site case study. The questions posed in this study supported the use of qualitative research in several ways. The study attempted to understand the meaning of peoples’ experiences; explored phenomena that are not well understood; and required understanding of intricacies of decision making, leadership, and personal feelings (Huberman & Miles, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Case study enables the researcher to directly observe the problem and interact directly with participants and also makes use of a range of evidence, including interviews, documents, and observation (Yin, 2003).

Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attach to their experiences. Qualitative studies are designed to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). Creswell (2007) noted that in qualitative research, “The researcher is an instrument of data collection who gathers words or pictures, analyzes them inductively, focuses on the meaning of the participants, and describes a process that is expressive and persuasive in language” (p. 14). Qualitative researchers believe that meaning is embedded in people’s experiences and the investigator mediates this experience through their own perceptions (Merriam, 2009). The role of the researcher is to seek, describe, interpret, and explain the world as those in the world experience it. In other words, the researcher is the instrument of data collection and analysis. This multi-site case study brought together perceptions from multiple middle level school leaders to identify themes embedded in the “lived realities” of the participants (Creswell, 2007, p. 54).
The majority of data in this multiple case study emerged through interviews with middle level school leadership, including building principals and other formal and informal school leaders. The purpose of the interview is to capture the world as seen by the participant, as the interviewer guides a conversational partner in an extended discussion about a research topic (Glesne, 2008; Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Shandy, McCurdy, & Spradley, 2005). In this study, I collected data from multiple participants to investigate how leadership practices are distributed in successful middle level schools. Field notes from the observation of distributed leadership practices (e.g., building leadership, interdisciplinary team, smaller learning community meetings, etc.), and document analysis also were utilized. The use of multiple research methods allows for triangulation or multiple views of a subject considered in a research project (Berg, 2004).

**Case study methodology.** Although Stake (1995) states that case study research is not a methodology but instead is a choice of what is to be studied, others present it as a strategy of inquiry, a methodology, or a comprehensive research strategy. It may be viewed as a methodology, a type of design in qualitative research, or an object of study, as well as a product of the inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003; Creswell, 2007). According to Dyson and Genishi (2005), cases are not found, but instead are constructed by the decisions researchers make about how to tell a particular story of human experience. When researchers are interested in exploring, explaining, and describing a phenomenon within a real-life context, a case study methodology is desirable because it focuses on a particular situation, event, program, or phenomenon, expresses rich details, and illuminates the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998). A case study is appropriate when the researcher is studying change and process and when “how” and “why” questions are being asked (Yin, 2003). Creswell (2007) describes a case study as a methodology well-suited when the researcher wishes to study a group, incident,
or phenomenon by using multiple data collection. A case study allows researchers to explore the uniqueness or the commonality of a case that might make it representative of other cases. Yin (2003) recommends using case study methodology when researching a contemporary issue. Furthermore, since case studies frequently are used whenever researching the influence of a particular practice, this method of inquiry provides a fitting choice for further examination of distributed leadership.

As was indicated earlier, this study utilized a multiple site, or multi-case, study. Also described as collective, cross-case, and comparative case studies (Borman, Clarke, Cotner, & Lee, 2006; Merriam, 1998), Merriam indicated that this research design involves the analysis of data from multiple cases, as opposed to a single case, to address the research question. Used in this manner, multiple case studies can be helpful in strengthening the findings of a study (Yin, 2003). Miles and Huberman (1994) noted that the use of multiple case studies can “strengthen the precision, the validity, and the stability of the findings” (p. 29). Merriam (1998) suggested that having more and varied cases in a study provides a more compelling interpretation of the findings.

**Population and sampling procedures.** The population included in this research was principals of public middle level schools in the State of Illinois. For the purpose of this study, middle level schools were defined as those schools, between elementary and high school, designed specifically to serve young adolescents from grades 5-9 (Valentine et al., 2004). Indicators of principal effectiveness included measures of student academic performance and reports of high levels of faculty engagement by the building principal. The purposeful sample for this study was limited to the principals of Illinois public middle level schools that serve at least
two grade levels, no lower than grade 5 and no higher than grade 9, with an average of at least 100 students per grade. Out of the 613 Illinois public middle level schools, 457 fit this profile.

**Participant selection.** When selecting participants for a study, qualitative researchers often use purposive sampling to maximize what can be learned about a phenomenon (Patton, 2001; Stake, 1995). Purposive sampling, Merriam (2009) noted, “is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 61). Creswell (2003) added that participants selected in this fashion will help the researcher understand the problems and the research questions. When sampling purposively, the researcher identifies criteria that are essential for choosing the people to be studied. The sample for this study was determined by a combination of referral and snowball, or chain-referral, sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Krathwohl, 2009; Vogt, 2005).

The overall goal in determining the sample for this study was to identify middle level principals who have demonstrated effectiveness in their roles as learning leaders, as well as exercising some degree of distributed leadership practices in their buildings. A limiting criterion in this sample was that the principals of these schools must have served as principal in their respective buildings for at least three years. Efforts were made to ensure the sample was geographically distributed throughout Illinois, representing the Chicago metropolitan area, as well as downstate Illinois, including small urban and rural communities. Diversity was included in the sample, in school demographics and principal gender. Schools in the sample were considered academically successful, determined by an examination of trend data from the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT). Only those schools that had shown continuous progress toward meeting and exceeding State standards for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) were
included in the sample. Efforts were made to include schools in the sample that were representative of both a “middle school” model as well as a more traditional “junior high school” model; however, as the sampling procedures developed, only principals from schools following a middle school model emerged as finalists.

To determine a pool, nominations or referrals were sought from representatives of regional and statewide organizations and entities who were familiar with local school leaders in December 2009 (Appendix A). Representatives from regions and subregions of each Illinois Regional Office of Education (ROE) and Regional Service Provider System of Support (RESPRO) office, as well as the Association of Illinois Middle Level Schools (AIMS), were asked to nominate middle level principals who had demonstrated effectiveness and had a reputation of engaging their faculty in a variety of leadership roles. Regional leaders from the Illinois Principals Association (IPA) and Illinois Association of School Administrators (IASA) also were asked to nominate principals who met the study’s criteria. As the sample pool developed, there were regions of the state that lacked nominees, so additional school district superintendents from underrepresented areas were solicited to nominate appropriate middle level principals. A description of the study and a definition of distributed leadership were provided to nominating groups and individuals to clarify the nomination criteria and types of faculty engagement desired (Appendix B).

Twenty-eight names of principals were provided by the nominating groups after I made several inquiries. The nominees’ school characteristics then were reviewed to ensure they fit the middle level school definition outlined earlier, and Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) data from 2006-2009 were examined to determine if each nominee qualified as an academically successful school. Those schools that had not continually made progress toward meeting and
exceeding state standards were excluded. Nominees were eliminated if grade level enrollments were too small to support interdisciplinary teams or if the principal had not served in that capacity in the school for at least three years.

Nine principals were identified after eliminating those schools/principals that did not meet the sample criteria. In January 2010, each principal was asked to participate in a brief 10-15 minute structured telephone screening interview, following the interview protocol in Appendix C. The purposes of this screening interview were two-fold. First, potential subjects were asked to provide additional demographic information, confirm their distributed leadership practices, and indicate their willingness to participate in the study. The second purpose was to ask for additional recommendations for potential participants.

Snowball sampling, also called chain referral sampling or network sampling, is a process in which a researcher starts with a subject who displays qualities of interest, then obtains referred subjects from the first subject, then additional referred subjects from the second set, and so on (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Krathwohl, 2009; Vogt, 2005). In this study, the initial subject pool identified by nomination from statewide organizations was asked to refer other potential subjects. Seven additional individuals were recommended through this snowball sampling method, but none met the criteria for final inclusion in the sample.

After examining all available information from the final pool of nine subjects, three candidates stood out who exhibited exceptional distributed leadership qualities and diversity in gender and geography—representing suburban, small urban, and rural school districts. However, the principal from the rural school district became ill and was unable to participate in the study. The next best candidate also represented exceptional distributed leadership qualities, but also
was from a suburban school district. Therefore, the final sample of three was less geographically diverse than originally intended.

**Institutional Review Board Approval and Ethical Considerations**

The design, planning, and reporting of research must be conducted in accordance with ethical standards of behavior. Care must be taken to ensure that study participants are treated fairly and ethically with careful adherence to Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols. Approval to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Illinois IRB (Appendix D), and the informed consent process was followed to provide prospective participants with an explanation to assist them in making a decision about whether to begin or continue their participation in this study (Appendix E). During the informed consent process, all prospective participants received information on the study, which included the purpose of the study, description of procedures, duration of the study, any risks involved, and benefits of participating in the study. Participants were not made to feel that they are pressured in any way to be involved in this study, and they were informed that they could withdraw from participation at any time.

Throughout all data gathering, transcription, and reporting of the study, personally identifying information was removed and pseudonyms were used for the names of all subjects (including principals and others observed in building leadership meetings), their schools, districts, and communities. Field notes from the observation of building leadership meetings were focused specifically on the interactions between the leader and others in meetings, documenting how leadership roles, activities, tasks, and responsibilities were delegated, shared, and reported. Only the interactions related to how leadership roles, activities, tasks, and responsibilities were delegated, shared, and reported were described in field notes.
Data Collection Procedures

The primary data collection approach for this study was through the use of semi-structured interviews (Bogdan & Bilken, 2007). Three face-to-face interviews were conducted with each of the three principals, taking place in February, April, and May 2010. Face-to-face interviews also were conducted with a variety of other staff at each participating school. Upon recommendation from the building principal, other building leaders were sought to interview. A combination of formal and informal building leaders were interviewed at each participating school in addition to the building principal, and included assistant principals and deans of students, interdisciplinary team leaders, department heads, committee chairs, teachers’ union leadership, disciplinary coaches, and teacher mentors. Twenty different building leaders were interviewed for this study, including 3 interviews for each of the 3 participating principals and 17 other formal or informal building leaders, for a total of 23 interviews¹.

Each interview was audiotaped and transcribed. A summary of each transcribed interview was returned by electronic mail to the respective subject for member checking (Glesne, 2008). Participants from each of the three school sites were interviewed before the subsequent round of interviews was initiated. The interviews followed a semi-structured format, with the first round of questions following the interview protocol in Appendix F. As Bogdan and Biklen (2007) and Whyte (1984) suggested, this semi-structured interview format involves building rapport, trust, and establishing relationship with the interviewee and interviewer. The goal for these interviews was for the participants to “feel relaxed and open to talk about the topics in a meaningful way” (Bogdan & Bilken, 2007, p. 98).

¹ Two interviews included more than one respondent. A teacher team interview included three teachers and an interview of building administration included two assistant principals.
The first face-to-face interview used a protocol that was tailored to the specific research questions. The content of this first interview allowed the participants significant freedom to answer the initial questions and provide valuable background information. Interviews were conducted at the participants’ schools and were scheduled so I would be able to observe events that characterize distributed leadership practices, including building leadership team meetings, smaller learning community activities, and interdisciplinary team meetings. The initial interviews were conducted with the building principals in their offices, with each lasting approximately 45-60 minutes. These initial conversations provided a background understanding of the participants’ views on distributed leadership and why they believed it was important to utilize this practice in their schools.

The subsequent interviews with principals and other school leaders also followed semi-structured formats (Appendix F) but were constructed to follow up and expand upon emergent themes from earlier interviews. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) described this type of interview as “guided conversation” (p. 101). The purpose of these interviews was to further discuss elements from the prior interviews, probing emergent themes that were identified through data analysis of the initial interviews and observations. A series of topics and follow-up/clarifying questions were created for these interviews. These questions provided the opportunity for additional reflection on the participants’ distributed leadership practices, background, school demographics, and the collective responses from participants in the previous round of interviews.

Additional data collection procedures were utilized, supplementing the data gathered through qualitative interviews. I observed building leadership team meetings, as well as other meetings suggested by the participating principals, such as meetings for interdisciplinary teams, professional learning communities, disciplinary teams, and other building committees.
Observational field notes of these meetings captured examples of distributed leadership practices in action at each of the school sites. Through these observations, additional data were gathered that added to the rich description of distributed leadership. Given the case-study nature of this research, these observation sessions were included as a way to further triangulate data gathered from interviews and documents. The primary purpose of the observation sessions was to find contradictory or corroborative evidence for the other data sources, particularly in helping determine the effectiveness and true extent of the distribution of leadership in each school.

Observations for two of the three schools were coordinated with the interviews of the building principal and other building leaders and coincided with the meetings of regularly scheduled leadership groups or teams. Because the third school was closer in proximity to me, it was unnecessary for observations and interviews to coincide. Many short, single-purpose visits were made to this school for interviews, observations, or both.

An additional data source also contributed to this study, which involved the examination of documentation or written materials gathered during each visit or voluntarily provided by the principals. Documents included items such as agendas and minutes from building meetings, information about student achievement, building climate, service delivery, school vision and mission, and curriculum and professional development information in the form of memos, staff and student handbooks, newspaper articles, newsletters, demographic information, data tables, graphs, timelines, or policies. These materials were used to verify perceptions or claims from interviews and to shed light on similar events from a different point of view.

Validity lends strength to a qualitative study (Creswell, 2003), so the researcher must use strategies such as triangulation, member-checking, and rich and thick descriptions. Triangulation is data collection that cuts across two or more techniques or sources as a “cross validation”
In this study, multiple procedures were used as a means to verify the data. Data were gathered using three different methods: interviews, observations, and document analysis. Member checking was utilized during the interview portion of the study, with summaries of each interview transcript being shared with the interviewee to check for accuracy and helping to ensure the researcher’s understandings represent the true feelings of those participants (Krathwohl, 2009).

**Data Analysis Procedures**

Data analysis is the process of transforming raw data into findings, themes, or propositions. It “combines inductive category coding with a simultaneous comparison of all social incidents observed” (LeCompte & Goetz, 1993, p. 58). Data collection and analysis occur simultaneously in qualitative research. The process is recursive and dynamic, as the researcher continuously develops refines and validates emerging codes (Merriam, 2009). According to Patton (2001), the challenge of quantitative analysis lies in making sense of massive amounts of data. This process involves reducing the volume of raw information, sifting trivia from significance, identifying significant patterns, and constructing a framework for communicating the essence of what the data revealed. In order to make sense of what was collected, I conducted an inductive, thematic analysis of the interview, observation, and artifact data. Themes and/or propositions that emerge from the data were shaped and modified throughout the research process, with the goal of presenting an accurate description of the participants’ experiences (Boyatzis, 1998).

Thematic analysis (Aronson, 1994; Attride-Stirling, 2001; Boyatzis, 1998) is the process of gathering and coding information into emergent codes or themes (Merriam, 2009; Strauss &
Corbin, 1998). In thematic analysis, patterns of experiences are identified from direct quotes or the paraphrasing of common ideas in the data. Related patterns then are identified and expounded. To identify themes in data requires identifying the unit of coding, or “the most basic segment, or element, of raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon” (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 63). The unit of coding in this study was a participant’s response to a question.

The coding of data captured through interviews, document review, and observations played an important role in helping to make comparisons and identify common themes and patterns. In order to understand and assess the implementation of distributed leadership in the context of middle level schools, codes related to distributed leadership and the middle school concept were generated from the literature review for this study. These codes enabled me to better analyze each participant’s descriptions and understandings (Appendix G).

The work of Mayrowetz (2008) informed codes on distributed leadership themes, and Spillane’s (2006) work informed codes on categories of leadership practice distribution and the elements of leadership practice. Woods, Bennett, Harvey, and Wise (2004) influenced codes identifying distinctive elements of distributed leadership, while Oduro (2004) influenced the description of specific promoters and inhibitors of distributed leadership. Additional codes were developed for the identification of teacher leadership tasks (Harris, 2002; Miller et al., 2000; Silva et al., 2002; York-Barr & Duke, 2004) and the influence of teams on distributed leadership (Leithwood et al., 2004; Scribner et al., 2005; Timperely, 2005). To help understand the influence of the middle school concept on distributed leadership at each school, codes were developed based on the core practices of the middle school concept (CCAD, 1989; Jackson & Davis, 2000; National Forum to Accelerate Middle School Reform, 2004; NMSA, 2003a, 2010).
The process of coding was facilitated through the use of NVivo qualitative analysis software. This program allowed the review of each data source multiple times, applying both etic and emic codes, and allowing me to categorize, group, and compare findings for each data source, within each case, and then across cases.

**Interviews.** The interviews conducted with principals and other building leaders were audiorecorded and then transcribed. These transcriptions and interview notes were reviewed and analytic memos were written to sum up initial thoughts and reactions as I “made sense of the participants’ comments” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 96). Next, the interview responses were coded through the process described above. As each interview transcript was analyzed, additional codes emerged through participants’ own words. These codes then were applied to the other cases and data sources through a process of constant comparison (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). A final narrative memo was written to describe connections across the cases. The coding process enabled me to identify and uncover patterns and themes in participants’ responses, facilitating the process of understanding and comparing the perspectives of all participants.

**Documents and records.** The review and analysis of documents and archival records followed a process similar to that used during the interview analyses. Notes were taken on a variety of documents available from each school and principal. Initial reactions and thoughts were recorded through analytic memos, each with a subsection providing a case profile, designed to capture the school context. The coding of documents involved three strategies: organizational categories were used to sort document information by topic, substantive categories were used as insight was gained from the document review process, and theoretical categories based on the literature were used to identify distributed leadership and middle school related elements.
Patterns and comparisons across case study schools were compared as I became aware of the similarities and differences, as well as emerging themes and actions across the case studies.

**Observation notes.** Upon completion of each observation session, I compiled memos to capture initial thoughts and reactions, and to summarize notes taken during the observation. Field notes then were coded using the etic categories described above. Observation notes were used as references when reviewing documents and interview transcripts, as a way to substantiate other data sources. As this process evolved, emic codes that emerged were applied. Finally, coded notes were used for cross-case analysis, to make comparisons and generalizations across all case study sites in order to substantiate conclusions.

The data collection and analysis phases of this study were not conducted in a linear fashion. Rather, both processes continued simultaneously, each informing the other (Maxwell, 2005).

**Summary**

This chapter discussed the research methodology used for this study of how principals in middle level schools facilitate distributed leadership. This discussion included a description of the theoretical framework, sample and population, data collection instruments, data collection process, and data analysis. The three cases in this study represented successful Illinois middle schools, each with a principal who had shown the propensity to share leadership across the school and actively involve teachers in school-wide decision making. This chapter explained how the study was guided by the research questions and how multiple data sources were gathered from interviews with the principals, assistant principals, the observations of leadership meetings and field notes, and various documents and artifacts. Data findings, analysis, and
interpretations of each research question are presented in the following chapter. The similarities and differences between the cases are also discussed.
Chapter Four

The Cases

This chapter provides detailed descriptions of the cases in this study, as well as themes that emerged from data analysis. Three academically successful middle level schools with principals that have demonstrated principles or instances of distributed leadership make up the cases. A case study methodology was utilized in the data collection that took place during the first half of 2010. Eight meetings were observed and 23 interviews were conducted between January and July 2010, with one follow-up telephone interview conducted January 2011. Pseudonyms are used to identify the names of individual participants, school sites, and districts. The participants included 3 principals; each interviewed on 3 different occasions; 4 assistant principals; and 13 teachers, including 1 subject area coach. Triangulation was made by utilizing a variety of data sources, including interviews of building principals and other formal and informal building leaders, observations of distributed leadership events, and document analysis.

This section addresses each case individually, with each case subdivided by themes that emerged from the data analysis. Table 2 provides a context of the case schools, with Tables 3-4 highlighting the context of all interview respondents. Tables 5-7 highlight the academic performance of the case schools, as measured by performance on the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT).
## Table 2

### Context of the Three Cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School data</th>
<th>Case A John Adams Junior High School</th>
<th>Case B Blue Trail Middle School</th>
<th>Case C Cardinal Middle School</th>
<th>State Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade Levels</td>
<td>6-8</td>
<td>7-8</td>
<td>6-8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per Pupil Operating Expenditure a</td>
<td>$10,775</td>
<td>$8,075</td>
<td>$9,750</td>
<td>$9,907</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per Pupil Instructional Expenditure b</td>
<td>$6,700</td>
<td>$8,125</td>
<td>$5,975</td>
<td>$5,808</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revenue From Local Property Taxes</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>57.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Enrollment</td>
<td>1,100</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>650 c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% White Students</td>
<td>69.0</td>
<td>77.4</td>
<td>48.2</td>
<td>53.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% African American Students</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>38.8</td>
<td>19.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Latino/a Students</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Asian/Pacific Islander Students</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Native American Students</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Multi-Racial Students</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Low Income Students</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>45.5</td>
<td>42.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% English Language Learners (ELL)</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008-09 Overall ISAT Performance d</td>
<td>97.7</td>
<td>85.0</td>
<td>83.2</td>
<td>79.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007-08 Overall ISAT Performance</td>
<td>98.1</td>
<td>81.3</td>
<td>83.0</td>
<td>79.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006-07 Overall ISAT Performance</td>
<td>98.0</td>
<td>82.7</td>
<td>80.2</td>
<td>73.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005-06 Overall ISAT Performance</td>
<td>98.3</td>
<td>78.9</td>
<td>77.9</td>
<td>72.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a Operating expenditure per pupil includes the gross operating cost of a school district excluding summer school, adult education, bond principal retired, and capital expenditures.
b Instructional expenditure per pupil includes the direct costs of teaching pupils or the interaction between teachers and pupils.
c Enrollment average of the 463 schools meeting sample criteria.
d Overall ISAT Performance indicates the percentage of students meeting or exceeding State standards as measured by the Illinois Standards Achievement Test.
Table 3

Profile of the Principals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Years at current assignment</th>
<th>Years of administrative experience</th>
<th>Total years experience</th>
<th>Degree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AP-Allan</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Ed.M.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BP-Richard</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>M.S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CP-Mary Ann</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Ed.D.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4

Profile of Other Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent&lt;br&gt;Respondent&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Grade levels taught</th>
<th>Years experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A1-Suzanne</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Reading Specialist</td>
<td>6th -8th</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2-Sandy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Social Studies/ELA</td>
<td>7th</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A3-James</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>8th</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A4-Sheila</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>8&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A5-Beth</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>8&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B1-Brenda</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>7th</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B2-George</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Social Studies</td>
<td>8&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B3-Sharla</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>7th</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1-Elsie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>ELA</td>
<td>6th -8th</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2-Barbara</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>8th</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3-Tammy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Gifted ELA</td>
<td>6th -8th</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C4-Jessica</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>ELA</td>
<td>7th</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C5-Marsha</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Social Studies/ELA</td>
<td>8th</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(table continues)
Table 4 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Grade levels taught</th>
<th>Years experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AAP-John</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Assistant Principal</td>
<td></td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BAP1-Shane</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Assistant Principal</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BAP2-Diane</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Assistant Principal</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAP-Joyce</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Assistant Principal</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Years Experience is the individual’s total number of years in education and may not reflect the length of time in his/her current assignment.

<sup>a</sup> Respondent identification labels utilize the letters A, B, and C, which correspond to Cases A, B, and C (Teacher A1 is from Case A, John Adams Junior High School).

Table 5

**ISAT Scores for Case A: John Adams Junior High School**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Composite</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>SPED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Percentage of students meeting or exceeding standards in Reading</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>90.8</td>
<td>90.3</td>
<td>91.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>97.5</td>
<td>97.6</td>
<td>97.9</td>
<td>84.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>97.3</td>
<td>97.5</td>
<td>97.6</td>
<td>83.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>97.7</td>
<td>97.8</td>
<td>97.3</td>
<td>81.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>97.8</td>
<td>97.8</td>
<td>98.2</td>
<td>81.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>97.2</td>
<td>96.9</td>
<td>98.5</td>
<td>72.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Percentage of students meeting or exceeding standards in Math</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>82.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>97.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>98.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>98.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>96.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>97.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6

**ISAT Scores for Case B: Blue Trail Middle School**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Composite</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Latino/a</th>
<th>SPED</th>
<th>Low income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Percentage of students meeting or exceeding standards in Reading</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>77.0</td>
<td>77.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>72.4</td>
<td>72.8</td>
<td></td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>77.7</td>
<td>79.5</td>
<td></td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>76.6</td>
<td>78.7</td>
<td>70.4</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>82.3</td>
<td>84.1</td>
<td>75.5</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>66.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>88.2</td>
<td>88.9</td>
<td>83.5</td>
<td>47.9</td>
<td>76.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Percentage of students meeting or exceeding standards in Math</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>54.1</td>
<td>55.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>80.6</td>
<td>82.1</td>
<td></td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>82.9</td>
<td>85.1</td>
<td></td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>84.0</td>
<td>86.4</td>
<td>74.5</td>
<td>38.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>87.6</td>
<td>89.4</td>
<td>79.8</td>
<td>54.1</td>
<td>73.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>89.3</td>
<td>90.4</td>
<td>84.8</td>
<td>61.4</td>
<td>82.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7

**ISAT Scores for Case C: Cardinal Middle School**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Composite</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>African American</th>
<th>SPED</th>
<th>Low Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Percentage of students meeting or exceeding standards in Reading</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>72.0</td>
<td>84.5</td>
<td>46.7</td>
<td>37.2</td>
<td>47.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>75.9</td>
<td>85.8</td>
<td>54.2</td>
<td>43.9</td>
<td>59.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>75.4</td>
<td>87.0</td>
<td>55.6</td>
<td>50.6</td>
<td>60.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>80.0</td>
<td>90.1</td>
<td>64.8</td>
<td>47.0</td>
<td>67.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>81.0</td>
<td>89.9</td>
<td>67.2</td>
<td>52.9</td>
<td>69.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>81.4</td>
<td>89.4</td>
<td>70.6</td>
<td>60.4</td>
<td>73.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(table continues)
Table 7 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Composite</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>African American</th>
<th>SPED</th>
<th>Low Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>61.7</td>
<td>75.4</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>32.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>82.8</td>
<td>91.5</td>
<td>65.0</td>
<td>59.7</td>
<td>69.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>86.0</td>
<td>95.0</td>
<td>71.0</td>
<td>76.0</td>
<td>75.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>87.7</td>
<td>95.1</td>
<td>76.3</td>
<td>74.1</td>
<td>78.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>88.2</td>
<td>94.7</td>
<td>77.1</td>
<td>70.6</td>
<td>81.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>86.6</td>
<td>93.3</td>
<td>75.3</td>
<td>730</td>
<td>80.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Case A: John Adams Junior High School**

To laugh often and much; To win the respect of intelligent people and the affection of children; To earn the appreciation of honest critics and endure the betrayal of false friends; To appreciate beauty, to find the best in others; To leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden patch, or a redeemed social condition; To know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived. This is to have succeeded. (Stanley, 1911, pp. 1-2)

John Adams Junior High School (a pseudonym) is a 6-8 grade middle level school located in Wood Grove School District (a pseudonym), a suburban school district neighboring the city of Chicago. A PreK-12 unit district of more than 15,000 students, Teachers in the district have an average teaching experience of approximately 13 years, and more than 70% have earned Master’s degrees or above. Located in a high-tech industry corridor, Wood Grove School District draws from a highly educated, mostly White, upper-middle-class population. The building principal indicated that the school system, and school in particular, has helped make the area an ideal community for families moving to the Chicago area. He also noted that the school population was very stable, with a turnover of only about 78 families a year. According to a
recent Illinois School Report Card, the school had a mobility rate of approximately 2%, compared to the district’s rate of 6% and the state average of 13.5%.

Housing about 1,100 students, John Adams has a mostly White student body (69%) with a large Asian population (26%). Other minority groups represent small portions of the overall student makeup: African American (2.4%), Latino/a (1.9%), Native American (0.2%), and multi-racial (0.5%). Because the school draws from a predominately affluent area, only a small number of low-income students (3.5%) and English Language Learners (ELL) (0.3%) are enrolled. The staff composition of John Adams includes 71 teachers, 3 counselors, and 2 assistant principals.

John Adams’ popularity with families moving to the large suburban area neighboring Chicago is due, in many respects, to its reputation as an outstanding public school in an outstanding public school district. Nearly all students at John Adams are making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), meeting or achieving state standards as measured by the Illinois State Achievement Test (ISAT). Overall ISAT performance for 2005-06 was 98.3% of students meeting or exceeding standards, and was 98% in 06-07, 98.1% in 07-08, and 97.7% in 08-09. Figures 5 and 6 illustrate the consistently high percentage of John Adams students who meet or exceed standards.

![Graph](image)

*Figure 5. Percentage of John Adams students meeting or exceeding standards in reading.*
Figure 6. Percentage of John Adams students meeting or exceeding standards in math.

John Adams, like all middle level buildings in the district, follows a middle school philosophy, and the existence of smaller units within the larger school is a dominant element of the school structure and overall culture. When John Adams opened in 1990, the district had already adopted the middle school philosophy, yet chose to use the same “Junior High School” name designation as the district’s other four middle level schools. The principal stated that the School Board determined that the money used to change the names could be better spent on students or staff development. John Adams is indeed a middle school with a Junior High School name. Interdisciplinary teams of 4-5 teachers are responsible for groups of approximately 90 students, with 10 teams operating in grades 6-8. John Adams teachers also work in groups determined by discipline.

The principal at John Adams, Allan (a pseudonym), was in his 33rd year in education when this study took place and retired at the end of the 2009-10 school year. With a background in child development, Allan has taught at the 2nd, 4th, 5th, and 6th grade levels. He noted that his extensive experiential background has proven to be very valuable at the middle school level. In
addition to his Illinois General Administrative (principalship) endorsement, he also obtained his Chief Schools Business Officer certification. Allan has been a teacher, driven a school bus, served as a director of transportation, and worked as an elementary principal, gaining 27 years of administrative experience. Allan has served 13 years as the principal at John Adams, originally having been moved into the building mid-year to “repair the damage to a troubled school” (Allan, interview, February 16, 2010). As it nears the end of its 20th year, John Adams has had only three principals in that time. In his 13 years at John Adams, Allan has been responsible for the hiring of 70-80% of the building’s current staff, an accomplishment of which he is quite proud, given the impact it has on students:

I hope that when. . . Well, I don’t hope. I feel that it’s that way I’ve had an impact. When you do the job right, you effect what happens to these kids. About 1,050 of them come through here every year. I feel like I’ve had an impact on them. (Allan, interview, May 20, 2010)

**Interdisciplinary teaming.** John Adams has an organizational structure that has developed over time to take advantage of a distributed form of leadership. Although the principal is clearly the head of the organization, when investigating the daily operations of the school, it does not take long to see a highly engrained culture of collaboration among the staff with a common sense of importance. Considering the long list of state and national awards for attaining high levels of student achievement, as well as a historically low level of staff turnover, this structure seems to be supplying what the students and staff need to provide a developmentally appropriate environment for young adolescents.

With the physical facility designed for the middle school concept, interdisciplinary core teams comprise a dominant element in the John Adams school culture. Core academic teams of 4-5 teachers are responsible for groups of approximately 90 students, with 10 teams operating in grades 6-8, and include teachers of English Language Arts, Social Studies, Science, and
Mathematics, as well as special education. With nine class periods, teachers teach six periods daily, with most teaching five of those in one subject area and one period taught in a different subject. With the exception of the science classrooms, which are located together in one hallway, classes are grouped in clusters of four for each interdisciplinary team. Specific wings of the building are home to a grade level’s teams, with each team having a designated office space in the same wing. All teachers have two planning periods, one individual and one team, and core team teachers meet daily with their interdisciplinary teams in their designated office space. Offices are artfully decorated with team logos and are filled with curricular resources for each of the core subjects. Team planning serves a number of functions, including providing teachers with an opportunity to participate in decision-making processes for most initiatives. During their common team planning meetings, core teachers receive pertinent information from team leaders and take part in discussion about topics so they may be reported back to the Building Leadership Team (BLT). However, the primary functions of the teams are focused on students, as Allan noted:

I like them to spend time talking about teaching and learning. It’s the most important thing we do . . . of course there’s time to talk about individual students and issues, so we have a period where the counselor comes in and they deal with some of that stuff. And then the psychologist comes in collecting data and working on RtI\(^2\), but that’s still connected to teaching and learning. (Allan, interview, February 16, 2010)

During the observation of one team meeting, it was clear that the core teams’ attention was the curriculum and their students. Teachers of Team Penguin conducted an orderly meeting during their team planning time, addressing issues associated with curricular integration, individual students, and items being discussed among the BLT. The relaxed but focused conversation among the staff demonstrated a group that routinely addressed curricular, student,

\(^2\) RtI is an abbreviation for Response to Intervention, a method of academic intervention designed to provide early, effective assistance to children who are having difficulty learning. RtI is also designed to function as one part of a data-based process of identifying learning disabilities.
and building issues, and was empowered to make suggestions for consideration by the BLT, even if they were different or in opposition to the majority. In addition to discussing building issues, the team structure demonstrates an effective means to plan and execute interdisciplinary curricular plans and discuss individual student matters.

Departmental teams. In addition to interdisciplinary core teams, teachers also are assigned to subject area, or departmental teams. As John Adams was established utilizing the middle school philosophy, there were no disciplinary departments in its original configuration. However, over time, a need to articulate curriculum arose, not just within the building, but district-wide, as the five middle schools in John Adams’ district were all to adhere to the district curriculum. The department leaders meet regularly with the building principal, discuss teaching and learning strategies, analyze testing data, and help set curricular goals for their respective departments. They also meet regularly with personnel at the district curriculum office, bring that information back to the building, and assist the principal in implementing those policies and practices.

Suzanne, reading specialist at Adams, noted that Allan trusted her as a curricular expert and supported her initiatives to address student achievement. She shared how he allowed her to create opportunities for teachers to learn new strategies for reading comprehension:

I told Allan that I would like to do a book study, and he let me go out and buy Nancie Atwell, the guru for that. So he let me buy 22 books and he let me do a book study, and as a result, we have three teams in the building that entirely workshop, and when it started that year, we had a 6th grade team and an 8th grade team. People come now to see it done here. People from outside the district have come and it has actually been very successful. (interview, February 16, 2010)

Teachers who lead each of the teams at John Adams receive a stipend for their service. A team teacher leads the interdisciplinary teams and subject area teachers lead the departmental groups, although sometimes a non-classroom teacher may head a departmental team. For
example, in the case of English Language Arts (ELA), the largest department with twice as many teachers as the other areas, a reading specialist leads that group. Without a classroom assignment, the reading specialist is able to provide support to the various ELA teachers throughout the building. Between the interdisciplinary teams and subject area teams, a sophisticated system of communication, measurement, and curriculum development has been developed:

We have literally diversified what we do and we have department coordinator as leaders and each of the academic teams has team leaders. Those folks are facilitating what is going on in the teams and they are taking information from each of the departments and coordinating it on their teams and delivering it to kids. It’s cool how it works. (Allan, interview, February 16, 2010)

**Building leadership team.** In addition to interdisciplinary and subject area teams, teachers at John Adams also may be involved in the Building Leadership Team (BLT). Composed of the principal and assistant principals, interdisciplinary team leaders, department heads, and representatives from the building support office (counselors, psychologist, and social worker), this group serves as the school’s primary decision-making body.

The role of the BLT is to examine the issues that affect the building as a whole. Not focusing much on “nuts and bolts” items, this group spends most of its time reviewing items brought to BLT by the staff. From the BLT, items will go to interdisciplinary teams for discussion and input, and then come back to BLT. The principal indicated that the items discussed at BLT are largely staff-initiated ideas, with him serving in a facilitator role rather than leading the group.

The John Adams staff handbook clearly articulates the role of the Building Leadership Team:

The Building Leadership Team is grounded in the belief that collaborative site-based decision-making structures are key to accelerating student academic achievement. The
BLT committee meets weekly to discuss building-wide issues including school-wide events, attendance, student activities and school climate. The BLT is also responsible for providing leadership and direction for professional development, the school budget and the school improvement plan. (JAJHS Staff Handbook, 2009, p. 14)

Over time, the BLT has taken on a more significant role at John Adams, addressing a greater number of issues than in previous years. Recognizing that their role had expanded and they did not have enough time to make the decisions that were necessary, the members of the BLT determined they should meet every week instead of twice a month. The principal, Allan, shared that this decision was an example of the group’s dedication. “Now, how many groups of people do you know that say, ‘Give us twice as many meetings’?” (Allan, interview, April 14, 2010). Adams’ BLT is responsible for developing the School Improvement Plan and annual learning targets, and the group takes these responsibilities very seriously. Data analysis is incorporated into their responsibilities, as well as continual examination of measures that can provide meaningful benchmarks to evaluate progress. This group is responsible for developing and implementing a significant initiative focused on vocabulary, designed to address learning goals and deficiencies seen in some student groups on the state assessments. After focusing on vocabulary development school-wide, Adams was able to raise student vocabulary scores significantly, effectively removing that area from the school’s learning goals. However, because of this effort, vocabulary development now has become woven into the regular curriculum throughout each discipline. It is clear that the members of the John Adams BLT, and the staff as a whole, take their role in collaborative leadership very seriously.

**Building leadership capacity.** When discussing building the leadership capacity of his staff, John Adams’ principal shared that he felt the most important element for leaders was passion: “People that are passionate about something will emerge as a leader” (Allan, interview, February 16, 2010). The non-administrative building leaders at John Adams are positions with
stipends and are part of the district’s collective bargaining agreement; therefore, the individuals appointed to these positions go through a formalized application and hiring process. Although these building leaders are hired by the principal, Allan indicated that he involved his administrative team in this decision-making process and also consulted with other teacher leaders. However, beyond these leadership appointments, there are other places where people emerge as natural leaders, often evidenced by their interest and passion about a particular area. Allan readily listed many individuals beyond the teacher leaders who exhibited leadership in his building. They include faculty who headed the school’s intramural programs and Student Council, the band director, and teachers who take on special projects like the technology showcase and serve on nominating committees for special awards.

The list of school leaders went beyond teachers and also included staff members, such as his secretary, who often led workshops and tutored other support staff in the district, and the building’s head custodian, who played an active role in building decisions. In addition to school faculty and staff, Allan identified a number of parents who assume important leadership roles at John Adams. With just over 1,000 students, John Adams had over 900 volunteer activities provided by parents and community members in the previous year. From the executive and general boards for the Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO), to team parent coordinators, and to individual mentors and volunteers at special events, parents and community members also are emerging as leaders in different ways at John Adams.

**Culture of collaboration.** The John Adams principal described decision making at the school as being collaborative; however, he noted the need for the formally appointed administrative leader to have the ability to make important decisions when necessary. Feedback generally is sought for most items that have an impact on teachers, with the administration
utilizing email and staff memos for procedural items, and the Building Leadership Team for the larger issues. Decisions on items generally are made by consensus, with the understanding that once an item is decided, everybody will agree to follow the group decision. Allan noted, “Once we decide this is what we’re doing, everybody has to give it 100%. Everybody gets that. You get your say until we make a decision, and then you’ve got to do what we’re doing” (Allan, interview, January 19, 2010). Although the staff at John Adams is consulted on most decisions and all significant issues, Allan made it clear that, even when operating within a distributed framework, there came a time when the leader has to make a decision:

We have input. We have discussion. We facilitate it. We come together. We tackle the big problems. But ultimately, somebody has to be at that point where you say, okay, this is enough of this. Let’s make a decision and move. I think that’s where some of the leaders fall down. They beat it to death. They never come to consensus, and they never go out and implement. They never get it to that stage where you’re going to make it happen... In schools the principal says, it’s time to move. You have to do some of that [make an executive decision]. (interview, May 20, 2010)

With a leader who utilizes a distributive framework for leadership, the entire John Adams school community is involved in determining how they will address issues and concerns, identify effective solutions, and then move forward. With a clearly articulated vision, the entire John Adams staff knows what their responsibilities are and work together to plan, implement, measure, assess, and modify their process. Teachers report feeling empowered by having input and control over how to do their jobs better. Sandy, a 7th grade social studies teacher, shared how her experience at John Adams was different because of the staff involvement:

I have had the opportunity to work in a number of different buildings, with a variety of principal leadership styles, and the leadership style here really helps to motivate the faculty. As a teacher I can say that we know [principal’s name] is in charge and the principal, but he is not the boss. If you go to him with ideas about student achievement and how to improve learning, he will support you all the way. That support is really important and helps encourage all of us to find the ways to motivate and impact our students. (interview, April 14, 2010)
Allan shared how empowerment also can lead to a feeling of responsibility as well:

When teachers and faculty feel like the responsibility is theirs and they have a sense of urgency about it, they take ownership and they go make big things happen. It’s not the same when the principal stands up and says, “Go do this,” and then just hope that everybody will follow suit and do what they said. It’s like they can’t wait to solve that problem . . . then they’ll go fix it. If I was standing there telling them to, it would be a whole different story. It doesn’t make sense to try to solve it all yourself. (interview, April 14, 2010)

Teachers and administrators at John Adams credit collaborative decision making for contributing to teacher empowerment, ownership in student achievement and other school issues, a sense of trust, and a feeling of professionalism. Adams’ assistant principal, John, noted:

I think our school culture has developed in part because we have a leader who is willing to give up his power . . . you have to be willing to give that up and empower the staff. A strong leader can do that without needing control over everything. The relationships he develops with the entire staff are a big part of that. He provides what the teachers need to best help their kids, and they take care of the kids the best they can. They want to do their best. (interview, January 20, 2011)

The principal observed that the front of the building had been compared to the side of a NASCAR racecar, with a multitude of signs adorning the entryway, each recognizing a recent accomplishment or award:

When the superintendent said something about it looking like NASCAR on the front of the building, no one laughed. They [the staff] are proud of it and it makes them feel good and I can't tell you how many teachers tell me they love coming to work because they feel we are doing something authentic and it is recognized. It's getting all the right stuff. Why would you not do that. I think it is wrong to not [emphasis added] tout your successes. You want people to feel good about where they work. (Allan, interview, February 16, 2010)

Common vision and mission. The importance of having a clearly articulated mission is discussed throughout the literature on leadership and management, in education and business alike. The John Adams principal believes that one of his most important duties is to continually keep the mission out in front of the school community. When asked what John Adams mission was, Allan simply replied, “teaching and learning.” Although there obviously is more to it than
that, the singular importance of the teaching and learning function of the school is not overlooked and was evident in every conversation. Allan continually conveyed the importance he felt about touting the mission. Although he applied the term “mission” to mean any of the primary functions of the organization, and not simply the district or school mission statement, the significance of teaching and learning are clearly the primary concern at John Adams. The importance of making sure everybody in the organization is aware of an overall goal, along with their own primary tasks, allows the leader to always keep those in the forefront as the focus of individuals’ and groups’ attention. At John Adams, it is all about teaching and learning. Allan shared how his study of leadership, in education and business alike, reiterated the importance of the mission:

It’s all about teaching and learning. I read Iacocca and some different ones in there, Schwarzkopf, Covey, Blanchard . . . I love it. I love it that they all talk about touting the mission . . . that the leader's job is to move about and tell people what the mission is, and don't ever stop saying it or think that everybody gets it . . . I think for us, we have people’s most valuable asset—their children. It ought to be all about them. That’s why we’re in business. We’re not making widgets. I like the idea that everybody in the house knows exactly what we’re about, and what we’re supposed to be working on. (interview, February 16, 2010)

Sheila, a 7th grade special education teacher, and Sandy, a 7th grade social studies teacher, reflected on the school’s mission:

Our mission at John Adams is clearly to focus on the learning of our students. Whenever we gather as a team, or as a department, or as a faculty as a whole, we are constantly reminded what our real purpose is here. (Sheila, interview, February 16, 2010)

I think that one of the real differences between our school and the others I have worked at is just how everyone here understands how their role in the building relates to the overall school mission. Whether it is analyzing trends in our test data or exploring new strategies for vocabulary or reading comprehension, the focus on student learning is always there. We are all professionals here, and we all work together so that John Adams stays at the top. (Sandy, interview, February 16, 2010)

Although John Adams’ principal focuses on teaching and learning, he also recognizes that he cannot be the expert on all things. By reaching out to others in the organization, the
principal is able to focus efforts on the overall function of the school and its primary goals.

Department leaders meet with him to discuss curriculum, achievement scores, and goal setting for their groups.

Simply called “goal setting,” teachers routinely meet with building leaders and other teachers to discuss student achievement, benchmarks, and strategies to boost the performance of all students. Meeting minutes and agendas from numerous BLT, departmental, and team meetings demonstrate the commitment to the use of data to address student achievement. In addition to the ISAT data, teachers at John Adams utilize other nationally normed assessments and locally designed benchmarks to continually assess student performance. Using a variety of measures, building leaders and teachers monitor the teaching and learning that occurs throughout John Adams, assessing new curriculum to ensure it addresses the desired learning goals, and allowing teachers to reteach elements of the curriculum that are not mastered by students.

Doing the right work. With the principal taking on responsibilities as the school’s leader for learning, the administrative team at John Adams has adjusted their duties so he is able to keep his primary focus on the teaching and learning in the building. The two seasoned assistant principals assume most of the mechanistic, managerial responsibilities that may otherwise dominate a building principal’s time. Both assistants have a considerable amount of experience, with one previously serving as a building principal and the other as a Marine Corps officer and business leader, and both provide data analysis and perform the majority of the work required for the development of the master schedule. One of the assistants, John, reflected on these responsibilities:

[Principal’s name] has a great working relationship with both of us [Assistant Principals]. He is truly focused on the big picture—teaching and learning, and relies on us to address some of the more managerial aspects of his position. I have been a principal and know what is required in that position and am happy to allow him some of the time needed to
focus on instruction and learning. For example, right now I am knee-deep in the master schedule. Most principals I know spend a significant amount of their time working through these issues. [Principal’s name] is able to channel that time into our learning goals. (John, interview, January 20, 2011)

During each visit to John Adams, it was apparent that the assistant principals took an active role in building-wide administrative duties, sharing the instructional leadership duties and roll with the building principal. Several of the BLT meetings that were observed were led by an assistant principal, and it was clear that the all members of the building administrative team collaboratively shared administrative responsibilities. Allan indicated that it is important to “let go” of those leadership responsibilities in order to be available to address the primary goals of the organization:

My assistant principals agreed and have made a conscious effort to take some of the things that are mechanical types of things off my plate so that I can work on the bigger picture kinds of things, the leadership things of teaching and learning, so I can be the instructional leader and so I’m not swamped in the day-to-day stuff that takes you away from doing that. Both of my guys [assistant principals] can master schedule. I want to talk about team make up and configuration and all the big picture stuff, but when it comes down to plugging in the numbers and making it all work, I like them to do that. (Allan, interview, February 16, 2010)

Allan indicated that he likes to be “working on the real work” at John Adams, with his focus primarily on instruction and student learning. By redistributing some of the managerial tasks (albeit important) to others on the administrative team, as well as entrusting teacher leaders in the building with the analysis of achievement data and the development of plans for improvement, he is able to oversee the organization and provide support to groups as they perform their tasks. It is easy to become bogged down in the multitude of demands placed upon today’s school leader, and that is why distributing leadership to others in the organization has become such an important concept. As Allan put it, “It is best to be doing the real work and not out changing the sign.” He further noted:
I was at a principals meeting and talking about the concept of working on the right work when I mentioned not being a leader that's out in front of the building who's changing the sign, and people disputed it with me. They said, “Sometimes we grab the mop and we're mopping water.” I said that's all admirable stuff, but when you are doing that, you are not working on the real stuff—which is the teaching and learning piece of the leadership part of your job. I said, I get that you jump in and help somebody when they need some help, but that is not primarily what your job is, and the more you are doing that, the less you are doing the right work. (Allan, interview, February 16, 2010)

**Personnel.** Throughout numerous interviews, Allan reiterated the importance of having the right people as part of your organization, or “having the right people on the bus.” During his 33 years in education, and his 27 years as an administrator, he has taken a number of steps to ensure that he had strong, effective people in his school who fit well into the organization and embraced the mission. He indicated that the hiring process is such an important aspect of having a quality school, that each vacant position is treated with the same sense of urgency.

Ensuring that the school staff members are a good fit for the organization is critically important for many reasons. Allan has been responsible for hiring the vast majority of the current teaching staff, and along the way, he has encountered numerous faculty members who have not pedagogically agreed with the mission. Although public school administrators may not be able to simply “eliminate people who are not good fits,” effective leaders will find ways to encourage those individuals to consider making a change. Allan noted that in almost all cases, “people come to that conclusion themselves and elect to withdraw and go someplace else. When those discussions take place, those people say, ‘You know, you are right. This isn’t the place for me’” (interview, April 14, 2010).

Allan was quite adamant about getting the right people on the bus. In his first school year at John Adams he started in January, and by June he had 22 resignations, with his office manager submitting her resignation to him on his first day. Although personnel issues are often quite
complex and sometimes very difficult, Allan noted that building principals should not shy away from them:

If you’ve got a bunch of people in a building that don’t believe in the mission, and they’re not interested . . . you can’t fix that. Stephen Covey said there’s no way that you’re going to change their mindset and think that you’re right and they’re wrong. So, the best you can do for people that don’t want to make a move and won’t get on the bus is get them to do something else. I had an associate superintendent that was very wise. One time he said, don’t take them all on at once. Take them on one at a time. He said, after you do the first one, the word will rattle around. (interview, April 14, 2010)

Although challenging and often unpleasant, addressing staff members whose attitudes and behaviors are contrary to the mission is a necessary step toward developing a school climate that is trusting and collaborative. Allan noted:

Everybody knows. I think I am a real open book. I just let them know real clearly. Here’s what we are about. Now, if you are about something different or if you don’t agree with that mission of the school district or the school, then it’s time to think about something else. It's the wrong job. (interview, April 14, 2010)

**Summary.** John Adams Junior High is a highly successful school, with a structure developed specifically to address the needs of young adolescent learners, as well as to allow faculty input in the school-wide decision-making process. Interdisciplinary teams, departmental teams, and a Building Leadership Team all play a part in the distribution of leadership at Adams. The principal, Allan, also works to develop the leadership capacity of his faculty and staff, relying on team and departmental leaders to work through building issues with teachers, and then bringing back their ideas and feedback to the BLT. It is also clear that at John Adams, the fundamental work of teaching and learning is regularly at the forefront of leadership decisions and conversations. The principal called this “doing the right work,” and the teaching mission of the school is something that is always a significant factor when decisions are made. Faculty and staff feel encouraged and empowered to become part of this school-wide decision-making process because of the atmosphere of trust that is cultivated at Adams. Teachers are respected for
their knowledge, are considered experts in their fields, and are encouraged to brainstorm and “think outside the box” when addressing issues. Subsequently, the faculty at Adams routinely seeks innovative solutions to the school-wide issues that are addressed by the BLT, and administration. Because the employees play such a critical role in working to achieve the overall mission of teaching and learning, Adams’ principal emphasized the importance of having the right faculty and staff. He placed utmost importance in the hiring process and worked to ensure that all the faculty and staff at Adams were team players, all moving toward the common goals of the school.

Case B: Blue Trail Middle School

Many hands make light work.—John Heywood (1546/1874)

Blue Trail Middle School (a pseudonym) is a 7-8 grade middle level school located in a semi-rural community with a population of approximately 15,000 on the edge of the Chicago suburbs. The Blue Trail staff is comprised of 60 teachers, a student service team of two counselors, two social workers, and a psychologist, and an administrative team consisting of the principal, two assistant principals, and a dean of students. Teachers in the district have an average teaching experience of 7.6 years, with fewer than 30% having Master’s degrees or above. Blue Trail also has a young staff, as 67% of the 61 faculty members are untenured, with an average 2.4 years of experience. This phenomenon may be largely due to the significant increases in enrollment the district has experienced over a short period of time. As a result of rapid residential growth, Blue Trail County has been recognized by the U.S. Census Bureau as one of the fastest growing county in the United States. In the past nine years, the Blue Trail School District has more than doubled in size, growing 120% in that time, and because of this
growth has been engaged in a significant building campaign, opening three new schools in the last five years—including a new Blue Trail.

Prior to the 2004-05 school year, the middle school had been organized in a 6-8 grade configuration with 666 students. However, during that year, the 6th grade moved to a newly built intermediate building and the middle school took on its present 7-8 grade-level configuration. Because of the rapid growth in Blue Trail, the school continued to increase in population (Figure 7) and it now serves about 800 students. Housed in a brand new facility, the new middle school was designed with future expansion in mind.

![Figure 7. Enrollment trends at Blue Trail Middle School.](image)

Blue Trail has a mostly White student body (77.4%) with a significant Latino/a population (12.4%). Other minority groups represent small portions of the overall student makeup: African American (4.2%), Asian/Pacific Islander (1.6%), Native American (0.1%), and multi-racial (3.7%). The Blue Trail community also is experiencing demographic changes as its population continues to expand. An increase has been seen in racial diversity, with the first African-American family moving into the community eight years ago and the growing Latino/a
community continuing to change the area’s demographics. Changes also have occurred in socio-economic diversity. Blue Trail’s low-income population was reported at 0% in 2007 and then at 10.6% for 2010. The principal indicated that this number is underreported and continues to grow, being estimated at 13% at the time of this study. Although this percentage is significantly lower than the state average, it represents a sizable shift in local demographics, and is one area that school staff has had to address in numerous ways.

Prior to the 2009-10 school year, Blue Trail had been on the state Academic Watch List for failure to meet AYP. Like many schools, Blue Trail did not have issues with the majority of the student body meeting AYP or scores reported in the aggregate, but it was within one of the smaller demographic breakouts that students failed to meet standards. Prior to 2008, the homogenous nature of the community left Blue Trail with only one demographic sub-group, students with disabilities, and only 25% of those students met standards in 2007. Because this group had failed to meet APY previously, Blue Trail was placed on the Watch List. However, with a renewed focus on raising achievement for all students, the teachers at Blue Trail were successful in increasing the special education subgroup scores in the next two consecutive years.

After ISAT scores were released in 2009, Blue Trail was removed from the state’s Watch List. Because Blue Trail’s student population has continued to diversify, two additional subgroups now are measured for AYP on the ISAT: economically disadvantaged and Latino/a students.

Figures 8 and 9 show Blue Trail’s upward trends in test scores that resulted in the school being removed from the State Watch List.
During this study, Blue Trail was completing its second year in a new, $36 million and 206,000 square-foot facility. Although having the outward appearance of a high school, the new Blue Trail Middle School is planned specifically for young adolescents. Built with wide hallways and a central hub, building wings designed for interdisciplinary teams fan out over two levels,
each designated primarily for one grade level. The consideration given to the design of the new building reflects the school’s dedication to the middle school philosophy. As one of the original pilot schools for the Association of Illinois Middle Level Schools, Blue Trail embraces many critical middle school components. The principal at Blue Trail, Richard (a pseudonym), was in his 25th year in education when this study took place. After graduating college, where he played baseball and was an all-conference football player, he worked for 10 years at a residential facility for disadvantaged kids, teaching, coaching, and serving as athletic director. He is presently a doctoral candidate in Educational Administration, with General Administrative and Superintendent endorsements on his administrative certification. He has served as principal at Blue Trail for 15 years and has guided the school through many challenges and changes, including unprecedented growth, the construction and move into the new facility, being placed on the state’s Academic Watch List for failure to meet AYP, and then after three consecutive years of making AYP, being removed from the Watch List.

After being in the district as an administrator for 15 years and experiencing large increases in student population, Richard estimated that he has recommended hiring as many as 50-60% of the entire district’s faculty. And, when reflecting on the things of which he is really proud, it is the staff in his building who come to mind first. With only 3-4 teachers in his building whom he was not responsible for hiring, he feels developing the middle school staff has been a direct result of the work he has done:

So good, bad, or indifferent, I’m responsible for this. Even if I left tomorrow, I think it’s in better shape, but that obviously remains to be seen. It’s my hope that you lay a foundation down where it continues to be collaborative. I’ve always liked the mantra, “Many hands make light work.” That doesn’t mean that anyone is trying to avoid heavy lifting, but it does mean that we are all in this together, and if we want to make it better, don’t admire the problem. Come up with some ideas and solutions to it and I think we will all be happier. Certainly, it will benefit the kids. (Richard, interview, February 16, 2010)
Richard has had an opportunity to significantly influence the culture of the school and its organizational structure. However, the Blue Trail structure has developed through the evolution of numerous factors: an evolution of the principal as a leader, an evolution of the community and school district, an evolution of educational technology and the availability of achievement data, and an evolution of the educational leadership role and the demands placed on principals today. The organizational structure also reflects a long history of dedication to the middle school concept. Since Blue Trail adopted the middle school philosophy in the 1980s, it became one of the charter members of the Association of Illinois Middle Level Schools, developed a curriculum and environment that embodies *Turning Points* recommendations and focuses on relationships with students, and constructed a new, state-of-the-art facility designed specifically for the needs of young adolescents and the middle school philosophy. As Blue Trail has moved forward in this evolution, so has the distribution of leadership, with the principal’s administrative philosophy supporting the empowerment of teachers in building-wide decision making. Blue Trail’s website has a slogan clearly visible in the middle of the front page that summarizes this philosophy nicely. It states, “Welcome to Blue Trail Middle School, where we believe every teacher is a leader, every leader is a teacher, and every child will be successful.”

**Interdisciplinary teaming.** The new Blue Trail Middle School was built specifically for young adolescents and a school-within-a-school model. Each floor primarily accommodates one grade level and each wing is home to one or more interdisciplinary core teams. Team rooms are clustered together, with a designated team meeting space also among the interdisciplinary classrooms. Three, 6-person interdisciplinary teams operate at each grade level, with each team responsible for groups of approximately 130 students. These core teams include reading, writing,
mathematics, science, social studies, and special education teachers. Teams also exist for exploratory teachers, fine arts, and physical education.

Adjustments to the common school class schedule are possible, with team members “borrowing” minutes from other team classes. Because of the variety of meeting times, the school’s bell system only rings at dismissal time. A more flexible schedule, determined by needs of individual interdisciplinary teams, is being considered for the upcoming school year, now that the new school building may more easily accommodate such a schedule.

With a 9-period day, teachers have class and lunch assignments for seven periods, as well as a daily individual planning period and a planning period that rotates between team planning and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), which are determined by discipline and grade level (7th grade science, 8th grade writing, etc.). Teachers meet with their interdisciplinary teams during the designated planning period three days a week, and with their PLC two days a week, both in designated team or PLC planning space.

Interdisciplinary teams serve a number of functions at Blue Trail, but the most important one is acting as a core group of teachers for students. The teams at Blue Trail, like most middle schools, are the primary identifier for students, and the hallways that are home to each group are adorned with team identifiers and logos, in addition to an abundance of student work. Often, student work incorporates a theme from the team, expanding on the meaning of Team Imagine or Team Fusion, for example. The teams also serve as a means of communication and are a forum for discussion. By having each team member serve as a representative to one of the building’s standing committees (such as the Building Leadership Team or Response to Intervention), two-way communication is established with each of these groups. Each team member is assigned to a committee that meets weekly, bringing back information to the team members to disseminate and
for discussion. Brenda, a 7th grade writing teacher, shared how discussion items are relayed back to the committees by the team’s representative:

There are five of us on our core team, and we split roles pretty equitably. We do have a team leader, but really, it’s just a way for us to get information from [principal’s name] to us. We don’t have staff meetings, and so on Wednesdays we are all in a separate committee, so it’s not as if one person does every committee, which has happened in my past building. Sometimes there were teachers who stepped up and so then they end up on everything. The expectation here is that everybody does something. Many hands make light work. So, Wednesdays we all have a committee. I’m on RtI, Sherry [a pseudonym] is on Character Counts, Chris [a pseudonym] is BLT . . . she’s our team leader, so she goes to those building meetings, Melissa [a pseudonym] is our Calendar Coordinator. So, it’s definitely not top down. (Brenda, interview, May 19, 2010)

The work of the interdisciplinary teams at Blue Trail takes on many facets, with team members assuming a variety of roles in the building. The distribution of these responsibilities is characteristic of the principal’s overall leadership philosophy, which centers on empowering teachers and sharing responsibility to everyone in the school.

**Building committees.** When moving into the new school, the Blue Trail administration took that opportunity to implement a number of new practices, many of which were designed to further involve the entire faculty in building-wide decision making. One of these initiatives was redesigning the building committee assignments. Now, all teachers at Blue Trail are responsible for participating in one of the six standing building committees. Meeting each week after school on Wednesdays, each member of the school’s 6-person teams participates in the committee meetings. Each committee member communicates his/her team’s views and concerns and then reports back to the team the outcome of the meetings and any decisions that were made. The administrative team takes a careful inventory of teachers’ strengths when making assignments to the committees, and although those assignments were determined by the administration during this study, the school will be moving to a self-nominated model in the near future.
Building committees consist of the Building Leadership Team (BLT), Response to Intervention (RtI), Character Counts, Team Coordinator, and Floater/Discipline Committee. Each of these groups plays a different role in the management of the building, and each provides a variety of services or performs a series of duties throughout the year. The only committee that is not a heterogeneous blend of teacher disciplinary specializations is special education. Blue Trail District is also part of a special education cooperative, so during committee time, special education teachers meet with co-op staff. The teacher serving on the BLT committee has the designation of “team leader,” though this terminology may be misleading. The individual team leader has a specific set of team management responsibilities and is part of the BLT, which meets with the principal and addresses team and building concerns. However, the BLT does not have a more significant role than other committees. The administrative team at Blue Trail plans to change the BLT name to something more descriptive. Richard shared how, ironically, of all the committees, the one with the least “visible” or tangible outcomes is the leadership team:

I would probably argue that the building leadership team has the least effect, because it is so . . . I don’t want to say nebulous, but you are dealing with e-plans, and you are dealing with . . . and you’ll see today, we go around the room and people that have concerns and whatever. The impact it has is usually it becomes what’s the gripe of the week or two weeks that’s being told. (Richard, interview, April 14, 2010)

In addition to participating in weekly committee meetings, team members have other roles and responsibilities. One of these is the role of team leader, who is responsible for a number of organizational tasks. The role of team leader is rotated every two years, so that the responsibilities of leadership are shared among team members and more people can appreciate the perspective that comes from that leadership position. Because leadership is something that is expected from all teachers, team leaders at Blue Trail do not receive a stipend, such as the department head at a high school might. Richard explained:
If you look at a model like the high school with the department chair, at some point you know there has to be some kind of conversation like, “Well, you are getting paid for this, and I’m not.” If you are going to have a small group working, that kinda stops it right there. But if everybody is on the same . . . not getting extra pay for it, in some respects I think it’s better. (interview, April 14, 2010)

Reflecting on her team, Brenda, a 7th grade writing teacher, shared how the rotation of leadership serves other functions, in addition to providing opportunities to serve:

[Principal’s name] is very cognizant of not picking the same people over and over again. He’s good at trying to figure out what everyone’s strengths are. Actually, our team leader this year was really a negative member of our team last year, and he made her team leader this year. At first I was like, “What’s he doing?” But it’s really been positive for our team leader. We’re much healthier this year than we were last year as a core team. Once she was asked to step into that role, I’ve seen attributes in her that I’ve never seen the three previous years. She’s much more positive. (Brenda, interview, May 19, 2010)

Professional learning communities. In addition to being an interdisciplinary team member and participating on one of the building committees, each teacher at Blue Trail is a part of a discipline specific Professional Learning Community (PLC). These groups meet twice a week and consist of all the teachers who share a common discipline at a given grade level (7th grade science, 8th grade writing, 7th grade social studies, etc.). These groups meet to discuss the teaching and learning in their classrooms, analyze test data, and work to make adjustments to their curriculum and teaching so all of their students may be successful. Introduced during the previous year as part of a district mandate, the PLCs at Blue Trail are still going through a development phase. During this second year, PLC meetings have been moved from after school to teachers’ common team planning period, meeting in a specially designated “data room.” Although during this study the PLCs consisted of grade level departments, the schedule for next year was being restructured to allow both grade levels in each discipline to meet during PLC time, giving teachers the opportunity to collaborate and articulate vertically and horizontally.
Richard felt the effectiveness of PLCs was mixed, with some described as high functioning and others that were not. He noted that during this start-up phase, the success of individual PLCs may have as much to do with data as it does with individual personalities:

The focus of n-test creation, or a focus of curriculum development, or looking at data all depends on what the subject is, and in some cases . . . I don’t think it’s as much personality driven as it is what data can I provide for them on a more regular basis, so they’re not to the point yet, in our building at least, where they’re looking at their own n-tests, and their own data from n-tests as much. The math and the reading and the language have MAP testing, and they’re very focused and specific because they have data from September and January, and there is so much of it that they’re pulling through it all the time. It’s much easier to be collaborative and say, “My kids didn’t do well on number 6. How did your kids do? Well, they did great” and have that as a shared piece, rather than, “I’m not sure where we’re going with this and I don’t have data to look at.” (Richard, interview, April 14, 2010)

Although the outcomes from some PLCs may be limited due to the nature of the test data that is available, others have developed into real communities of professionals, collaborating and engaging in authentic dialogue about the craft of teaching.

Building leadership capacity. One does not have to look far to see the influence of the Blue Trail principal’s philosophy, as it is hanging on a banner as you walk through the front doors: “Welcome to Blue Trail Middle School, where we believe every teacher is a leader, every leader is a teacher, and every child will be successful.” Throughout the school’s organizational structure, it is apparent that teachers are expected to play prominent roles in the leadership of the building. Because every teacher serves in at least three groups (interdisciplinary teams, building committees, PLCs) and also may participate in other building events and groups, the opportunities for Blue Trail teachers to take on a leadership role in some capacity are extensive. The principal’s philosophy about leadership development is that everyone can succeed if given the opportunity to practice in safety.
The building principal and others on his administrative team see the development of the staff’s leadership capacity much like the development of teaching techniques and curricular mastery. Opportunities are given for teachers to take on leadership responsibilities, and in some cases, those responsibilities may be thrust upon them. Then they are allowed to practice their leadership skills. When a teachable moment arises, Richard or one of the other administrators will sit with the teacher and talk about had happened and how it might be improved:

I think you get better at stuff when you practice it. Everyone meets. . . . I’m on the building leadership meeting, we have an RtI committee, we have Character Counts committee, we try to make sure there’s an administrator that’s there. We might help set the agenda, we might do some other things but we try not to just talk for 30 minutes. So when teachers are new at this, they’re not perfect. They will be going through some of the same growing pains when I first started as principal. That is when an administrator, or maybe two, can help them reflect back . . . maybe we could have done this or tried this and it might have worked better. (Richard, interview, May 19, 2010)

Leadership development is not only for teachers. Richard spends a considerable amount of time working with his administrative team, helping to develop them as leaders, too. By providing opportunities for assistant principals and deans to assume those responsibilities not often found in their job descriptions, Richard is not only providing them with valuable experience but also continuing to distribute leadership responsibilities to others in the organization. Shane, one of the assistant principals, reflected on how he has had opportunities to grow as a leader:

He’s been able to give me tasks, and some tasks have just taken over, either a void or an expansion of something. He won’t stand in the way of any of my progress, and certainly it’s just been beneficial for, I think, both of us for me to learn more about non-traditional assistant principal things. You do a lot of things with curriculum, but also the budget, also the AD role, and the master schedule. (interview, May 19, 2010).

**Culture of collaboration.** The principal at Blue Trail exercises a form of distributed leadership that permeates every aspect of the building’s culture and function. Teachers are collaborative because that is the environment in which they are expected to perform. Richard
moved away from faculty meetings comprised of the entire faculty in favor of smaller groups discussing issues, giving teachers opportunities to voice their opinions and be heard. Teachers serve on building committees, reporting back discussions and findings to their teams, and reporting team concerns and questions to the committee. Working in a PLC, teachers address their students’ learning and their teaching practices with their peers. All of these opportunities put teachers in control of the decision-making process in the building, increase opportunities for input, and lead to high instances of teacher commitment. In addition to a sense of ownership, the collaborative nature of Richard’s leadership has led to a positive building climate. Brenda, a 7th grade writing teacher, noted:

I would say that 90% of the time, this school climate feels . . . there’s more buy-in with [principal’s name]’s type of leadership, because we are all responsible to make this a great place for kids to learn. So, I think that [principal’s name]’s way of leading is much more productive and I think, long-term . . . well, you’ve been in our building more than once. When you walk in, it’s a healthy climate. You know that school climate . . . you can feel it. People like to teach here. We like each other. I think that even when things happen and you get somebody going through a negative patch, it is still okay because everything else is so positive. (interview, May 19, 2010)

The fundamental tenets to Richard’s philosophy on distributed leadership and collaboration lie with providing teachers opportunities to be involved in the planning process. By engaging teachers in a variety of groups, they have multiple opportunities to problem solve and find solutions to the issues at hand. Providing multiple chances to participate in this type of dialogue and problem-solving process increases the opportunities for teachers to become engaged. However, there may be those who are resistive to this approach, which Richard acknowledged:

At some point, do I think that everybody works well in a group or a team? No. Are there still people in this building that would prefer to be left alone to teach my six periods a day? I’d rather not meet with anyone. I don’t want to collaborate. I don’t mind looking at my [emphasis added] kids’ data but I don’t want to hear about somebody talking about their kids’ data. I don’t have much to share. I don’t have much to offer. Yes. There are
people still in the building that are like that, but in a distributive model, at least by having them be on several different . . . a core team, PLC, Character Counts, something along those lines . . . they have four opportunities, instead of maybe none, to have an impact in the building. (interview, April 14, 2010)

**Decision making.** One of the fundamental elements in Blue Trail’s distributed leadership model is its deliberate and multiple efforts to engage teachers in dialogue, provide opportunities for feedback, and encourage them to take ownership in building-wide decisions. The administrative team has a common approach to decision making, and input is sought from staff on most issues. One administrative team member noted that there may be a few teachers that do not want to be involved in the school-wide decision-making process, but their numbers are dwindling. This decline may be attributed to hiring new teachers who have a desire to be collaborative. Because such a large percentage of Blue Trail’s teachers are new to the profession, they have been trained under this model of collaboration and may be more accepting of this approach. Recent trends in education have evidenced a shift away from teacher-centered classrooms to environments in which teachers serve as facilitators of learning activities. In that role, students are more engaged in their learning experiences, providing input along the way. In many ways, the distributed forms of leadership present at Blue Trail emulate the learning-centered classroom.

**Summary.** Blue Trail demonstrates how an entire faculty can be empowered as leaders and participate in school-wide decision making through a variety of teams and committees. Teachers participate in interdisciplinary teams, building committees, and professional learning communities, each with a multitude of ways for faculty members to share and participate in the building’s growth and development. The Blue Trail principal utilizes each of the teams and committees as avenues for faculty leadership development. The administrative team also is given opportunities to work outside their assigned areas of responsibility, thereby strengthening their
understanding of school administration and leadership. One of the central concepts at Blue Trail that enables this large degree of distributed leadership is how the school operates within a culture of collaboration. The expectation at Blue Trail is for all faculty and staff to lead, to learn, and to participate fully in decision making.

**Case C: Cardinal Middle School**

Cardinal Middle School (a pseudonym) is a 6-8 grade middle level school, located in a small urban community with a population of about 125,000, in a PreK-12 unit district of less than 10,000 students. Teachers in the district have an average teaching experience of approximately 12 years, and slightly over half of the teachers have Master’s degrees or above. The staff at Cardinal is composed of 64 teachers, a student services team consisting of 3 counselors, a social worker, and psychologist, and an administrative team consisting of the principal, associate principal, and assistant principal.

In close proximity to a university, Cardinal District’s community includes a highly educated population and is able to provide many of the amenities of a large city while retaining the leisurely pace of a smaller town. However, Cardinal District’s community has developed a polarizing socio-economic gap. The district has a low-income rate of 49%. This phenomenon may be attributed partly to a reduction of low-income housing in the Chicago area, which has displaced families in poverty and caused them to seek out communities elsewhere in the state with low-income housing availability. Although poverty transcends racial and ethnic groups, the majority of African-American families in the Cardinal District fall into this category.

Home to about 700 students, Cardinal has a diverse student body. White students constitute 48.2% of the population, with African-American students making up 38.8% and Asian
students representing 9.1% of Cardinal students. Although Latino/a students account for only 3.9% of the student body, they represent a growing demographic group in the community. Although district ELL services are concentrated in other buildings, 3% of Cardinal students qualify for bilingual programs. Students qualifying for special education services constitute 20% of the population, and reflecting the community’s poverty, Cardinal has a low-income rate of 49%. This proportion represents a significant increase in cultural and economic diversity in a short period of time. Since 2004, Cardinal has seen the African-American student population increase 11.2% and the population of low-income students increase by 18.8% (Figure 10).

However, during this demographic shift and significant increase in low-income students, the staff at Cardinal has worked to ensure that student success also has increased. The school continues to meet increasing AYP targets year after year, and Figures 11 and 12 show Cardinal’s upward trends in test scores. Cardinal’s principal attributes the continual increase in student achievement to the dedication and professionalism of the teachers.

Figure 10. Cardinal Middle School demographic shift.
Cardinal transitioned to the middle school philosophy in 1978 and consequently has built upon the cornerstones of that concept for more than 30 years. Today, Cardinal’s focus is on the whole child, addressing an academic and social curriculum for students with a full exploratory program and interdisciplinary teams. Cardinal has a long history of recognition for high levels of
achievement and innovation and is home to two Illinois State Teachers of the Year, with both educators becoming finalists for the national teacher of the year.

Throughout the past decade, the district has implemented a number of systematic changes to address outcomes for African-American students and has implemented programs, policies, and practices to ensure high expectations and equitable access to opportunity for all students, with an emphasis on improvements for African-American students. Through this process, the district developed one of the most extensive systems of data analysis in the state and has adopted a controlled school choice system (as opposed to neighborhood boundary schools) in which parents apply for admission to their preferred elementary and middle schools. This controlled school choice is designed to ensure that each school has a balanced student body that reflects the diversity of the district.

The principal at Cardinal, Mary Anne (a pseudonym), was in her 26th year in education when this study took place. She taught 1st and 2nd grade for 8 years, has General Administrative and Superintendent endorsements on her administrative certificate, and a Doctoral degree in Educational Administration. While in her 8th year as principal of Cardinal, she has a total of 18 years of administrative experience, and in addition to leading Cardinal, has served as an elementary principal, the Director of Title I, Literacy, and School Choice, and as Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction. She attributes this “micro, macro, micro again” experience as one that provides her with a great sense of the big picture and allows her to capitalize on additional opportunities to help develop the leadership capacity at Cardinal.

Organizational structure. Cardinal has benefitted from a long history of strong leadership and a commitment to the middle school philosophy. A variety of groups and individuals participate in the leadership activities at Cardinal, including the interdisciplinary
teams that comprise the building’s core organizational structure. However, leadership also is disseminated through the Content Area Chairs, the staff selected Building Council, PLCs, interdisciplinary teams, and the leaders of a variety of professional development initiatives that support building- and district-level activities. The Cardinal teaching staff is continually offered input into the decisions that are made and often form committees to study the impact of proposed actions. All staff members participate in Cardinal’s school improvement process, their team, content area, and personal professional development groups, and have opportunities to participate in leadership through a multitude of opportunities. The organizational structure of Cardinal has been crafted to ensure all faculty members are informed, have equal and frequent access to decision making, and play active roles in positively influencing student learning.

**Interdisciplinary teaming.** Cardinal has embraced the tenants of the middle school philosophy for more than three decades, and the prominence of interdisciplinary teams in the school’s organizational structure is a testament to creating developmentally appropriate environments for young adolescents. When this study was conducted, Cardinal contained two 4-5 person interdisciplinary teams at each of its 6th through 8th grades and also incorporated an additional team that contains the extra-curricular, exploratory, AVID, and technology teachers. The interdisciplinary teams include teachers of mathematics, social studies, science, language arts and special education. With a 9-period day, teachers at Cardinal teach five classes and supervise one period of FLEX, which is a structured study/tutoring period put in place to address the needs of students without adequate support at home. However, at the time of this study, the faculty was preparing to make a switch to three 4-person teams for the 2010-11 school-year, along with a move to a block schedule, reducing the number of students served in each team to about 75-80.
Teachers have a daily team planning period, in addition to their individual planning time, in which they meet to discuss students, families, curriculum, cross-content themes or projects. Each team’s planning time operates on a schedule, with specific tasks assigned to a different day of the week, with one of those days dedicated to meeting with the team’s designated administrator. Barbara, an 8th grade math teacher, describes the team schedule:

We get together and on Monday and we try to discuss student issues. Tuesday we try to discuss the teacher issues that we need to do like paperwork and stuff that needs to be processed. Wednesday we try to make that our curriculum planning day, so I would go to the other team’s math teacher and we would sit down and plan math. Thursday we meet with our administrator as a whole team. And Friday we try to make it a positive day where we make contacts home or send post cards and such. (interview, May 18, 2010)

Interdisciplinary teams function as one of several means to facilitate communication, provide feedback on building issues, and create opportunities for teachers to be involved in school-wide decision making. Cardinal’s interdisciplinary teams focus on providing a sense of community in a small-school atmosphere for students, where teachers work on incorporating themes across their disciplines. Teacher teams are also in close physical proximity to one another, residing in a portion of each of the grade level’s designated building areas. In addition to facilitating teachers’ ability to meet together during team planning, this close proximity lends itself to the integration of topics across curricular areas. Barbara, an 8th grade math teacher, explained:

We do that because we can talk. Also, the way that the building is set up, all the team teachers that I teach with . . . we are all next door to each other. So, while we are in the hallway, like I just walked past the science teacher and I asked if he had hit roller coasters yet. He said he was going to hit it Thursday. Because we’ve all been together a number of years, we all know each other’s curriculum. (interview, May 18, 2010)

Other leadership groups. In addition to operating with interdisciplinary teams, Cardinal incorporates a number of other leadership groups that engage faculty members in a variety of capacities. Content Area Chairs are positions that are appointed by the principal, and although
they receive a stipend for their services, they do not receive any release time from their classroom teaching duties. The Content Area Chairs work with all teachers in their discipline, organize professional development opportunities for their teachers and the faculty as a whole, and coordinate data collection and analysis in smaller learning communities. The Content Area Chairs also comprise the Cardinal Building Leadership Team (BLT), which serves as a cabinet that meets with the building principal monthly, acting as advisors on various activities and issues. Although the administrative team does not always meet with this group, they often are included for important discussions and decisions.

An additional leadership group is the Building Council, which is mandated in all schools by the District’s collective bargaining agreement and contains representation throughout the building. Faculty and staff members are represented from grade levels, content areas, interdisciplinary teams, and support staff, as well as representatives from the respective faculty and staff unions. This site-based management group addresses different topics at each monthly meeting and often is used as means to collect and disseminate information and establish committees to investigate ideas or concepts brought before the Council. Demonstrated by the principal’s commitment to collaboration and willingness to relinquish formal power, all major initiatives, and many others, are approved by the Building Council before being implemented at Cardinal.

An administrative team, consisting of an associate and assistant principal, also assists in the duties and responsibilities of operating Cardinal. Each administrator has distinct responsibilities, including student discipline, special programs, and teacher evaluation and have adopted the same open and collaborative style as the principal. The division of duties and responsibilities of the administrative group has been established specifically to assist in
developing their abilities as leaders, and the principal works with them throughout the year to mentor and build their leadership capacity. Mary Anne explained how the expectation of leadership at Cardinal moves well beyond simply managing an organization:

[When looking for a new associate principal] I wanted that person to know up front, I’m not looking for someone to fill out paperwork, but you are going to step up in ways that you haven’t, as well as being a voice of leadership and encouragement, and keeping the mission and vision we set in motion. (interview, February 22, 2010)

**Professional development.** The professional development at Cardinal honors the work and expertise of the teachers in the building and reflects a collaborative and respectful culture, as the teachers have assumed many of the responsibilities for leading their colleagues in professional discovery and learning. Not only are teachers working within professional learning communities to analyze their curriculum and student performance but they also are leading regularly occurring professional development activities within the building and across the district. Teachers are divided into small PLCs by grade level and discipline (i.e., 7th grade math, 8th grade social studies) but also have the opportunity to identify an additional area of interest, such as educational technology or differentiation, and meet in those groups throughout the year. Consequently, Cardinal’s professional development calendar for the year, during staff meetings and school improvement days, is filled by the leaders of grade level PLCs and other groups, where peer-led activities and information is shared.

The Technology Partnership, University Academy, and AVID program also require teachers to participate in additional professional development opportunities that focus on specific objectives aligned to each group. The Technology Partnership provides teachers access to and training for classroom technology, including SMART Boards, clickers, software, and visualization tools. The University Academy is a program in which selected teachers participate in training focused on differentiated instruction and learning technologies. The Advancement Via
Individual Determination (AVID) program is designed to provide students from underrepresented groups with the skills, strategies, and attitudes that will allow them to successfully prepare for college. By engaging teachers with an interest in areas of professional development, Cardinal is efficiently utilizing a variety of expertise in the building. Having teachers from within the building assume responsibility for leading professional development activities increases the sense of professionalism among the teachers, as well as fostering a sense of collaboration. Marsha, and 8th grade social studies teacher, tells how this strategy allows for a multitude of professional development topics to be shared:

Social studies and science might have a few sessions where we are doing some kind of presentation of trainings they need at the time. Since we were dealing with block scheduling and trying to figure that out this next year, we did a lot with that. Any presentations I did were either around block scheduling or integrating technology, which is always a big piece of differentiating instruction. There would be a [University] Academy that works on different strategies, also using technology. There would also be special education meetings, so you had choices . . . Almost like mini-courses that you went to. You have personal learning goals, but you also have a department goal focused on the things that you want to get better at. (interview, May 28, 2010)

**Developing leadership capacity.** The faculty and administration at Cardinal work closely together on most aspects of the building’s mission. This ability to collaborate on most issues is possible largely due to the diverse leadership responsibilities that are embraced by teachers, as well as the opportunities that are given to them. Joyce, the assistant principal said, “We have a philosophy that everything we need is right here in the building. Someone knows it. We just have to figure out who it is and encourage them to step up and share it with everyone else” (interview, May 18, 2010).

Mary Anne believes that the nature of working in a middle school environment lends itself to developing the conversations and collaborations necessary for leadership to emerge. The expectation of collaboration in the interdisciplinary teams fosters an atmosphere that is ripe with
opportunities to share professional experiences with the rest of the staff. Capitalizing on the collaborative environment at Cardinal, when teachers participate in professional development activities outside the school, they are expected to return some of that knowledge to their peers.

Mary Anne noted,

These kinds of things evolve very easily in the professional development strand because we are already collaborating, we already have a team with the [Technology] Partnership and they also know, from my leadership, that when you go . . . if you sign up to these-whatever those things are, you know that you now are stepping forward as a leader. If you’re going into [Technology] Partnership, that’s not just so you can learn how to use a SMART Board. You’re going to come back and be a go-to-person. So, when people are placed in those positions, they know that part of that is their ability to continue on and that concept is kind of there with the middle school team model. (interview February 22, 2010)

Leadership roles and responsibilities at Cardinal take on a variety of shapes and sizes. Some initiatives require a large investment of time and come with significant responsibilities. Others are “one and done.” For example, a teacher may facilitate a single professional development session at a staff meeting. Diverse opportunities enable a variety of individuals to actively participate in the building’s leadership, choosing a role they are comfortable assuming. When identifying teachers with leadership potential, the principal and her administrative team have a large group from which to draw, as Mary Anne explains:

Some of them are people who are working on leadership training or their [General Administrative Certificate Type] 75s. Some of them are people who have just been in the building and have moved up because of their expertise—their master teaching. Some are people that have the potential and just need to be coached into leadership. (interview February 22, 2010)

Because of the abundance of leadership opportunities, teachers are able to choose those that best suit their expertise and level of commitment, allowing many Cardinal teachers to take on leadership roles in the building. Cardinal’s Assistant Principal, Joyce, explains how teachers utilize their expertise in curriculum development in leadership roles:
We try our best to help teachers to stand up as leaders in their positions, so it’s not only the administration that are seen as leaders in the building. Within our staff meetings every other week, we allow teachers to lead those meetings. At the beginning of the year, they are designing a curriculum that will take place over the course of the school year that will pertain to the exact teacher needs of that time. This is a great way for us to increase the leadership of the teachers in the building. It’s wonderful that they step up to do that, because the teachers are much more accepting of that information since it’s coming from a colleague-someone at their level . . . and they really are the experts. They’re in the classroom. (interview, May 18, 2010)

**Teachers as leaders.** Engaging teachers as leaders is an effective and efficient way to increase the level of professionalism, encourage staff commitment, and distribute leadership functions throughout a building. The faculty interviewed at Cardinal indicated that including teachers in the leadership roles of the building not only created professionalism but also an increased sense of pride in the effort put into their work, as well as focusing on individuals’ strengths. Marsha, an 8th grade social studies teacher explains how teachers acting as leaders helps to build respect among peers:

> We are all, on some levels, seen as leaders. Of course our job in itself is being a leader, because we work with children and we are trying to help and guide them. But I think amongst each other, as peers, it builds such a level of respect. You don’t necessarily have to agree with every aspect of teaching practice that we all do, but you focus in on the strengths of what’s really good about an individual’s teaching. I think that makes life easier as a teacher, because teaching is a very hard and stressful profession. This eases some of that stress, to kind of share the successes that we are all having. (interview, May 28, 2010)

Teacher leaders indicated that they strive to emulate the leadership style demonstrated by Mary Anne and her administrative team. Tammy, the Gifted ELA teacher, noted how the collaborative nature of the Cardinal decision-making process involves the building leaders in those conversations, and this shared approach has caused teacher leaders to consider that they have “not necessarily a management responsibility, but a leadership responsibility in the school, to model that same thing when we are in charge of something. So, we will bring in our teachers to be a part of that group as well” (interview, May 27, 2010).
Jessica, a 7th grade English/language arts teacher, indicated that all the professionals at Cardinal were experts in some regard. Whether in the areas of classroom management, classroom instruction, curriculum, or determining goals and assessments, the teachers understand that with their expertise comes the responsibility to share it with other teachers in the building.

Through the identification of individuals in the building who demonstrate a certain level of passion for their respective subject area or team, teachers are introduced to the idea of working with their peers on a variety of different levels. Mary Anne then will mentor teacher leaders, promoting them into leadership positions and gradually giving them more responsibilities. This gradual transition allows for teachers to grow into leadership roles without being thrust into them without the skills or knowledge to be successful.

**Culture of collaboration.** When she became an elementary principal at the age of 27, Mary Anne found herself in a situation that required collaboration at an early stage in her professional career. Lacking the knowledge base that a teacher with 10-15 years of experience would have, she found that she was forced to ask people questions and engage in conversations. This high level of engagement fed into a collaborative leadership style, leading to staff involvement in every step of the decision-making process:

> By being put into a leadership position at such a young age, I hadn’t any other options but to bring other people to the table, plus I think my leadership style has always been bent on at least letting people feel like they have been part of the process. When the end result rolls out, you’re going to have more understanding, success, and even buy-in, even if you don’t agree. At least you’ve been at the table and understand how we got to where we got. (Mary Anne, interview February 22, 2010)

Speaking with the Cardinal faculty members, it is clear that the principal operates in a highly collaborative mode. Few decisions are made without feedback from the staff on multiple levels. And although she clearly has the final say in decision making, the teacher leaders are empowered to engage the faculty, provide forums for discussion, and solicit feedback throughout
the process. Not only does this grant opportunities for teachers to participate in the decision-making process but it also allows the principal to make the most informed decision after gathering information from all stakeholders, thus permitting her to determine what is best for the group as a whole.

The underlying philosophy behind this collaborative decision-making process is around the creation of commitment and trust. The development of trust is generated over time but it also can be developed by following through on initiatives. Mary Anne explained, “When you can give people evidence about your follow-through as an administrator on the really simple things, they are more willing to journey with you on the bigger ideas” (interview February 22, 2010). Trust also is reciprocal and can be cultivated by a principal conveying confidence in her/his faculty. Tammy, the gifted ELA teacher, said, “She takes good people and then trusts that they will do what she asks them to do, or what needs to get done. She never dictates what needs to be done” (interview, May 27, 2010). This process also includes the selection of knowledgeable people to perform the tasks. Joyce, an assistant principal, shares how this applies to the administrative team as well:

In terms of leadership, [principal’s name] has a very minimalist style, I guess I would say. She presents an idea and it may be one sentence and then she gives it to us to run with, which is fantastic. I think she really trusts her administrative team and her staff to know what they’re doing and to get it done . . . and we do. (interview, May 18, 2010)

The types of issues that are conveyed to the staff may be weighed carefully before input is sought. Although it is valuable to seek input from all stakeholders on decisions that will affect them, some issues should be left to the building administration. For example, questions about interdisciplinary team composition may elicit numerous responses from teachers, but they may not address the multitude of considerations that must be applied to those decisions. Team composition requires balances in certification, individual personalities, and the needs of the
building, so it may not be realistic to seek input on those issues. However, there are many
decisions that ultimately will be better served by seeking input from the staff, as Mary Anne
noted:

Whether it’s scheduling or room placements . . . I think some of that goes better when
people have more voice or at least know it’s coming, or there’s a conversation. I think the
schedule is a really good example of, even if there will be some grieving if you will, it
will be done as a part of the process, not as opposed to angst or anger or frustration that I
wasn’t included and now we are teaching more minutes. It’s been articulated I think lots
of different ways that I recognize there’s more teaching minutes in next year’s schedule. I
mean, that will be part of the process. (interview, February 22, 2010)

Without engaging staff in collaborative forms of decision making, it may difficult to
obtain a sufficient level of commitment for those items that require a considerable shift in some
aspect of the school culture or building practices. Even when proposed changes are intended to
support improved student achievement, they may be perceived as top-down edicts and may not
garner support from the majority of faculty. Mary Anne and her staff shared two examples of
how high levels of collaboration can lead to increased commitment and acceptance of proposals
that may otherwise have difficulty gaining support from the faculty.

Upon her arrival at Cardinal, Mary Anne noticed that, even with the longstanding
practice of interdisciplinary teaming, the assignment of classrooms to teachers, teams, and grade
levels seemed to be haphazard—based on year-to-year availability. Over time, each hallway (the
school is essentially a square, with three classroom hallways and a hallway dedicated to offices,
the cafeteria, and gym) had developed into a mismatched combination of 6th, 7th, and 8th grade
classrooms. She realized that to suggest completely rearranging classroom assignments after only
being in the school for a month most likely would create much consternation among the faculty.
After an issue was raised about students causing problems in other teams’ hallways, she took that
opportunity to bring the item to Building Council for discussion, knowing that 13 classrooms
ultimately would be required to move. The conversation in that forum led to a suggestion about arranging the hallways by grade level. Since it was an idea generated by staff and was focused on what was best for students, not about moving classrooms, the group continued the discussion and brought it back and forth from the different faculty groups. By February, teachers had largely accepted the change and Mary Anne only had to work through a few individual situations to make the transition complete. She shared a particular situation that could have had a very different outcome if approached in a less than collaborative manner:

Mrs. So-and-so has been in that room for 30 years, and she parked her car over there and really liked to be able to see it. It was real for her. So, I met with her and talked with her. I said, “Well, it’s always good to have choice.” I’m a big choice person in terms of giving them the power to decide. I said, “The good news is that we’ve actually got a couple of options. One option is, there’s going to be an English/Language Arts opening in 7th grade, so you can actually stay here, teach 7th grade . . . some of the kids you have right now, and leave your car and be good.” She said, “I’m not teaching 7th grade!” I said, “Well the other option is you can move to the 6th grade hallway and we can just find another spot for you to park your car where you can also see it.” Well, she liked that much better. I said, “Okay. We’ll go with you.” You can see how that would have blown up in October. We did move 13 classrooms at the end of that first summer, and it’s worked out great! (interview, February 22, 2010)

A second example of how collaborative decision making can bring about school-wide commitment amid a difficult transition involves Cardinal’s move to a block schedule. Prior to the 2009-10 school year, Cardinal operated with 2-, 4-, or 5-person interdisciplinary teams per grade level, in a traditional 8-period bell schedule. Amid changes of requirements in class time, established by the district in response to No Child Left Behind, Mary Anne worked with building leaders to develop scenarios for Cardinal’s future schedule. After a block schedule with three 4-person teams per grade level emerged as a possibility, the Cardinal administration started to engage the different leadership groups in extensive discussions about the impact of proposed changes, with those conversations being brought back to staff, and then back to the administration. Several building leaders attended a scheduling conference to learn about block
scheduling and also visited several schools that had transitioned to a block schedule. The English-language arts (ELA) department suggested implementing a 2-period ELA block for the 2009-10 school year, in advance of any school-wide changes, and those teachers prepared for that shift to occur. As schedule changes were negotiated with the district and teachers’ union bargaining unit, it became clear that all three Cardinal District middle schools would be adopting a block schedule. The general consensus among teachers is that this shift has not been accepted very positively at the other two middle schools, while teachers at Cardinal had been preparing for the change for almost two years and were excited about the change. The approach at Cardinal, engaging building leadership for an extended period of time, working with teachers to voice concerns and work through possible solutions, was not necessarily the approach taken at the other schools, which had more of a top-down implementation approach. Elsie, an ELA teacher, expressed how the transition had been made through efforts of the whole faculty and staff: “It really was just a team effort, so I think without collaboration . . . I don’t know what we would have done this year” (interview, May 6, 2010). Mary Anne discussed how this process helped to prepare her staff for the change:

It is important to consider who, what, where, and how middle school tenants are preserved in the schedule. We have been looking at it since last September. Examining what central office requires. We have had small groups examining the different aspects and considering options. This is not me. It is staff members. We are in a really good place now. Because people have been included in the conversation, there are no surprises. People know what the teams look like, what people will be doing, and they are appreciative, have new ideas, and are excited. Part of it is being really transparent when these things happen. This is the solution, and the staff is part of the development of that solution. (interview, January 21, 2010)

**Common vision.** The collaborative and transparent decision-making process that is a cornerstone of the Cardinal culture is possible largely because all members of the school function with a common vocabulary and shared understanding about expectations and priorities. The
school has a long history of adherence to the middle school concept, including highly collaborative interdisciplinary teams and democratic governance, as advocated in the *Turning Points* documents (CCAD, 1989; Jackson & Davis, 2000). Decisions about school structure, class schedules, and curricular offerings are considered in light of the tenants of the middle school philosophy, while also considering their individual merits.

In addition to the middle school philosophy, Mary Anne applies a simple measure to her decision-making approach. The basis of any decision rests on how it affects student learning. This simple principle serves as the underlying argument for most actions at Cardinal. Although not a lengthy mission statement, using impacts on student learning as a unifying rubric for decision making brings the fundamental purpose of school to the forefront. Although the Cardinal faculty and staff strive to create an environment that is developmentally appropriate for young adolescents, ultimately they are trying to have positive impacts on student learning:

I listened [to a teacher making a request], and you know me . . . I only have one question. He said, “You never asked me how it impacts student learning,” I said, “That’s going to be my question!” I’m not hung up on dollars, that’s not the first thing I wonder. You tell me at the end of the day if kids are going to be functioning at a higher level in their math skills if you want to teach it this way. (Mary Anne, interview February 22, 2010)

**Summary.** Cardinal Middle School has a 30-year history of following the middle school philosophy, so it may not be surprising to find that those tenants have a significant impact on the school structure, culture, and the principal’s approach to collaborative leadership. With an organizational structure that offers multiple opportunities for teachers to become informed, provide feedback, and participate in leadership opportunities, Cardinal teachers are involved in all aspects of decision making. In addition to interdisciplinary teams, teachers participate in PLCs and topic-specific professional development groups, all of which are led by teachers. These professional development groups, as well as the variety of other leadership groups in the
building, provide an opportunity for faculty to participate in leadership roles, in ways that fit their comfort level, further developing the leadership capacity of the school. The full involvement of faculty in the building’s decision-making process and professional development are instrumental to the culture of collaboration that is a cornerstone of the principal’s leadership philosophy. Another fundamental element to this philosophy is the common vision shared among the entire Cardinal faculty. The focus on student learning is paramount at Cardinal and evident in the decisions made by all leaders.

**Summary**

On the surface, the three cases in this study appeared to be significantly different. Varying widely in student enrollment, diversity, poverty, and geography, the case schools had dissimilar histories and different leaders. However, as different as these three schools initially appeared, the similarities in which they utilized a distributed framework for leadership were quite apparent, and an adherence to the middle school concept adds to their parallels.

In all cases, the use of interdisciplinary teams acted as a cornerstone of the distributed leadership frameworks. The interdisciplinary teams formed an integral part of each school’s school-wide decision-making process and communication network, as well as providing opportunities to develop the collective leadership capacity of the teachers. The close working relationships between team members played an important role in the ability to utilize teams as vehicles for small-group dialogue on a variety of issues. The collaborative nature of teams also may lend itself to the development a school-wide culture of collaboration that encourages the distribution of leadership.
In addition to the leadership in teams, the principals in the case schools utilized teachers as leaders in a variety of contexts. Teacher leaders provided guidance as curriculum experts and leaders within their team, subject area, grade level, or even within the district. Teachers also served as leaders of formal building leadership teams and committees, as well as informal leaders among their colleagues. The principals in each of the cases made conscious efforts to continually build the leadership capacity of teachers through group membership and multiple leadership opportunities.

Additionally, the case schools all shared an overt, singular focus on student learning. The importance of the schools’ mission of teaching and learning was a common mantra in each case, repeated in interviews by teachers, observed in meetings and interactions, and continually kept at the forefront by each school leader. The importance of communicating the mission of the school was viewed by each principal as centrally important, and it was apparent in all cases. The value placed on keeping student interests in the forefront of all activities was shared by all principals and reiterated by every teacher interviewed.

This chapter examined each of the three cases in detail, describing the context and distinctions of each site. Chapter Five addresses each of the of the research questions in a cross-case analysis, providing findings for each question and a comparison between the cases.
Chapter Five

Cross-Case Analysis and Findings

This chapter provides a cross-case analysis of the three case schools in this study, detailing themes that emerged from data analysis, and comparing findings across the three cases. Similarities and differences between the cases are explored in detail when discussing the overarching research question: *How do successful middle level principals utilize distributed leadership practices within their schools?* To support the overarching research question, three ancillary questions were addressed:

1. What actions or activities of the principal help to facilitate distributed leadership practices?
2. What barriers or challenges do principals encounter when attempting to implement distributed leadership practices and what strategies or practices have been put into place to overcome them?
3. How does the presence of interdisciplinary teaming influence distributed leadership practices in middle level schools?

The three ancillary research questions, taken collectively, address the overarching question. As such, these ancillary questions include themes and issues that cut across all questions. Therefore, the themes and issues described in these findings may address multiple research questions in some of the narratives. For example, the second question addresses the barriers and challenges faced when implementing distributed leadership, and the strategies taken to overcome them, additional challenges and strategies also are described in question one, describing actions or activities that help to facilitate distributed leadership practices. Similarly, elements of the middle school philosophy and the impacts of interdisciplinary teaming are incorporated into items addressed in research question one. As a result of the interwoven nature of the research findings,
the answers to the research questions may be best understood by reading all sections and not limiting reading to the narrative for a single research question.

**Research Question One: Facilitating Distributed Leadership Practices**

Research Question 1 was as follows: *What actions or activities of the principal help to facilitate distributed leadership practices?* Data analysis revealed five themes when considering these actions and activities, and include: (a) the development of organizational structures that cause all faculty and staff to engage in multiple groups and allow tasks to be distributed; (b) communicating a common vision for student learning; (c) developing structures and cultures that engage faculty and staff in democratic governance; (d) engaging teachers as leaders to advance curricular goals, professional development, and building management; and (e) developing an atmosphere of trust, building positive relationships, and empowering faculty and staff to address significant issues.

**Developing empowering organizational structures.** In all three case schools, an organizational structure had been developed that enabled faculty members to be a part of multiple groups, which in turn enabled small-group dialogue about such issues as school-wide decision making, specific school issues, professional development, and teaching and learning. Teachers belonged to interdisciplinary teams, departmental or content area groups, grade levels, and smaller or professional learning communities based on subject area and grade level. Faculty handbooks at Blue Trail and Cardinal clearly outlined a multitude of groups and opportunities for all staff members to become involved in a variety of decision-making and leadership roles in their buildings. At Blue Trail, *all* teachers served on one of the building’s standing committees, and at Cardinal, teachers were part of professional development groups with a specific focus.
(such as technology integration). In many instances, leaders of these individual groups were considered part of the formal building leadership and were included in meetings, groups, and committees focused on tasks associated with specific purposes or the school as a whole.

Teachers at each site also indicated that the highly collaborative model under which their school operated mirrored the environments they sought to create in their own classrooms. For example, Marsha, from Cardinal, noted:

I think that, for too long, we have thought that there should be this top-down approach to education, and when we work with our kids, we know what works best for them is them collaborating and thinking together. We are moving towards a society in the world of work that it’s all about teaming and working together as groups, so we do that for our kids. Why wouldn’t we do that for the adults? Shared knowledge is so much better than individual knowledge, and I can’t help think that we’ll all benefit from doing that. (interview, February 22, 2010)

As one of the fundamental principles of the middle school philosophy and distributed leadership, this collaboration provides teachers opportunities to be included in the planning process. During observations of team meetings at each of the case schools, I saw how teachers routinely engaged in discussions about school-wide issues, brainstormed about possibilities, and utilized team leaders to relay their thoughts to school leaders. By engaging teachers in a variety of groups, they have multiple opportunities to problem solve and find solutions to the issues at hand. Providing multiple chances to participate in this type of dialogue and problem-solving process increases the opportunities for teachers to become engaged in building-wide issues and planning.

The principals in each of the three cases utilized a highly engaged faculty and staff, as well as their network of administrators, to distribute managerial tasks formerly associated with the role of principal. Assistant principals were responsible for developing the master schedule, data analysis, and budgeting, as well as many other managerial duties. While maintaining oversight on these issues, this delegation of tasks allows principals the time necessary to function
as learning leaders in their respective building. Assistant principals enthusiastically accepted the involvement in significant building issues and considered that work to be an important contribution to the success of their schools. Shane, Assistant Principal at Blue Trail, noted:

I think that in shared leadership, the key is being able to give up some things that some building principals wouldn’t give up, like for example, I do the master schedule. I don’t know a lot of principals that would give that up. (interview, May 19, 2010)

The administration at each school also shared responsibility with teachers in the development of many of the schools’ organizational structures. Examples among the schools show how teams of teachers were responsible for the development of parts of the master schedule, preparation for and implementation of standardized testing, special events and activities, flexible scheduling for interdisciplinary teams, and student discipline. Providing faculty and staff multiple opportunities to participate in the school organization provides opportunities for teachers to become engaged.

Allan indicated that he likes to be “working on the real work” at John Adams, with his focus primarily on instruction and student learning. By redistributing some of the managerial tasks (albeit important) to others on the administrative team, as well as entrusting building leaders with the analysis of achievement data and the development of plans for improvement, he is able to oversee the organization and provide support to groups as they perform their tasks. It is easy to become bogged down in the multitude of demands placed upon today’s school leader, and that is why distributing leadership to others in the organization has become such an important concept.

Communicating a common vision. The principals in each case demonstrated how keeping a common vision or mission can have an impact on decisions made at all levels. Each building leader reiterated his/her own version of a common mantra—that all decisions should be
measured against their impact on student achievement, teaching and learning, and student interests. It was obvious that the principals said these things often and were serious about their meaning, as it was conveyed by every faculty member interviewed and was apparent at all observed meetings. In reviewing documents for each case, the singular focus on student learning was apparent in faculty handbooks, small group and faculty meeting agendas, and literature distributed to parents and students. The leaders at all schools conveyed the importance of teaching and learning through all avenues of communication.

Each principal indicated that keeping the vision out in front was essential in developing a school climate that was student centered and focused on improvement. It makes the business of schools the central element of every decision. The principal of John Adams believes that one of his most important duties is to continually keep the mission out in front of the school community. When asked to state the John Adams mission, Allan simply replied, “teaching and learning.” Although there is obviously more to this mission the singular importance of the teaching and learning function of the school is not overlooked and was evident in every conversation. Additionally, during Building Leadership Team meetings, I observed teachers and administrators repeatedly referencing the focus of teaching and learning on almost all agenda items.

By fostering this universal language among all faculty members, it allows teacher leaders to operate independently, yet toward a common goal. Teachers all have a common understanding of their roles in the building and a shared purpose for their work. Moving an entire school toward improvement requires all adults to be focused on those goals, and ensuring the entire staff shares a common vision will help to maintain a consistent focus on those goals.
The collaborative and transparent decision-making process that is a cornerstone of the culture of the three case schools is possible largely because all members of the schools share a common vocabulary and understanding about expectations and priorities. All three case schools have a long history of adherence to the middle school concept, including highly collaborative interdisciplinary teams and democratic governance, as advocated in the *Turning Points* documents (CCAD, 1989; Jackson & Davis, 2000). Decisions about school structure, class schedules, and curricular offerings are considered in light of the tenants of the middle school philosophy, in addition to considering their individual merits.

At Cardinal, Mary Anne applies a simple measure to her decision-making approach in addition to the middle school philosophy. The basis of any decision rests on how it affects student learning. This simple principle serves as the underlying argument for most actions at Cardinal. Applied to parents, the success of their children is a common ground between them and the school. They want their students to be successful, and so do the Cardinal faculty, staff, and administration. Mary Anne explained, “Once we all agree that’s where we are all working from, you can move forward. It’s really hard for people to argue because I want the same thing you want. That’s a really easy place for people to go” (interview, February 22, 2010).

During each interview, observation, conversation, and throughout the documents gathered at John Adams, the importance of teaching and learning was clearly expressed. Every teacher articulated that student achievement and teaching and learning in the classroom were Adams’ focus and those topics translated to agenda items in BLT, departmental, and interdisciplinary team meetings. All teachers interviewed shared a common perception of their roles in the building and a shared purpose for their work, and it was clear that everybody was moving in the same direction with goals focused on teaching and learning.
Similarly, at Blue Trail each teacher and administrative team interviewed reiterated the principal’s mantra of “many hands make light work.” With an element of the school’s mission stating that “every teacher is a leader,” it was clear that there was an expectation of shared leadership, of which the faculty was keenly aware. In addition to sharing an understanding of the collaborative leadership present at the school, each teacher interviewed reiterated that a focus on student learning was at the forefront of their charge. George, an 8th grade social studies teacher, shared, “We all have the responsibility to put our students’ understanding and learning in mind with each and every decision we make.”

**Developing structures that support a culture of democratic governance.** The principals in each of the case schools have worked, over time, to develop a culture of shared leadership that allows the faculty multiple venues and opportunities to have significant feedback and input on school-wide decision making. In addition to developing the mechanism for faculty input, the schools also demonstrate an ingrained culture of shared governance. Each case had a formal building leadership team that functioned as a forum to address faculty concerns and as a decision-making body for school-wide decisions. Principals also enlisted an informal group of faculty and staff to serve as an advising “cabinet” that also conveyed information back and forth. Each case demonstrated numerous ways that staff members could be involved in some aspect of building leadership.

Input from the faculty as a whole, and particularly those impacted by proposed changes, was an important part of the decision-making process in all three case schools. Principals utilized a variety of input mechanisms to foster a sense of commitment from teachers, as well as to shape the overall product of the process. All staff members had multiple opportunities to provide feedback to proposals as they flowed from formal leadership groups, to smaller teams, and back
to the principal. This decision-making process also was outlined in each of the case school’s faculty handbooks, describing how all faculty members were provided avenues to openly participate in school-wide decisions and were expected to avail themselves of these opportunities.

Although the principal was respected as the final decision maker in each building, there were significant opportunities for ideas and opinions to be shared before final decisions were made. And although school-wide initiatives often emanated from the building’s administration, many significant initiatives also started from staff. Just as staff members were fully involved in the decision-making process, they also were able to suggest changes that may aid in the school’s mission. This simultaneous “top-down” and “bottom-up” approach fully involved the faculty throughout the process, ensuring the opportunity for each faculty member to be heard and to have a hand in the decisions made that will have an impact on their classrooms. All three principals were regarded as having an “open door” and a willingness to consider changes that were in the schools’ best interest.

Opportunities for input and collaboration put teachers in control of the decision-making process in the building, increase opportunities for input, leading to teacher commitment:

I think that at Blue Trail you have input and a chance to either agree or disagree and share your concerns. I think as a teacher you’re taught, don’t come in and tell them [students] the rules, work together as a community because they’re more likely to be vested in it if you’ve had a piece in making it. I think that can be carried from your classroom into your professional leadership role because you are more . . . when you feel you have been a part of it in some way, shape, or form, you’re more likely to follow it or do what’s being asked than just having somebody tell you what to do. (Sharla, interview, May 27, 2010)

The dialogue that occurs during this collaborative decision-making approach requires discussion in small groups, as opposed to asking for feedback in large faculty meetings. These small-group conversations allow more opportunities for discussion and for multiple perspectives to be shared.
The interdisciplinary team meetings observed at each of the case schools demonstrated how teachers accustomed to working together were able to freely debate issues among themselves, even when there were differing opinions. The close working relationships shared by these teachers seemed to allow an open debate on issues that potentially could have been stifled in larger group settings. The principals at all three case schools agreed that individuals may be unwilling to take a risk by sharing a different or dissenting opinion in a large group, but they may feel comfortable doing so in a smaller setting. Small groups were utilized significantly as a mechanism to allow faculty input and participation in decision making at the time of this study, but two schools still met in full faculty meetings. Blue Trail was the exception, where the principal had moved away from the large-group forums. However, there were plans to reinstate the full faculty meetings for the next school year to address faculty concerns about this practice.

Mary Anne, Cardinal principal, believes that by actively engaging individuals in a variety of contexts, an initiative is more likely to develop a consensus and a coalition of support. She feels that developing a collation of people was imperative to bring significant initiatives to fruition: “You need a lot of buy-in, and not everybody will want to play with you. If you have a large enough of a collation, it won’t matter” (interview, July 5, 2010). Barbara, an 8th grade math teacher at Cardinal, shared how decisions are made as a staff:

When there is a topic at hand . . . something that needs to be decided upon, vary rarely does she just make that decision. It goes to the building council. It goes to the building leaders. It goes to team leaders, and then those persons disseminate and talk to their people, and then they talk about what the best thing would be. They do it together and then they go back to [principal’s name] and say, here’s this perspective and here’s this perspective. I find it as a way for her to try to be well informed of making that decision with input from the staff that’s actually going to be impacted. Everything is decided upon as a staff. (interview, May 19, 2010)

The complexity of today’s school leadership has made it so that effectiveness and collaboration have become synonymous in educational discussions. Because the building
principal cannot provide all the resources necessary to propel a school forward, the entire organization needs to be empowered to become involved in all aspects of school leadership. George explained:

It’s part of [principal’s name]’s philosophy. . . . You will hear him say, “Many hands make light work,” and it is true. Everybody at Blue Trail hears that over and over. It’s the expectation in the building. That’s the way the administrative team functions, and so does the teaching staff. Everybody has different things they are better at, so they use their strengths and help each other. If you asked the kids, they’re not sure who runs the building. Some kids know that [principal’s name] is actually the principal, but they’re not sure, because everybody runs this building. (interview, May 19, 2010)

The degree of teacher involvement in the decision-making process may be directly related to the level of impact of the issue on the school and its faculty. Items that have far-reaching consequences, such as making a switch to a block schedule, would involve many groups, a lengthy planning period, and significant opportunities for staff input, including study groups and dedicated committees to address the issue. Items that were more procedural in nature were handled through electronic communication or as part of a regular short brief in either small-group or faculty meetings. The ability to have regular input in school decision making was regarded as an important aspect of each school’s overall culture and norms, and this form of participatory governance was seen as empowering for faculty members, as well as creating a heightened sense of professionalism and a positive school climate.

The practice of principals engaging teachers in decision making often is an evolutionary process. Many beginning leaders do not have the confidence in themselves, or their staff, to let go of power and decision-making authority inherent with the position of building principal. In many cases, because the principal is ultimately responsible for such decisions, they feel they must hold onto decision-making authority. Allan noted that, in his first years as a principal, “I always thought that I had to solve the problem. It didn’t occur to me that they [the teachers]
could solve the problem, take it and develop an action plan, and fix it” (interview, February 16, 2010). As he gained leadership experience, and due in part to both good and bad decisions, Allan indicated that he gradually learned to relinquish control over building issues and more fully involve building leaders and the staff as a whole:

When I first started, I thought you work alone. You do your own work. You make things happen, and when you wait for everyone else you would be waiting forever. So I always thought it was time to forge ahead and work alone. The longer I did the job, I started to realize that I could rely upon the expertise of my teachers to do some of these tasks. I also realized you can't do it by yourself. (interview, February 16, 2010)

Without engaging staff in collaborative forms of decision making, it may difficult to obtain a sufficient level of commitment for those items that require a considerable shift in some aspect of the school culture or building practices. Even when proposed changes are intended to support improved student achievement, they may be perceived as top-down administrative edicts and may not garner support from the majority of faculty.

**Teachers lead to advance curriculum, professional development, and building management.** In each of the cases, teachers were regarded as the experts in curriculum and played a significant role in the development of school improvement goals and instructional strategies, student performance assessments, and data analysis, as well as professional development. Teachers chosen to lead department or content areas were considered the building “experts” in the given discipline and were often sought out by faculty members for input on curricular and instructional issues. The principals depended upon this collection of in-house curricular experts to shape and guide the teaching and learning in their subject area. Allan noted, “The department coordinators are the liaison between the curriculum office and the building . . . the resident experts on how it is all supposed to work. I can’t know it all and they are the ones who help me” (interview, February 16, 2010).
Principals saw their role as a facilitator in curricular issues, working closely with the subject area leaders to provide the resources needed to move their teachers forward, recognizing that as the leader of a building they could not be an expert in all things. Conversely, the subject leaders looked to the principals to lend support when they needed it—to formalize curricular decisions and to assist with compliance when needed. Teacher leaders found that their roles as peer leaders sometimes led to uncomfortable situations and felt that without administrative responsibilities had limited ability to ensure follow-through. However, these situations may cause teacher leaders to take a more collegial approach to leadership and use their positions to model effective instructional practices. The role of the principal often was seen as a way to provide these curricular leaders with resources, support, and a structure that allowed them to reach out to other teachers.

Across the three cases, teacher leaders were chosen carefully. Each principal described how choosing teachers with the right attributes and interests as leaders was an important part of developing an effective school leadership structure. With a variety of leadership opportunities available, teachers with different backgrounds and experiences were able to act in formal and informal leadership roles. In two cases, a formal leadership team consisted of building leaders with paid stipends, appointed by the principal. In those cases, the district collective bargaining agreement outlined the basic function of those positions, along with a description of the process through which individuals were selected for these roles. In other instances, representatives to building leadership were chosen democratically by the groups they represented. In all cases, teachers who demonstrated passion for their responsibilities were sought out to serve in some leadership capacity.
Once those individuals were identified, leadership opportunities were utilized to “grow” school leaders. Principals created opportunities for individuals to lead that showed potential for growth, and then would provide additional opportunities to “step” them into more significant leadership positions. By identifying individuals in the building who demonstrate a certain level of passion for their respective subject area or team, teachers are introduced to the idea of working with their peers on a variety of different levels. Building principals then will mentor teacher leaders, promoting them into leadership positions and gradually giving them more significant responsibilities. This gradual transition allows for teachers to grow into leadership roles without being thrust into them without the skills or knowledge to be successful.

Teacher leaders led professional development in a variety of contexts. Throughout the cases, examples of teachers leading professional development were a common theme. From organizing and facilitating school improvement workshops at the district level to leading small professional learning communities, teachers are seen as the source of professional development for other teachers in the buildings. I observed a professional development session in Cardinal’s school district, in which a team of Cardinal teachers worked with teachers from across the district on differentiated instructional strategies. The district-wide school improvement day actually utilized dozens of teachers from all grade levels to work with their peers on topics related to their skills and district goals. At Blue Trail and Cardinal, faculty meetings were utilized as an opportunity to break into professional development groups, and building leaders were responsible for planning and leading sessions in those meetings. A review of meeting agendas from the past year showed the regular use of this peer-to-peer professional development.

Teachers attending professional development opportunities away from their buildings were encouraged to “give back” to the community as a whole by presenting information learned.
Although one case utilized external experts during school improvement sessions, teacher leaders were relied upon to implement lessons learned. In one case, teachers who participated in special professional development activities outside of the school then were responsible for implementing regular professional development activities throughout the academic year. Teachers indicated that utilizing the expertise in their buildings as a source of professional development increased their sense of professionalism and contributed to a high level of trust between faculty and administration.

Fundamental to the effective distribution of leadership is having the right people in the organization or “the right people on the bus.” The principals in each of the three cases considered hiring teachers to be the single most important thing they did in the performance of their jobs, and the impact of hiring the right, or wrong, teacher could be felt in a school for years or even decades. Richard indicated that the hiring process is such an important aspect of having a quality school, the act of filling each position with the best candidate is treated with the same sense of urgency. He wants to have experts, but more importantly, they need to be doing it for the right reason.

I want to hear people that are so excited about this business that they just can’t wait to do it. That it’s the most important thing to them, that they want to be teachers more than anything in the world. That they love it, and they’re passionate about it. Those people make great teachers, and leaders. I always ask, why do you want to be a teacher? If they don’t come in here and convince me that they love this business and want to do it more than anything, I’m not interested. (interview, May 20, 2010)

Because of the highly collaborative environment distributed leadership requires, teachers must be able to work with their peers, be respected, and believe in the underlying mission of the school. And while those parameters may be difficult to measure during a job interview, they will most certainly become apparent in the first few years of employment. Those individuals who are not a match for the school, for any of those reasons, should not be retained. And while
encouraging tenured teachers to move onto a different career may be more difficult, it is nonetheless important to do so.

All principals agreed that administrators must not shy away from addressing personnel issues. The effect of a negative or non-performing teacher on a school can be devastating to student achievement, teacher morale, and the ability to effectively distribute leadership throughout the building. Allan explained:

If you have people who are opposed to the mission, or don't believe in what you are doing, those folks are going to stand in your way. If they don't speak up about it, they will be subversive about it. You have to have the right people on the bus, I think. It's critical for building leadership to recognize that, and folks who don't want to be here for the right reasons need to be thinking about doing something else. (interview, April 14, 2010)

An atmosphere of trust aids in developing relationships and empowering faculty.

Organizations that employ a collaborative decision-making process, where teachers are leaders, may only thrive where there is an atmosphere of trust. From a distributed leadership perspective, trust has been found to be a significant factor. The principals in all cases worked with the faculty and staff in their buildings to develop a culture of mutual respect and trust.

Although trust is something that develops over time, principal actions help facilitate this atmosphere. Principals in the three cases projected confidence in their teaching staff and communicated that they trusted them—in their ability to teach, in their interactions with students and parents, and to make decisions that are in the best interests of children. Suzanne, a reading specialist at John Adams, stated that the empowerment that comes from this level of trust lends itself to reaching out with ideas for improvement: “The next thing you know, you are sharing it with two people, and they are sharing it with two people, who are sharing it with two people, and it just spreads through the place like wildfire” (interview, April 14, 2010).
Richard, the principal of Blue Trail indicated that from his perspective, it seemed that creating an atmosphere of trust has encouraged teachers to share ideas and opinions during meetings, become more collaborative with each other in regards to improving their craft, and has enabled the staff as a whole to address more significant issues in a meaningful way:

You have to let them feel like you trust them and that they know something, and that you are not going to bite them when they make a mistake. I think it is hugely important up and down the chain of command. It is important for me to feel that way about the leadership above me. You aren’t going to be thinking outside the box if you feel if you make a mistake it will bite you. Trust is a huge thing. Nobody wants to get up and say an opinion or discuss an idea if they’re going to get beat up or made fun of, or if people will think less of them for doing that. So we have tried to create an atmosphere of trust. I think it starts with me. (interview, May 20, 2010)

Principals practiced an “open door” policy, where teachers are welcomed and encouraged to come in with ideas and issues. Principals were considered fair and understanding by their staff, and teachers believed that if they brought a concern or an idea to the administration, whether directly or through building leadership, their voices would be heard. Principals also conveyed trust in their teaching staff by bringing them big issues to address. By allowing building leadership, and in turn, the entire staff, to work on and solve some of the hard problems, a message of trust is sent to all of those that participate. Marsha, an 8th grade social studies teacher at Cardinal, noted:

There’s very little that happens at the school that the teachers at all levels are not consulted with or have some kind of decision-making power around. Of course, [principal’s name] has the ultimate say. She’ll get the feedback and make the best decision for the group based on that, but there’s . . . I don’t remember any time in my history here having a time where staff wasn’t consulted at every level at some point. (Marsha, interview, May 28, 2010)

Principals who entrust teachers to assist with moving the school forward and solve underlying issues are, in turn, empowering the teaching staff to continue to reach out with ideas for improvement as well as developing and fostering positive relationships with the faculty and staff.
The relationships principals develop among teachers will reap many rewards, including providing a sense of empowerment that can contribute to many elements associated with distributed leadership. Relationship building, developing trust, empowering participation in collaborative decision making, and encouraging participation in leadership activities are all practices that can enable distributed leadership to occur.

**Research Question Two: Distributed Leadership’s Barriers, Challenges, and Strategies**

Research Question 2 was as follows: *What barriers or challenges do principals encounter when attempting to implement distributed leadership practices and what strategies or practices have been put into place to overcome them?* While the intent of this question was to identify specific challenges faced by educational leaders implementing distributed leadership, the findings of this study failed to recognize many specific “challenges.” It should be noted that the actions or strategies discussed in RQ1 may be related to the following findings. Data analysis revealed four themes when considering the barriers and challenges to distributed leadership and the strategies or practices put in place to overcome them, and include: (a) leadership development is an ongoing process, requiring multiple opportunities to “practice” in a safe environment; (b) building principals should surround themselves with good people—experts in their field who can be relied upon and accessed to address issues and areas of improvement; (c) some individuals are more collaborative than others and may require multiple opportunities to become engaged in leadership; and (d) accurate communication can be a challenge when addressing groups through multiple leaders.
**Development of leadership requires a safe environment to evolve.** All principals in this study reported a progression in their leadership and the movement toward a distributed approach, including an eventual understanding that they could not, and should not, do it all. When reflecting on his leadership progression, Allan shared, “[At the beginning of my principalship], every time I would try to make a decision and make something happen on my own, I felt I was always cleaning up the damage afterwards. The longer I did this job, the more I realized you can’t do it by yourself” (interview, February 16, 2010). Richard indicated that the beginning of his leadership experience involved a lot of “knee-jerk,” crisis-based reactions. He reported that a change occurred when he was able to move out of a “firefighting mode” and was actually able to focus and execute a leadership plan:

> You have confidence in yourself as an educator, but I don't know . . . I don't think I was very good at leading by getting out of the way or distributing or sharing what I knew with teachres. I think the progression then was, you have to first realize you have to do this with them, you can't do this to them. (interview, February 16, 2010)

Mary Anne said that by being put into a leadership position at a younger age, and then into a new district, she had to count on people as mentors, resources, and a knowledge base. The collaborative nature of her principalships has encouraged a distributive approach to her leadership.

As with any set of skills, the development of leadership is an evolutionary process. As evidenced in the preceding paragraph, the three principals developed the skills and attributes that led to their distributed approach to leadership over time and were due in part to their own experiences as leaders, both positive and negative. With experiences in education ranging from 25-33 years, the leadership development for these principals has occurred over a significant period of time, with that development being as varied as the individuals themselves. What they

---

3 The context of this theme applies to both the school principal and the faculty in their schools.
have in common is their realization that the role of the principal was to engage the expertise that existed in their own faculties and to utilize that expertise to address school-wide issues and decisions. To help facilitate this faculty engagement, each principal takes care to model a collaborative leadership style for their teachers.

When the principals were asked if they had past or current leaders after which they modeled their leadership styles, their responses differed. Although each principal indicated that they had a mentor early in their principalships, a distributed approach to leadership was not always what was modeled:

There are lots of people I’ve watched and learned from, and even those who have a more direct style. I have noticed that if it’s not working for them, it’s a teaching point for me. I say, why is that campus struggling right now? (Mary Anne, interview, February 22, 2010)

I am sad to say, that in several situations it's what NOT to do. It occurred to me that when I get into the saddle, that is what I won't do. (Allan, interview, February 16, 2010)

However, Richard indicated that he has been able to emulate some of the administrative techniques used in his district office:

We have a [monthly] curriculum meeting and we are small enough to include everybody that is an administrator in the district, and it’s very collaborative in nature. Our assistant superintendent puts an agenda up and everybody has a chance for input. I think when you look at that, it’s certainly from the district level, not an autocratic model. I guess it models from the district on down. (interview, February 16, 2010)

Just as the principals have had their leadership develop over time, they all indicated the importance of allowing opportunities for their faculty to develop leadership skills incrementally. Richard indicated that it was important for teachers to have opportunities to practice leadership, where they can make mistakes and learn from them. He asserted that everybody can succeed if given the opportunity to practice in safety:

Just like in a classroom. . . . You’ve seen this. If a student’s comment is belittled or the other kids laughed at what was said, what do you learn? To shut up and be quiet? It’s not
a good environment for learning and I think the same is true with leadership. You have to let people take risks and accept that not everything is going to work perfectly. It’s a growth process. You model that. (interview, April 14, 2010)

The principals in this study encouraged the teachers in their schools to take on leadership roles but also created a safe environment to practice their leadership. One aspect of this safety is enabling teachers to take risks, with an understanding that not everything will work perfectly. The development of leadership skills involves opportunity, mentoring, and reflection, as well as an environment in which individuals feel empowered enough to take risks and accept leadership responsibilities.

**Principals surround themselves with experts to address improvement.** Becoming a collaborative leader and distributing leadership throughout an organization requires a variety of factors to be acting in concert, including trust and confidence. Principals need confidence in themselves, as well as their staff, to step away from responsibilities that have traditionally rested with the principal and trust in others to perform these functions. One of the most significant factors in principals’ ability to develop confidence and trust in their staff lies in the quality of the staff itself.

All three principals considered the hiring of staff to be fundamentally important to their organizations. By hiring good people, and continually working to further develop their skills, principals can effectively set the stage for a distributed environment. Allan made a comparison to Ronald Reagan’s leadership style when asked about the importance of surrounding yourself with good people:

Jimmy Carter would get up at 5:00am and stay up until midnight, trying to read, know, and stay on top of everything. When Ronald Regan came on board he told the aides to never wake him or bother him before 9:00 am . . . and they said, “How can you manage the government working like that?” He said, “I go out and get the smartest, brightest people I can find, I give them their mission, and then I get out of their way.” So, I try to do that. I try to find the best and the brightest people who will carry the ball, I let them
know what I want them to do, and then get out of their way and let them do it. (interview, May 20, 2010)

All three principals regarded their staff as experts and relied upon them to lead school-wide efforts at improvement, staff development, and many other initiatives. Blue Trail’s principal indicated that recent discussion about Race to the Top\(^4\) and the use of test scores, other than the State test, as part of schools’ evaluation have caused him to see PLCs as an integral part in the development of that data, utilizing the teachers in those groups as the resident experts in those areas:

There’s no way a principal can. . . . Okay I’m going to create the PE test, I’m going to create the drama test. . . . Somebody is going to have to step up and say, “here’s what I think our students should have by the end of this class, and have a pre- and post-test. (Richard, interview, May 20, 2010)

The expectation of teachers acting as experts also is identified by the teachers in the case schools. At Cardinal, Jessica, a 7\(^{th}\) grade ELA teacher, said that along with teacher expertise was the responsibility to share it with peers: “There’s some area that you know. I think it’s a responsibility then to share that with other people and make sure that everybody is equipped with that knowledge so we can all be successful” (interview, May 27, 2010).

Just as important as finding the right people to work within an organization is working with those who are not a fit for the organization. Individuals who are opposed to the mission or don’t believe in what the principal is doing may become an obstacle. For many reasons, principals should not shy away from addressing faculty members who are acting in opposition to the central mission of the school. All principals in this study agreed that leaders cannot spend inordinate amounts of time and energy trying to change individuals who do not align to the

---

\(^4\) Race to the Top is a program funded by the Department of Education designed to spur reforms in state and local education. At the time of this study, Illinois was preparing an application for funding under this program by proposing a number of professional development initiatives designed to improve outcomes for students.
school’s mission—they most likely will not change. Efforts should be directed toward encouraging those individuals to consider another profession.

**Multiple opportunities allow more to engage in leadership roles.** The principals in this study have shown that in their schools, developing a collaborative environment in which faculty and staff interact regularly in small groups is an important component of being able to distribute leadership across the organization. This organizational structure requires teachers to function as part of multiple groups, represented in this study by interdisciplinary teams, subject areas, grade levels, professional learning communities, and other committees and professional development groups. However, not all teachers are necessarily comfortable or ready to fully engage in these groups. Two principals noted that engaging a more experienced faculty in collaborative work had been challenging, and that some of the more veteran teachers were “set in their ways.” As staff members are hired and become part of a building’s faculty, a collaborative approach may be more easily instilled, as the new teachers can be mentored with this philosophy in the formative stages of their development.

However, even for those teachers who may be less willing to speak and participate in a group setting, providing an organizational structure that utilizes small groups or teams will force individuals to participate to some degree. And although teachers may not be able to select the teams on which they participate (but some organizations will allow teachers to self-select professional development strands, committees, and other groups), by providing multiple opportunities for teachers to become engaged in small groups they will have one, two, three, or four chances to become engaged in the collaborative environment and decision-making process of the school, as opposed to one or no opportunities to become engaged.
Those leadership opportunities may not necessarily lie in an individual’s area of expertise. Richard utilizes these occasions to have teachers and administrators alike work in their zone of proximal development, where they may have to stretch and are out of their area of comfort, but do experience growth:

One of the things we have come up with for next year, administratively for instance is not necessarily putting people in their greatest area of comfort. Like, [administrator’s name], who was in here before. . . . He would be very good with the special ed. component because he has been dealing with that for a long time now. Well, we might put him in the curriculum component because that is his weakest area and he needs to build capacity in that area, and he is okay with it. That is what we are kind of talking through. Does it go against any of his weaknesses? Is it an area where he can learn more? (interview, April 14, 2010)

It is important to note that these statements are not intended to indicate that older, more experienced teachers are less capable or likely to embrace a collaborative working environment, but each of the principals in the study indicated that it was an issue at their buildings with some of their teachers.

A variety of leadership may make accurate communication a challenge. In a school utilizing distributed leadership, faculty members are participating in groups and communicating with building leaders, in addition to the principal. These building leaders are providing information, directions, and leading discussion on items that originate from a singular source—often the principal or building administration. In some cases, several leaders will be heading similar groups (interdisciplinary team leaders, for example), each relaying what is intended to be the same message or concept. However, just as the childhood game of “telephone” demonstrates, even with the best intentions, different groups may end up with variations of the original message. In buildings in which an administrative team is communicating a vision, it is possible for multiple leaders with varied styles and personalities to communicate an issue differently, even if they intend to have a common vision and message.
A positive aspect of utilizing a variety of leaders to communicate issues is that it may provide options for teachers to engage in more in-depth conversations with an individual in which they may have more rapport. However, the same message may be confusing when teachers speak with their peers, who received information from someone else. Although it may be efficient and helpful to have multiple leaders convey important information, the message may not be delivered with one voice or from a unified perspective.

In all three schools, communication between groups resembled a chain. In core groups, such as the interdisciplinary teams, different team members would be responsible for gathering and passing on information from various committees and efforts. Though this communication chain was not described as problematic in the case schools, the potential for breakdowns are real, with many individuals being responsible for a successful line of communication. Care should be taken to ensure that effective and open lines of communication are in place for all groups.

All principals in this study utilized smaller groups, in addition to or in place of large-group faculty meetings, for the purpose of disseminating information. One school had eliminated the large faculty meetings completely, and the other two had revised their focus to be more on professional development, dedicating a short time at the beginning for delivering information. Principals utilized electronic mail to pass on information to the whole school, but the real value in collaborative environments is in the discussion around issues.

In the case of Blue Trail, the principal actually had moved away from large faculty meetings almost entirely in an effort to encourage dialogue within small-group settings. However, after two years of this practice, the Blue Trail faculty successfully lobbied to have the whole-faculty meetings reinstated. Teachers consistently reported that communication as a whole seemed to suffer without the opportunity to meet in large groups. And although teachers valued
the small-group venue for dialogue, they saw the large-group meetings as a way to ensure a consistent message was shared with the entire faculty—which was something that did not always occur through the small groups.

Care must be taken to ensure that the leaders of smaller groups have an accurate understanding of the issues being discussed. This concern appeared to be most prevalent in the case school that had eliminated faculty meetings entirely. Many teachers in that school voiced a desire for a venue in which they would all be hearing the same thing, at the same time. One principal reiterated the need to continually speak to the mission of the school and that he was not doing his job if teachers did not understand what it was that was expected of them. However, with the multitude of initiatives, goals, and issues that are attended to in today’s schools, it may not be possible for the principal to continually reiterate all the information that needs to be disseminated to teachers.

**Research Question Three: Influence of Teaming on Distributed Leadership**

Research Question 3 was as follows: *How does the presence, or absence, of interdisciplinary teaming facilitate distributed leadership practices in middle level schools?* Data analysis revealed two underlying themes when considering how interdisciplinary teeming influenced distributed leadership in the case schools, and includes: (a) team leaders serve in a formal, school-wide leadership capacity where interdisciplinary teams are used as a platform for school-wide decision making; and (b) the collaborative nature of the middle school may support an organizational structure designed to capitalize on distributed leadership.

**Interdisciplinary teams are a platform for school-wide decision making.** In all three schools in this study, the designated leaders of interdisciplinary teams also served in a formal
building-wide leadership capacity. In addition to their role of helping to coordinate the teaching and learning functions of the interdisciplinary team, team leaders were part of a greater school-wide leadership group (building leadership team or building council) and were an important link between the schools’ administration and the teaching staff as a whole.

In a distributed leadership environment, the team leaders are poised to take on additional school-wide responsibilities and serve as links in a chain of communication that involves teachers in collaborative forms of decision making. Although building leadership groups served a variety of functions in this study, in all cases they provided opportunities for staff members to participate in the decision-making process. Document analysis of meeting agendas, meeting minutes, and handbooks revealed continual references to this process. Principals in each case went to great lengths to inform teachers and provide access to input mechanisms throughout the decision-making process, and the building leadership groups and team leaders served an important role in this process. Building Leadership Team and cabinet meetings observed at each of the case schools confirmed how teacher leaders acted as a conduit for this communication, sharing input and concerns from faculty. An 8th grade team leader at John Adams, James, indicated that he saw his role as team leader to be an important part of school decision making and communication: “All of the teams and individual teachers at John Adams have opportunities to have their ideas and opinions heard. The team leader not only facilitates conversation about those issues, but communicates them so the building leadership can respond” (interview, May 19, 2010).

At Blue Trail, each member of the interdisciplinary teams served as a representative to one of the school’s standing committees. These committees include the Building Leadership Team, which has each designated team leader serving as a representative. After the committees
meet every week, each team member shares the details with his/her group, allowing for small
group discussion, which can be relayed back by the team’s committee member.

At Cardinal, the team leaders are part of the Building Council. As members of this group, the
leaders serve as one of the building’s means to facilitate communication, provide feedback
on school issues, and allow teachers to participate in school-wide decision making. All major
initiatives and issues that will have a significant impact on the school are approved by the BLT
before being implemented. This deeply ingrained commitment to teacher involvement in school-
wide decision making has created a strong sense of empowerment among the faculty, as well as a
strong sense of commitment to the most complex and controversial decisions.

Although each school in this study implemented multiple means and groups to facilitate
communication and school-wide decision making, the use of interdisciplinary teams provides
teachers with long-term, meaningful, small-group discussion and dialogue with a group of peers.
It is likely the teachers on a given team have developed a comfortable working relationship and
are comfortable speaking candidly to each other. Team meetings observed at each of the case
schools demonstrated how team members were able to debate issues and share ideas with one
other in a respectful manner. Because each school in this study utilizes a dedicated team planning
period, most interdisciplinary team teachers interact in a meeting setting regularly, and their
classrooms are in close proximity. All of these factors provide opportunities for teachers to
engage in regular, candid conversations about the issues they are presented, as well as creating a
“safe” atmosphere for teachers to share opinions and concerns.

The dialogue that occurs during a collaborative decision-making approach requires
discussion in small groups, as opposed to simply asking for feedback in large faculty meetings.
In the interdisciplinary teams, the small-group conversations are intimate and allow more
opportunities for discussion and for multiple perspectives to be shared. Individuals may be unwilling to take a risk by sharing a different or dissenting opinion in a large group, but they may feel comfortable doing so in a smaller setting. The principal of Cardinal, Mary Anne, believes that by actively engaging individuals in a variety of contexts, an initiative is more likely to develop a consensus and a coalition of support. She feels that developing a collation of people was imperative to bring significant initiatives to fruition: “You need a lot of buy-in, and not everybody will want to play with you. If you have a large enough of a collation, it won’t matter” (interview, May 28, 2010).

The highly collaborative nature of interdisciplinary teams provides a natural forum for discussion on building topics, and creates a mechanism where issues can be relayed, discussed, debated, and communicated back to the building administration in an environment that empowers teachers to participate in school-wide decision making. In all cases, the interdisciplinary teams served as discussion groups for building initiatives passed on from the building leadership teams. After team leaders and other building leaders would discuss issues at BLT, the discussion then would occur in smaller groups in the interdisciplinary teams, facilitated by the team leaders. The intent of this organizational structure to utilize the small group to ensure group members are able to openly discuss items. However, the downside of this strategy becomes apparent if a team has one or two strong negative individuals. Other team members may be less willing to discuss topics for which they may have a dissenting view in the presence of a strong negative personality.

**Middle schools may support an organizational structure for distributed leadership.**

The collaboration of interdisciplinary teams is a hallmark of the middle school philosophy and provides much of the context for middle school culture, including a shared sense of
responsibility, which further supports a collaborative approach to decision making. Interdisciplinary team members collaborate regularly on many issues, including students, families, curriculum, and cross-content themes or projects, and, in each of this study’s cases, met regularly during the school day for designated team planning. Tammy, a gifted ELA teacher at Cardinal noted, “The middle school lends itself to collaboration. We collaborate about the kids. We collaborate about everything. The model lends itself to collaborative decision making” (interview, May 27, 2010). Because of this deeply ingrained culture of collaboration, it may be more likely in a middle school context for an organizational structure to be developed that capitalizes on a distributed form of leadership.

Organizational structures that are developed to ensure all faculty members are informed, have equal and frequent access to decision making, and play active roles in positively influencing student learning are well suited for a distributed leadership framework. The schools in this study incorporated multiple groups and organizations that enabled teachers to participate in the decision-making process and engaged a variety of individuals in leadership roles in those groups. Because of the varied and multiple opportunities for teachers to become engaged in leadership in the case schools, teachers regularly participated in activities that had the potential to increase commitment to school initiatives, as well as becoming engaged in the overall mission of the school. Diane, one of Blue Trail’s assistant principals, noted where successful teacher participation in Professional Learning Communities was attributed to the collaborative nature of the middle school.

I do think the smaller learning communities allow teachers to put your guard down a little bit, listening to other people’s ideas, and getting rid of the 20 one room schoolhouses in the building. I don’t want to say that it’s just [emphasis added] the middle school, but it’s having the small groups being collaborative at the grade level. What I think is really exciting is that we are actually having some professional dialogue now instead of just complaining and placing the blame of why Johnny can’t read on somebody else or on the
home life. It’s not about blaming somebody else for what their students can or cannot do, but how do we move them forward. I think this whole thing has caused that professional dialogue. I’m not sure if everyone’s instruction has improved but I think it’s moving that way. At least we have an awareness piece. People are having the dialogue and then there are people that are actually, truly changing. (interview, May 19, 2010)

Summary of Findings

The overarching research question for this study addressed how successful middle level principals utilize distributed leadership practices within their schools? The study illustrates the interwoven nature of schools and educational leadership, with themes from each of the ancillary questions blending among them, becoming factors in more than one area. The principals in this study each demonstrate how, over time, they involved teachers in a highly integrated system of engagement in school-wide decision making and staff development, where the overall school mission of teaching and learning was at the forefront. Principals communicated with their entire faculty through a series of groups that engaged teachers and allowed multiple opportunities for participation. These groups included the use of interdisciplinary teams, with those teams playing a significant role in each of the case schools’ distributed model, offering ready-made, highly collaborative groups for the faculty to participate in school governance.

Data analysis revealed five themes when considering the actions and activities taken by the principals in this study that may facilitate a distributed form of leadership, including: (a) the development of organizational structures that cause all faculty and staff to engage in multiple groups and allow tasks to be distributed; (b) communicating a common vision for student learning; (c) developing structures and cultures that engage faculty and staff in democratic governance; (d) engaging teachers as leaders to advance curricular goals, professional
development, and building management; and (e) developing an atmosphere of trust, building positive relationships, and empowering faculty and staff to address significant issues.

When considering the barriers and challenges to distributed leadership and the strategies or practices put in place to overcome them, data analysis revealed four themes in this study that include: (a) leadership development is an ongoing process, requiring multiple opportunities to “practice” in a safe environment; (b) building principals should surround themselves with good people—experts in their field who can be relied upon and accessed to address issues and areas of improvement; (c) some individuals are more collaborative than others and may require multiple opportunities to become engaged in leadership; and (d) accurate communication can be a challenge when addressing groups through multiple leaders.

The final research question focused on how interdisciplinary teaming influenced distributed leadership in the case schools, and data analysis revealed two underlying themes in this study, including how (a) team leaders serve in a formal, school-wide leadership capacity where interdisciplinary teams are used as a platform for school-wide decision making; and (b) the collaborative nature of the middle school may support an organizational structure designed to capitalize on distributed leadership.
Chapter Six

Summary, Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations

This chapter presents a summary of the research study, which includes the statement of the problem, a description of the methodology, and the major findings. In addition, the research questions are explored, providing the context to interpret the findings. Limitations of this study are provided to assist the reader in understanding and interpreting the results. A discussion of the results provides possible explanations for the findings, as well as implications of the study. The chapter concludes with recommendations for further research.

Summary of the Problem Statement and Methodology

The purpose of this study was to examine the leadership practices of principals in selected successful middle level schools, focusing on instances or principles of distributed leadership practices. Today’s school leadership functions in an era of accountability, with school principals having many complex and varied job responsibilities. Providing leadership for learning in this landscape requires a collaborative effort, involving all members of the learning community. Consequently, many schools are adopting a distributed leadership approach to address this issue. Although there is a notable lack of empirical research related to distributed leadership practices in middle level schools, those schools that have implemented the research-based characteristics of the middle school philosophy may be well suited for the adoption of a distributed form of leadership.

This qualitative inquiry was a comparative multiple-case study of the leadership in three public middle level schools in Illinois. The purposeful sample for this study was determined by a combination of referral and snowball sampling, with the goal being to identify middle level
principals who have demonstrated effectiveness in their roles as learning leaders and exercise some degree of distributed leadership practices. Schools in the sample were considered academically successful by an examination of trend data from the state achievement test.

Site visits were made to each participating school on three separate occasions during the first half of 2010. Eight meetings were observed and 29 interviews were conducted between January and July 2010. The subjects included three principals, each interviewed on three different occasions, three assistant principals, and 10 teachers, including one subject area coach. A variety of data sources were used, including interviews with principals and teacher leaders, field notes from meeting observations, and document analysis. During each visit, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the principal and other faculty members identified as holding key leadership within the school.

After the first visit, interviews followed semi-structured formats and were constructed to follow up and expand upon emergent themes that developed during previous interviews. Field notes were taken from the observation of meetings and events that had the potential to demonstrate distributed leadership practices, such as building leadership and interdisciplinary team meetings. Finally, documents were gathered throughout the semester and used to verify perceptions or claims from interviews and shed light on events from different points of view. The use of multiple data sources permitted triangulation and the ability to consider subjects from multiple views. An inductive, thematic analysis of interview, observation, and artifact data was conducted, with the goal of presenting an accurate description of participants’ experiences.

This study examined the following overarching question: How do successful middle level principals utilize distributed leadership practices within their schools? Three ancillary questions for the study were:
1. What actions or activities of the principal help to facilitate distributed leadership practices?

2. What barriers or challenges do principals encounter when attempting to implement distributed leadership practices, and what formal and informal strategies or practices have been put into place to overcome those barriers and challenges?

3. How does the presence of interdisciplinary teaming influence distributed leadership practices in middle level schools?

Findings

The findings from this study are detailed in this section.

Research Question 1: What actions or activities of the principal help to facilitate distributed leadership practices? The findings from interviews, observations, and document review showed that the distribution of leadership, in these cases, is often an evolutionary process, requiring significant levels of trust from all parties. In order to successfully utilize a school’s faculty for leadership, organizational structures have to be developed that permit the schools’ faculty and staff to be engaged in multiple groups, letting tasks be distributed and permitting democratic governance of the school. Findings also demonstrated how the development and communication of a common vision for student learning was important. In each of the cases, all decisions were weighed against the impact on student learning, and it was clear that was the mission of the organization. Teachers were regarded as experts and were engaged as leaders to advance curricular goals, professional development, and building management. Most importantly, each school had developed a culture and an atmosphere of trust, with the school leaders building positive relationships that empowered faculty and staff to address significant issues.
Research Question 2: What barriers or challenges do principals encounter when attempting to implement distributed leadership practices and what strategies or practices have been put into place to overcome them? Findings revealed that the three principals continually provided opportunities for their faculty to assume leadership roles, allowing multiple opportunities and a safe environment to practice leadership skills. Because not all people embrace collaborative work with the same degree of enthusiasm, it was important to provide numerous opportunities for leadership participation, allowing those less inclined to participate a variety of opportunities to engage in leadership activities. And while a distributed form of leadership has helped each of the study’s schools to be successful, accurate communication may be a challenge when addressing groups through multiple leaders.

The principals in the study all regarded the hiring of staff to be their most important responsibility. The staff in their buildings were regarded as the organizations’ greatest strength, and by surrounding themselves with experts in their fields, each principal was able to rely upon them to address issues and areas associated with school improvement. However, these school leaders indicated it was equally important to continually work with those individuals who were not a fit for the organization. Those that were not inclined to align with the vision for the school were addressed directly, and in some cases encouraged to consider a change in careers.

Research Question 3: How does the presence, or absence, of interdisciplinary teaming facilitate distributed leadership practices in middle level schools? Each of the three case schools embodied the middle school philosophy, and each had interdisciplinary teams at the core of their organizational structure. The principals in this study utilized the leaders of the interdisciplinary teams as formal school leaders. Team leaders served on a variety of school-wide committees that were platforms for school-wide decision making. Each of the case schools
demonstrated collaborative work among teachers, with interdisciplinary team work, and alignment throughout subject areas and grade levels. The collaborative nature of the middle school may support an organizational structure designed to capitalize on distributed leadership.

Limitations

The following limitations were present in this study:

1. The subjects included in this purposive sample may not have been representative of the entire population and also may have introduced unknown bias into their responses. Therefore, the findings may not be generalized to the entire population of schools meeting the criteria for inclusion in this study.

2. This study was based on a single means of investigating distributed leadership in middle level schools. Therefore, these findings may not have precisely reflected the current situation in all public schools.

3. The presence of interdisciplinary teams and their characteristics was used as an indicator of schools’ adherence to the middle school concept. Although teaming represents a “signature practice” of the middle school concept, it may be implemented with varying degrees of school commitment and effectiveness. Schools with high levels of teaming implementation and fidelity may not necessarily adhere to other aspects of the middle school concept. It may also be possible to implement other aspects of the middle school concept and Turning Points recommendations while not implementing teaming practices.

4. Case study sites were identified through recommendations made by representatives of multiple statewide organizations familiar with leaders of middle level schools, as well as by snowball sampling techniques from nominated subjects. These methods may not have comprehensively identified all middle level principals within the state of Illinois who exercise the most extensive levels of distributed leadership practices.

5. This study was limited to the information acquired from a review of the literature, data gathered through interviews, observation, and artifact review.

6. The results were limited in accuracy to the reported perceptions of the respondents.
Discussion

In the wake of the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB, 2002) and the current era of high-stakes accountability in schools, the considerable demands to show continuous gains in student achievement have caused the public school principalship to become quite multifaceted and challenging (Grubb & Flessa, 2006; Murphy, 1991; Whitaker, 1998). These demands have added such complexity to school leadership positions that the idea of the principal acting as a sole heroic leader has become obsolete (Barth, 2001; Lashway, 2003; Timperley, 2005). Although past research has demonstrated that the role of the principal has been shown to be a significant factor in a school’s programmatic change and instructional improvement (Camburn, Rowan, & Taylor, 2003; Harris, 2005), current research in educational leadership suggests a reconceptualization of school organizational structures, shifting away from traditional, hierarchical models and embracing the practice of distributed leadership (Elmore, 1999b; Gronn, 2000; Smylie et al., 2007; Spillane et al., 2003; Spillane et al., 2001). Although forms of distributed leadership are becoming a common expectation of today’s school leaders (CCAD, 1989; CCSSO, 2008; Jackson & Davis, 2000), few studies specifically address middle school principals and the issues faced by those who educate emerging adolescents.

This study has identified a number of themes that help to address the question of how successful middle level principals utilize distributed leadership practices within their schools. Understanding how middle level leaders can successfully implement a shared form of leadership, and how interdisciplinary teaming may be a factor in such an organizational structure, will allow middle level proponents to design policy, leadership and teacher preparation programs, and staff development initiatives that support distributed leadership in middle level schools.
This study intends to improve the understanding of how distributed leadership practices can be facilitated successfully in middle level schools. In addition, I sought to understand the strategies principals utilize to negotiate through barriers and challenges that may restrict the implementation of these practices. The three case schools examined in this study all embody elements key to the middle school philosophy, show high levels of student achievement, have had a leader in place for at least eight years who has demonstrated the willingness and ability to distribute leadership across multiple individuals in their organization, and demonstrate that distributed leadership is a practice in which some successful middle level principals in Illinois are engaged.

This study shows how a variety of interwoven elements can help to provide an atmosphere in which middle school teachers can participate openly in a highly collaborative form of decision making, and how providing an organizational structure to facilitate this process can allow for leadership to be distributed across the school. The study also shows how the three case schools capitalized on interdisciplinary teams and the collaborative nature of middle schools to support a distributed approach to leadership.

Some elements identified in this study as being supportive of distributed leadership in middle level schools may mirror other discussions on good leadership, yet hinge on the building principal’s desire and willingness to forego power and control of decision making and place much of it in the hands of their teachers. The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP, 2006) asserts that the principal should provide leadership by building and maintaining a vision, direction, and focus for student learning but also maintains that the principal of a school should never act alone. NASSP recommends that all schools establish a
governing council for key decisions to promote student learning and an atmosphere of participation, responsibility, and ownership.

Though it may be possible to distribute leadership without engaging faculty in collaborative decision making, the principals in this study used the collaborative nature of middle schools to engage their faculty members in the decision-making process of the school, create an organizational structure that utilized teachers as leaders, and empower those leaders to carry out tasks in support of the schools’ mission. At the heart of this process lay elements key to the nature of middle schools and that are paramount to engaging a diverse group of individuals, including the development of trust and relationships.

The principals of each of the case schools genuinely made efforts to engage their faculty in high levels of collaborative decision making. The commitment to engaging teachers as leaders in their organization has created schools with high levels of professionalism, engagement, and commitment to the central mission—teaching and learning. Teachers described their schools as engaging, fun places to work, where they were valued for their efforts. The list of accolades received by any of the schools in the study is impressive and is a testament to the level of commitment from those schools’ entire faculty and staff. In many ways, the distributed forms of leadership observed in this study emulate the student-centered classroom and collaborative elements that embody the middle school concept (CCAD, 1990; Erb, 2001; Jackson & Davis, 2000; NMSA, 1995).

By capitalizing on the collaborative nature of middle schools, leaders may be able to implement a distributed framework of leadership that embraces the cooperation observed on so many levels in those schools. An adherence to the middle school concept will likely indicate the presence of interdisciplinary teams (Alt & Choy, 2001; Hackmann et al., 2002; McEwin et al.,
and also may provide a strong scaffold to support collaboration, professional learning communities, and distributed leadership practices among team members and throughout the school (Scribner et al., 2007; Valentine et al., 2004). With teachers continually collaborating on issues related to their students and curriculum, they may be well suited to continue this collaboration on building-wide issues. Utilizing their existing teams as the vehicle for small-group discussion in the school-wide decision-making process may provide an additional outlet for an already established and functional group within the school. The schools in this study also capitalized on the middle school philosophy’s participatory nature by implementing a variety of groups and teams, which all have the potential for teacher leadership and may further engage teachers in the overall mission of the school (CCAD, 1990; Erb, 2001; Jackson & Davis, 2000; NMSA, 1995).

A number of common themes were found across each of the research questions. The use of small groups and their leadership was the most significant, with 11 of the study’s themes being related to this category. The principals in this study each took advantage of the highly collaborative nature of middle schools in the development of their organizational structures, planning for a distributed model of leadership throughout the school. The middle school concept advocates leadership structures that encourage small learning communities and opportunities for teachers to accept and demonstrate leadership among their peers and within their buildings (CCAD, 1989; Jackson & Davis, 2000; NASSP, 2006; NMSA, 1995). Fundamentally important to this organizational strategy is the significant involvement of interdisciplinary teams in many of the school’s functions. Interdisciplinary teams represented an important element in each if the case schools’ organizational structures. Building on the collaboration that is paramount to middle school interdisciplinary teams, the principals utilized their teams as a means to engage the
faculty in collaborative, school-wide decision making. In each case, the designated team leaders served as members of the school’s building leadership team (BLT) and as part of that role communicated information back to the team from the BLT meetings. An iterative, two-way communication between the interdisciplinary teams and the leadership teams enabled teachers to have an opportunity to engage in the decision-making process, providing feedback and having it relayed to the building leadership.

In an organization in which power is shared, decisions jointly made can only occur within a climate of trust. Smylie et al. (2007) found that the level of trust in an organization was related to how distributed leadership was perceived and how well it was accepted. The principals in this study worked with their respective faculty to develop a culture of mutual respect and trust, communicating trust in their ability to teach and make decisions in the best interest of children, as well as trust in their ability to take on and solve the questions, issues, and problems faced by the schools.

In addition to having teacher participation in decision making, this process empowers teachers to become engaged in the school, take on leadership roles, and foster a sense of commitment toward the issues addressed. Equally important to trust is the importance of relationships, a cornerstone of distributed leadership (Gronn, 2002; Harris, 2005) as well as the middle school philosophy (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Relationships between teachers and with administration may strengthen trust, empower teachers to participate in collaborative processes, and encourage participation in leadership opportunities.

Woven into the case schools’ culture of trust and respect is how teachers were regarded as experts in their curricular areas. Although each of the study’s principals are considered instructional leaders, they have recognized that given the complexity of today’s school
leadership, they need to rely upon curricular expertise from others to assist with the myriad of tasks needed to ensure all students are successful. By assigning teachers these tasks, they communicated confidence and trust in their abilities, as well as effectively distributing the leadership for professional development, data analysis, and curriculum related school improvement. Empowering teachers to assume these roles creates faculty who are more fully engaged in the school, are invested in their own learning and that of their students, and provides important leadership opportunities for teacher leaders, building the leadership capacity of the school (Blase & Blase, 1999; Davis & Wilson, 2000).

Elmore (2000) noted that the primary concept of distributed leadership is that the complex nature of instructional practice requires individuals to function in networks of shared and complementary expertise, rather than in a traditional bureaucratic structure with a hierarchical division of labor. The principals in this study developed organizational structures in their schools that effectively engaged all faculty members in such networks, where teachers participated in interdisciplinary teams, departmental or content area groups, grade levels, and smaller or professional learning communities. The groups utilized in each of the study’s schools served a task-specific purpose, but also had several underlying functions. Each of the groups provided avenues for the communication of building-wide issues and offered opportunities for discussion and a mechanism to provide feedback. The small groups also presented opportunities for faculty members to practice and develop leadership skills. The use of teachers and other faculty in multiple leadership positions mirrors the “leader-plus aspect” described by Spillane (2006), where the importance of other individuals is recognized as an important part of the leadership process.
Educational research recognizes that managing and leading schools involves a net of individuals beyond those in formal leadership roles (Elmore, 2000; Frost, 2005; Spillane & Diamond, 2007), and empirical evidence shows the importance of incorporating teachers’ expertise in school leadership practices (Heller & Firestone, 1995; Marzano, 2003). In this study, each of the schools drew from a diverse group of faculty to fill many school leadership positions. In each building, teachers were recruited as leaders because of their skills and expertise. However, in some instances, leadership positions were provided to teachers with little experience or interest, enabling those teachers to develop as leaders and gain an additional, valuable leadership perspective.

Aiding teachers in their leadership efforts, each of the schools in the study demonstrated a commonly understood central vision associated with the importance of teaching and learning. Keeping the vision in the foreground was seen by each building principal as an essential aspect of developing a school climate that was student centered and focused on continual improvement. The importance of communicating a common vision is well documented in the literature concerning instructional leadership (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Heck & Hallinger, 2009; Marks & Printy, 2003; May & Supovitz; 2010). A leader’s efforts to develop a shared vision have been described as “bonding” by Sergiovanni (1990), in that leader and followers with a shared set of values and commitment “bond them together in a common cause” (p. 23) in order to meet a common goal.

Murphy (1988b) stressed the need for the development of a shared vision. “It is rare to see a clearly defined vision articulated by a leader at the top of the hierarchy and then installed by followers” (p. 656). The vision of a school or district, developed collaboratively or initiated by the leader and agreed to by the followers, becomes the common ground, the shared vision that
compels all involved to realize the vision. “Vision comes alive only when it is shared” (Westley & Mintzberg, 2007, p. 21). The common visions for student learning and improvement shared by the schools in this study, while often touted by the building principals, were developed in conjunction with each school’s respective faculty and were not the product of a single leader.

Collins (2001) researched over 1,000 companies to identify what makes some stand out consistently over time. He found that none of them had a single, visionary leader at the helm. They instead had strong teams comprised of people who fit well in the company. Those teams set the vision and those teams executed with passion on that vision. The company mentality was to get the right team members assembled or “on the bus.” They then worked at getting people into the roles where they performed best. Getting the best people they could was a consistent theme across these companies. Just as important was eliminating people who were not good fits.

Just as having quality employees is a fundamental part of developing a highly functioning company, the quality of classroom instruction and a school’s teacher leadership will be determined by individuals who are part of the faculty, so careful consideration should be made with each new hiring decision. Each of the principals in this study regarded the hiring of teachers as one of the most significant aspects of their job. The principal of John Adams used the analogy of “getting the right people on the bus” continually, and made no qualms about the importance of not only finding the right people to hire but also taking on staff members who proved to be poor fit for the organization. Individuals who are not in agreement with the school’s mission should be encouraged to go elsewhere or removed through the school district’s dismissal procedures.

Though it could be helpful to develop a guide book or a list of items needed to facilitate distributed leadership, the results of this study show that quite a few of the factors identified act in concert with one another and may just be “good leadership.” Building positive relationships,
developing an atmosphere of trust, communicating a vision, and filling the organization with good people could be listed in a management book anywhere, not just for middle level schools. Although some researchers have indicated distributed leadership practices may have a positive impact on increased student achievement (Bell, Bolam, & Cubillom, 2003), it is important that such collaborative efforts be focused on school improvement efforts (Spillane, 2006) and professional development (Elmore, 2000; Odden, 2009; Odden, Archibald, Fermanich, & Gallagher, 2002).

The schools in this study all integrated significant levels of teacher involvement in their school improvement plans, including the professional development of their respective faculties. The common belief of principals regarding teachers as experts in their fields and the efforts made to empower teachers in the further development of their peers was well documented across the schools, and the continued professional development of the full and targeted members of each school’s faculty utilized a distributed approach in the planning, implementation, and evaluation in each of the cases.

The middle school structure present at each of the case schools represented an important function in their distribution of leadership practices. In this study’s schools, team structure and meetings, flexible scheduling, and student advisory all had significant roles in how leadership and responsibilities were shared. The collaborative nature of interdisciplinary teams, as well as the trust and relationships necessary to engage in effective teaming also seem to be factors in the success of these schools’ distributed leadership practices. The development of trust and relationships between young adolescents and adults and the organization of schools into small communities of learners have been important aspects of the middle school model (NMSA, 2010).
and may create opportunities for the administration and staff in middle level schools to effectively engage in collaborative forms of leadership and responsibility.

**Implications**

This study of the leadership practices in three middle schools provides a number of insights about how middle level leaders can leverage the collaborative structure of the middle school to develop and support a distributed leadership framework in their schools. The study outlined a number of common attributes found among the case schools that assisted leaders in facilitating distributed leadership practices and also identified several barriers and challenges to those practices. In addition, the influence of interdisciplinary teaming and the middle school concept were identified as significant factors in the success of the case schools’ distributed leadership. The findings of this study raise several implications for those who wish to encourage or support distributed leadership practices in schools, and in middle level schools in particular. This study has the potential to be useful to groups responsible for the development of leadership preparation programs for teachers and principals, as well as for school boards and district superintendents. In addition, this study has the potential to inform the middle level community as to specific strategies that may positively influence the implementation of distributed leadership practices. I note implications in five areas.

It may be practical to note that the practices identified in the case schools that support distributed leadership are not unique to this style of leadership. In fact, they are not unique to education and may just as easily be implemented in a large corporate setting or a small business—they may simply be attributes of good leadership. The development of empowering organizational structures and communicating a common vision for the organization are
demonstrated techniques to motivate and move an organization forward, in education and in business.

First, an effective framework for distributed leadership should include mechanisms for school-wide decision making. By having structures in place that allow real input, giving faculty and staff a real voice in the decisions that impact their working environment, as well as the teaching and learning of students, opportunities are created for faculty and staff to develop commitment to the schools’ vision and mission. An important component that may strengthen a distributed leadership framework includes the use of small, faculty-led groups to discuss and debate issues and concerns, offering a conduit directly to school leadership with structures in place that enable two-way communication. These distributed organizations do not operate with a top-down management style but regularly engage in an iterative dialogue with the entire faculty about the issues that directly affect their work. Principals use the feedback generated from these conversations to actively guide their decision-making process.

Second, principals engaging in distributed leadership rely on others in their organizations to carry out a variety of leadership functions. Because of increased demands on today’s principalship, many leaders indicate they are unable to adequately tend to all aspects of their responsibilities by themselves. Principals who utilize a framework of distributed leadership embrace the expertise and leadership within their organizations, drawing faculty members into the work of curriculum development and improvement, professional development, and school management. These school leaders trust in the expertise of their staff to be leaders in their curricular areas, in the analysis of assessment data, and in professional development, among other tasks. Principals engaged in distributed leadership often develop a high degree of trust between themselves, their teacher leaders, and their faculty and staff. Principals retain the final
word on most significant issues, but trust is placed in the school’s faculty to provide input and guidance in the decision-making process. Trust also is placed in the teachers as curricular leaders to guide their areas toward growth in student achievement. Effective principals coach teacher leaders, assisting them with distributed responsibilities. Through these leadership experiences and mentoring, teacher leaders are able to further develop their leadership skills, providing schools with a rich foundation for building-wide collaboration.

Third, distributed leadership appears to be significantly strengthened by a school’s adherence to the middle school philosophy. In schools in which interdisciplinary teams form the backbone of the organizational structure, the team is able to operate as a mechanism for participatory decision making and teacher leadership development. The highly collaborative nature of teaming, and the middle school philosophy in general, may be factors contributing to the success of a distributed form of leadership. The close working relationships of teams provides ready-made discussion groups for building issues and opportunities to share a variety of opinions with minimal risk. With teachers accustomed to working in a cooperative team environment, it may be reasonable to conclude that those experiences help prepare middle school teachers to work in a highly collaborative, distributed leadership culture.

Fourth, in consideration of school boards and district superintendents, embracing a framework for distributed leadership has the potential to provide a number of positive outcomes for school systems. By committing to an administrative philosophy that encourages participation in school-wide decision making and leadership activities, faculty members in distributed schools are provided with opportunities to achieve a high degree of commitment to administrative decisions, building-wide improvement plans, and professional development. By providing opportunities to participate in data analysis and school improvement initiatives, faculty members
take real ownership in assessment and outcomes. Involving teachers as experts in their fields empowers them as true professionals, tapping the day-to-day experience and in-depth knowledge gained from working with students in their respective curricular areas. Because the school’s principal and entire administrative team cannot be expected to demonstrate expertise in all curricular areas, this teacher-centered approach to school improvement allows schools to exploit the valuable knowledge base that exists within their faculty. By instilling teachers as curricular leaders, principals are able to engage teachers in small groups, focused on understanding the teaching and learning that occurs in their building, and their individual students. Utilizing interdisciplinary teams, subject area groups, grade levels, and topic-specific curricular groups, such as a technology focused teams, schools with a distributed framework for leadership not only can engage multiple faculty members in the work associated with school improvement but also by empowering teachers to lead such initiatives are likely to create a wider degree of faculty commitment to improvement plans that emerge from this work.

This distribution of improvement focused tasks is not only an opportunity to empower teachers but also provides an efficient and effective use of the leadership assets in a school, allowing school principals the time and energy to focus on other school-wide initiatives while still being able to provide a system-wide oversight to the process. Teachers in each of this study’s schools reported high degrees of job satisfaction and described their schools as fun places to work, where they were respected as educators and professionals. By supporting principals’ efforts toward distributed leadership, a district may be able to create working environments with high levels of staff retention, as well as a multitude of other benefits associated with job satisfaction. And although it cannot be directly attributed to distributed leadership efforts, increases in student achievement were seen in each of the study’s schools. School districts that
are interested in seeing gains in achievement from all student demographic groups may be interested in this leadership practice, as it may be a factor in such increases.

In addition to efficiency, job satisfaction, and student achievement, school districts may be interested in supporting distributed leadership practices so they may populate the district’s pool of potential administrative candidates. Many schools and districts provide training programs and opportunities for teachers to gain valuable administrative experiences. These programs enable districts to create in-district candidates for potential administrative vacancies. School faculties that engage in a distributed form of leadership have numerous opportunities to take on leadership roles in their buildings, providing invaluable experiences working with peers on a wide variety of leadership projects. These home-grown leaders have the potential to become future school and district administrators, where those individuals have had the opportunity not only to learn about leadership in a familiar and accepting climate but also where they become a known leadership commodity to their peers and district administration.

When considering candidates for administrative positions, school boards and district superintendents may be well served to examine the personal and professional attributes of potential school leaders. The principals in this study all reported that their administrative styles have evolved over time, each with a variety of experiences that led them to a more collaborative leadership style. If district administrators weighed potential candidates’ propensity to engage in a collaborative form of leadership and had an overt expectation for principals to distribute leadership, new administrators may be more inclined and prepared to fully engage their school’s faculty in this shared form of leadership.

Lastly, educational leadership preparation programs may be well served to ensure that aspiring school leaders are trained in distributed leadership practices. Because many of the
attributes and activities of this study’s leaders mirror what may be commonly described as good leadership, leadership preparation programs may already have components of their curriculum that address these techniques and philosophies. However, administrative training programs should carefully evaluate their curricula to ensure their students are exposed to a framework for distributed leadership.

Although each of the study’s principals engaged in high levels of distributed leadership, none of them identified those activities as such, and as previously indicated, had undergone an evolution of leadership styles and techniques. As distributed forms of leadership become a more common expectation of building leaders (CCAD, 1989; Council of Chief State School Officials [CCSSO], 2008; Jackson & Davis, 2000), future school leaders may be better equipped to begin their administrative careers from a more collaborative position by being provided training in distributed leadership in formal administrative preparation programs.

In addition to addressing distributed leadership, preparation programs may be well served to provide specific training associated with middle level education. Because these schools have a unique place in our educational system, tasked with being developmentally responsive to the special needs of the early adolescent learner, future administrators should be equipped to provide leadership in this environment. Because the middle school concept has been shown to be a significant factor in each of this study’s schools, it is vital for future middle level principals to understand the middle school philosophy and how the research based *Turning Points* recommendations act in concert to provide a supportive environment for early adolescents.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

The following recommendations are presented for further research.
Research should be conducted investigating the relationship of distributed leadership practices to improved student achievement. Some researchers have indicated distributed leadership may have a positive impact on increased student achievement (Bell, Bolam, & Cubillom, 2003). Although the intent of this study was not to directly attribute increased student achievement in the case schools to distributed leadership practices, the schools’ continued academic excellence and trends toward improvement cannot be ignored. Each of the schools studied demonstrated positive trends in achievement growth for the student aggregate, as well as for all subgroups. In one case, almost the entire student body tested at levels of meeting or exceeding standards. Although this study cannot show that a distributed form of leadership is related to increases in student achievement, this phenomenon is worthy of further investigation.

Replication of this study is encouraged utilizing larger or more diverse populations. There are very few studies that specifically address middle school principals and the issues faced by those who educate emerging adolescents. As distributed forms of leadership are becoming a more common expectation of principals (CCAD, 1989; CCSSO, 2008; Jackson & Davis, 2000), this study provides some insight into the creation and support of this type of leadership. Because this study was limited to a small number of Illinois principals, it would increase the current body of knowledge to replicate this study using a larger sample, or choosing a different population.

Additional research should be conducted specifically focused on middle level schools and the effects of distributed leadership. The data from this study suggest the need to collect additional information concerning the influence of the middle school concept on distributed leadership practices. The middle school structure present at each of the case schools represents an important function in their distribution of leadership practices. Team structure and meetings, flexible scheduling, and student advisory all had significant roles in how leadership and
responsibilities were shared. The collaborative nature of interdisciplinary teams, as well as the trust and relationships necessary to engage in effective teaming also seem to be factors in the success of these schools’ distributed leadership practices. The development of trust and relationships between young adolescents and adults and the organization of schools into small communities of learners have been important aspects of the middle school model (NMSA, 2010), and may create opportunities for the administration and staff in middle level schools to effectively engage in collaborative forms of leadership and responsibility.

**Conclusion**

It is clear that the principals of each of the case schools genuinely made efforts to engage their faculty in high levels of collaborative decision making. In one school, the principal was described as “ego-less” and several of the teachers were convinced that the students would not be able to accurately identify who “ran” the school because of how widespread the leadership functions were. The commitment to engaging teachers as leaders in their organization has created schools with high levels of professionalism, engagement, and commitment to the central mission—teaching and learning. Teachers described their schools as engaging, fun places to work, where they are valued for their efforts. The list of accolades received by any of the schools in the study is impressive, and is a testament to the level of commitment from those schools’ entire faculty and staff.

Though it could be helpful to develop a guidebook or a list of items needed to facilitate distributed leadership, the results of this study demonstrated that several factors acted in concert with one another and may just have been “good leadership.” Building positive relationships,
developing an atmosphere of trust, communicating a vision, and filling the organization with good people could be listed in any management book, not just for middle level schools.

Educators in many of the nation’s schools have shifted away from the teacher-centered classroom to one in which the teacher acts more as a facilitator. In that role, students are more engaged in their learning, providing input along the way. In many ways, the distributed forms of leadership observed in this study emulate the student-centered classroom. In the middle school environment, that student-centered classroom can be embodied in the highly collaborative and integrated interdisciplinary team. However, as many school districts face budget shortfalls, the elimination of common planning or the team concept in its entirety may be seen as an opportunity to redirect precious financial resources. The principal of Blue Trail noted, “There are schools all over the place over here where you could save a million dollars by stopping teaming and it goes away over the course of a summer when budgets get tight. It is often an overlooked gem” (interview, February 16, 2010). Middle level proponents need to continually advocate for the benefits of interdisciplinary teaming in such lean times, and the findings of this study may assist in such efforts.

Principals of middle level schools face a unique set of challenges as they work to ensure their schools are “developmentally responsive to the special needs of the early adolescent learner” (Clark & Clark, 1994, p. 4). It is important to examine the practices of middle level principals who have been effective in distributing leadership responsibilities throughout their school, so that other educators can gain insights from their experiences as they strive to more fully involve their staff members in leadership activities.
References

Teachers College Record, 104, 421-455.

Reflections: Personal essays by 33 distinguished educators (pp. 1-14). Bloomington, IN: 
The Kappa Delta Pi Educational Foundation.

Reinhart, and Winston.

Alt, M. N., & Choy, S. P. (2001). In the middle: Characteristics of public schools with a focus on 


Anfara, V. A. (2001). The handbook of research in middle level education. Greenwich, CT: 
Information Age Publishing.

in a state of affective disorder? Greenwich, CN: Information Age Publishing.

Arhar, J. M. (1992). Interdisciplinary teaming and the social bonding of middle level students. In 
J. L. Irvin (Ed.), Transforming middle level education: Perspectives and possibilities (pp. 
139-161). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.


Qualitative Research, 1, 385-405.


National Middle School Association.

National Middle School Association.

headteachers and principals on student outcomes. London, England: EPPI-Center, Social 
Science Research Institute, University of London.


Brown, K. M. (2001). Get the big picture of teaming: Eliminate isolation and competition through focus, leadership, and professional development. In V. A. Anfara (Ed.), The handbook of research in middle level education (pp. 35-71). Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.


National Middle School Association. (2003b). *Research and resources in support of This We Believe*. Westerville, OH: Author.


Odden, A. (2009, December 9). We know how to turn schools around—We just haven't done it, *Education Week*, 29(14), pp. 22-23.


Thomas, D. J. (1997). It's not like we have good models to follow: We're learning as we're doing it. In T. S. Dickinson (Ed.), *We gain more than we give: Teaming in middle schools* (pp. 93-118). Westerville, OH: National Middle School Association.


White, G. (1997). Team maturity: Learning to grow together. We're learning as we're doing it. In T. S. Dickinson (Ed.), *We gain more than we give: Teaming in middle schools* (pp. 63-92). Westerville, OH: National Middle School Association.


Appendix A

Nominating Groups for Participant Selection

Illinois Principals Association (IPA)
IPA has 21 regions, coterminous with the regions of IASA (Illinois Association of School Administrators), with a member leadership board for each region.
Method: Identify two IPA board members from each region whose school is a middle level grades serving institution⁵. (42)
Each individual will be contacted via electronic mail, asking for nominations of principals that fit the provided description.

Illinois Association of School Administrators (IASA)
IASA has 21 regions, with a member president for each region
Method: Identify the president for each IASA president. (23)
Each individual will be contacted via electronic mail, asking for nominations of principals that fit the provided description.

Regional Offices of Education (ROEs)
Illinois is divided into 45⁶ regions, grouped by county or counties throughout the state.
Method: Identify the Regional Superintendent of Schools and Assistant Superintendent for each ROE. (90)
Each individual will be contacted via electronic mail, asking for nominations of principals that fit the provided description.

Regional Systems of Support Providers (RESPROs)
Illinois is divided into 10 RESPRO regions and sub-regions⁷, based upon the Illinois Regional Offices of Education and Intermediate Service Centers.
Method: Identify two contacts for each region or sub-region, including the Director (often a Regional Superintendent) and an additional RESPRO coordinator or consultant. (26)
Each individual will be contacted via electronic mail, asking for nominations of principals that fit the provided description.

Association of Illinois Middle Level Schools (AIMS)
Method: Identify the Executive Director of AIMS. (1)
The Director will be asked to provide nominations of principals that fit the provided description.

42(IPA)+23( IASA)+90(ROE)+26(RESPRO)+1(AIMS)=182 individuals contacted for nominations

---
⁵ Sixteen of the 21 regions have two or more board members from middle level schools. Four regions have only one middle level board member, so the second member represents a non-middle level school. One region did not have any board members from the middle level, so both members are from non-middle level schools. The selections for five regions include board members serving as “Assistant Principal Chair.”
⁶ Excluding the City of Chicago
⁷ There are six RESPRO Regions (I-VI), with the Chicago-area (Region I) divided into 5 sub-regions.
Appendix B

Participant Nomination Communication Protocol

Participant Nominations
You are being asked to identify middle level principals that fit a description listed below, to assist with developing an initial pool of potential middle level principal participants for a study on distributed leadership, or shared leadership, at the middle level. The schools of identified principals will be measured for “success” using a standardized formula, so it is not necessary to determine if a school or a principal is “successful” in your nominations. For this study, we will be including only Illinois public middle level schools that serve at least two grade levels, no lower than grade 5 and no higher than grade 9, with an average of at least 100 students per grade. Please do not exclude a potential nominee if you are unsure if their school meets this criterion, as we will check each for demographic information. All nominations will be confidential and no nominee will know who provided their nomination for the study. AIMS may consider any Illinois middle level principal for nomination and is not limited to those schools in their network.

Please read the descriptions listed below. Identify those middle level principals that generally reflect the descriptions or ascribe to the philosophies therein. Please note that terms such as shared, collaborative, democratic, and distributed leadership are often used interchangeably.

- Principal has a reputation for engaging faculty and staff in a variety of ways.
- Teachers have an influence on school-wide decisions and have the opportunity to collaborate on matters regarding instruction.
- All staff members have opportunities for input in initiatives and directions for the school.
- Teachers and staff members have formal or informal leadership roles in the building.
- The principal is a facilitator, with teachers and staff taking prominent leadership roles.
- The principal recognizes they are not an expert in all areas.
- Specialists or experts (such as literacy coaches or mentors), other than the principal, work with individuals to develop professional skills and abilities, including areas of weakness.
- The principal fosters an atmosphere for sharing and exchanging ideas about good practice. Teachers engage in dialogue about student learning and learn from each other.
- The principal values and supports professional learning communities for teachers within the school.
- The principal releases control or authority while providing support, giving teachers and staff shared responsibilities and ownership.
- The principal moves beyond shared authority or power and focuses on shared responsibility and decision making to enhance student learning.
- Many initiatives in the school do not originate from the principal, but come from the faculty and staff.

Please email, jpgrenda@gmail.com, or call, (217) 637-1967, anytime with questions about the study or for clarification on the nomination process. To nominate principals that generally fit the descriptions listed above, please send the nominees’ name, school, and city in an email to jpgrenda@gmail.com.
Appendix C
Structured Phone Interview Protocol

Introduction/Purpose
I am calling today because you have been nominated by X as an example of a successful principal who practices a concept called distributed leadership. We are conducting a study to examine distributed leadership in successful middle level schools, focusing on the behaviors and activities of principals that facilitate distributed leadership practices. In addition to identifying the behaviors and activities that may support distributed leadership, the barriers and challenges to implementing these practices also will be examined, identifying specifically how principals are able to work through these issues to promote distributed practices that support student learning. This study also will seek to learn how the presence, or absence, of interdisciplinary teaming influences distributed leadership practices in middle level schools.

Distributed leadership can simply be defined as the delegation and redistribution of the principal’s responsibilities to other staff members. Other views call it a fundamental change in organizational thinking, redefining school leadership as the responsibility of all in a school. You have been nominated by some of your peers as a middle level leader who practices elements of distributed leadership and we would be interested in using you and your school in our study.

If you choose to take part in this study, it will involve three face-to-face interviews, each taking no more than an hour, the researcher’s observation of some leadership activity(s) on those interview visit dates, and the researcher gathering some additional documents and artifacts for analysis. The first interview/observation will occur in February, 2010, the second in March, 2010, and the third taking place in April, 2010.

Questions
1. Briefly describe your school.
2. Would you categorize your school as a “middle school” or “junior high school?” Why?
3. Does your school utilize interdisciplinary teaming? If so, please describe that structure.
4. Please give me a brief background of your professional experience, including the number of years you have served as a principal of this school.
5. Does your school have a building leadership team?
6. Can you describe an example from your leadership practice that may be considered “distributed leadership?”
7. Do you have any questions about this study?
8. Are you willing to be a participant in this study of principal leadership?
Snowball Sampling
We are looking for other successful middle level principals that foster distributed leadership practices in their buildings. Can you think a principal of an academically successful middle level school that has a reputation for distributing leadership in their building? Can you provide contact information?
Appendix D

Institutional Review Board Approval

November 16, 2009

Jon Grenda
Educational and Organization Leadership Department
344 Education Building
MC-708

Dear Jon,

On behalf of the College of Education Human Subjects Committee, I have reviewed and approved your research project entitled “Distributed Leadership Practices in Middle Level Schools”. This project meets the exemption criteria for federal regulation 46.101(b)1 for research involving the use of normal education procedures in an educational setting where the identity of the participant is protected. It also meets the exemption criteria for federal regulation 46.101(b)2 for research involving normal interview and observation procedures.

No changes may be made to your procedures without prior Committee review and approval. You are also required to promptly notify the Committee of any problems that arise during the course of the research. Please don’t hesitate to contact me with any questions.

Best regards,

Anne S. Robertson
Coordinator, College of Education Human Subjects Review Committee

Cc: Dr. Donald Hackmann
Appendix E

Informed Consent Forms

Initial Phone Interview

Distributed Leadership Practices in Middle Level Schools
Initial Phone Interview
INFORMED CONSENT

Your school is participating in a doctoral study that is facilitated by Dr. Donald Hackmann and Mr. Patrick Grenda from the University of Illinois. The primary goal of this study is to examine distributed leadership in successful middle schools, focusing on the behaviors and activities of principals that facilitate distributed leadership practices. In addition to identifying those behaviors and activities that may support distributed leadership, the barriers and challenges to implementing these practices also will be examined, identifying specifically how principals were able to work through these issues to promote distributed practices that support student learning. This study also will seek to determine how schools that have implemented interdisciplinary teaming are able to foster a distributed form of leadership in their schools. This study is significant, because it begins to fill the gap in the literature focused on distributed leadership in middle level schools. As distributed forms of leadership, including teacher leadership, are becoming a more common expectation of building leaders in all schools, this study can help provide some valuable insight into the creation and support of this type of leadership. To assist with our understanding of distributed leadership practices, it is important for the researchers to engage in some research activities. During this portion of the project, we are conducting initial phone interviews of the principals of participating middle level schools.

Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. Your decision to participate or not to participate will not affect your professional employment in any way or your relations with the University of Illinois. You may elect to terminate this activity if at any time you begin to feel uncomfortable about the experience. Should you choose to participate, you will participate in a phone interview, which should last no longer thirty minutes. Detailed notes will be taken during interviews, being transcribed immediately with all identifying information removed to protect confidentiality of the participants. Your responses will be kept secure and the results of the interviews will only be reported in the aggregate. You will receive a copy of the transcript by email attachment to double-check the information, and you may be contacted by telephone or email for clarification of your interview responses.

We do not anticipate any risk to this study greater than normal life and we anticipate that the results will increase our understanding of effective leadership practices in middle level schools. This information will be used as part of a doctoral dissertation and may be shared in a conference presentation or publication. No personally identifying information will be included in any presentation, proposal, or publication.

See Reverse for Signature

telephone 217-333-2155  •  fax 217-244-3378
Please check a box and sign

I have read and understand the description of the research project related to the Distributed Leadership Practices in Middle Level Schools project. I voluntarily agree to participate in the research project.

☐ I agree to be interviewed with notes taken for the purposes of transcription.

☐ I do not agree to be interviewed with notes taken for the purposes of transcription.

_________________________________________  __________________________
Signature                                      Date

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant please contact Anne Robertson, Bureau of Educational Research, 217-333-3023, or arobrtsn@illinois.edu or call the Institutional Review Board collect at 217-333-2670 or irb@uiuc.edu. The responsible project investigator is Don Hackmann at the University of Illinois (217-333-0230, dehack@illinois.edu) with Patrick Grenda at the University of Illinois serving as Co-PI (217-637-1967, jpgrenda@illinois.edu).

Please keep a copy of this consent form for your records.
Distributed Leadership Practices in Middle Level Schools

Interview

INFORMED CONSENT

Your school is participating in a doctoral study that is facilitated by Dr. Donald Hackmann and Mr. Patrick Grenda from the University of Illinois. The primary goal of this study is to examine distributed leadership in successful middle schools, focusing on the behaviors and activities of principals that facilitate distributed leadership practices. In addition to identifying those behaviors and activities that may support distributed leadership, the barriers and challenges to implementing these practices also will be examined, identifying specifically how principals were able to work through these issues to promote distributed practices that support student learning. This study also will seek to determine how schools that have implemented interdisciplinary teaming are able to foster a distributed form of leadership in their schools. This study is significant, because it begins to fill the gap in the literature focused on distributed leadership in middle level schools. As distributed forms of leadership, including teacher leadership, are becoming a more common expectation of building leaders in all schools, this study can help provide some valuable insight into the creation and support of this type of leadership. To assist with our understanding of distributed leadership practices, it is important for the researchers to engage in some research activities. During this portion of the project, we are interviewing the principals of the participating middle level schools.

Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. Your decision to participate or not to participate will not affect your professional employment in any way or your relations with the University of Illinois. You may elect to terminate this activity if at any time you begin to feel uncomfortable about the experience. Should you choose to participate, you will participate in an interview, which should last no longer than one hour. Interviews will be audiotaped for the purposes of data analysis and will be immediately transcribed, with all identifying information removed to protect confidentiality of the participants. Your responses will be kept secure and the results of the interviews will only be reported in the aggregate. You will receive a copy of the transcript by email attachment to double-check the information, and you may be contacted by telephone or email for clarification of your interview responses.

We do not anticipate any risk to this study greater than normal life and we anticipate that the results will increase our understanding of effective leadership practices in middle level schools. This information will be used as part of a doctoral dissertation and may be shared in a conference presentation or publication. No personally identifying information will be included in any presentation, proposal, or publication.

See Reverse for Signature
Please check a box and sign in both sections

I have read and understand the description of the research project related to the Distributed Leadership Practices in Middle Level Schools project.

☐ I voluntarily agree to participate in the Distributed Leadership Practices in Middle Level Schools project.

☐ I do not agree to participate in the Distributed Leadership Practices in Middle Level Schools project.

_________________________________________  __________________________
Signature                                           Date

________________________________________________________________________

☐ I agree to have my interview audiotaped for the purposes of transcription.

☐ I do not agree to have my interview audiotaped for the purposes of transcription.

_________________________________________  __________________________
Signature                                           Date

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant please contact Anne Robertson, Bureau of Educational Research, 217-333-3023, or arobertsn@illinois.edu or call the Institutional Review Board collect at 217-333-2670 or irb@uiuc.edu. The responsible project investigator is Don Hackmann at the University of Illinois (217-333-0230, deh@illinois.edu) with Patrick Grenda at the University of Illinois serving as Co-PI (217-637-1967, jgrenda@illinois.edu).

Please keep a copy of this consent form for your records.
Distributed Leadership Practices in Middle Level Schools
Building Leadership Meeting Observation #1
INFORMED CONSENT

Your school is participating in a doctoral study that is facilitated by Dr. Donald Hackmann and Mr. Patrick Grenda from the University of Illinois. The primary goal of this study is to examine distributed leadership in successful middle schools, focusing on the behaviors and activities of principals that facilitate distributed leadership practices. In addition to identifying those behaviors and activities that may support distributed leadership, the barriers and challenges to implementing these practices also will be examined, identifying specifically how principals were able to work through these issues to promote distributed practices that support student learning. This study also will seek to determine how schools that have implemented interdisciplinary teaching are able to foster a distributed form of leadership in their schools. This study is significant, because it begins to fill the gap in the literature focused on distributed leadership in middle level schools. As distributed forms of leadership, including teacher leadership, are becoming a more common expectation of building leaders in all schools, this study can help provide some valuable insight into the creation and support of this type of leadership. To assist with our understanding of distributed leadership practices, it is important for the researchers to engage in some research activities. During the study, we will observe three meetings or activities that demonstrate some degree of distributed leadership. These meetings will involve all normally participating members who choose to participate. Individual who do not elect to participate in this research will be excused from the meeting or activity.

Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. Your decision to participate or not to participate will not affect your professional employment in any way or your relations with the University of Illinois. You may elect to terminate this activity if at any time you begin to feel uncomfortable about the experience. Should you choose to participate, the researcher will quietly and silently observe your schools’ leadership meeting, taking notes related to leadership activities and decision-making processes. It is anticipated that the observation will be the usual duration of your schools’ meetings, but will not exceed one hour. No personally identifying information will be written during the note-taking process, to protect confidentiality of the participants. The field notes will be transcribed, removing any personally identifiable information and using pseudonyms. Your principal will receive a copy of the transcript by email attachment to double-check the information and may be contacted by telephone or email for clarification. The notes from any observation will be kept secure and the results will only be reported in the aggregate.

We do not anticipate any risk to this study greater than normal life and we anticipate that the results will increase our understanding of effective leadership practices in middle level schools. This information will be used as part of a doctoral dissertation and may be shared in a conference presentation or publication. No personally identifying information will be included in any presentation, proposal, or publication.

See Reverse for Signature

telephone 217-333-2155 • fax 217-244-3378
I have read and understand the description of the research project related to the Distributed Leadership Practices in Middle Level Schools project. I voluntarily agree to participate in the research project.

☐ I consent to the observation and note-taking of my participation in the building leadership meeting.

☐ I do not consent to the observation and note-taking of my participation in the building leadership meeting.

___________________________   ________________
Signature                                   Date

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant please contact Anne Robertson, Bureau of Educational Research, 217-333-3023, or arobrtn@illinois.edu or call the Institutional Review Board collect at 217-333-2670 or irb@uiuc.edu. The responsible project investigator is Don Hackmann at the University of Illinois (217-333-0230, dshack@illinois.edu) with Patrick Grenda at the University of Illinois serving as Co-PI (217-637-1967, jgrenda@illinois.edu).

Please keep a copy of this consent form for your records.
Appendix F

Interview Protocol

Principal Interview #1

Questions:

1. Please share your understanding of distributed leadership and share why you believe it is important for your school.

2. Please describe 2-3 examples from your school of distributed leadership in practice?

3. Please describe an example of a real situation where without distributed leadership practices, it might be problematic? If you can’t give a real life example, please describe a hypothetical example.

4. Please describe the transformation you have undergone, leading up to your current leadership position where you engage in distributed forms of leadership.

5. What are the unique characteristics of the middle level that add to the complexity of distributed leadership practices? What aids DL? What is a challenge? How do interdisciplinary teaming, advisory, etc. seem to affect DL?

6. Is there anything else you would like to share with me that might provide some insight into how or why you practice distributed leadership?
Principal Interview #2

Questions:

1. Some scholars have called for a fundamental change in organizational thinking in schools and have redefined school leadership as the responsibility of everyone in a school. Can you respond to that?
   a. What are some ways you have done this in your school?

2. Within the school setting, scholars agree that the teacher is a major leadership component within a distributed model. How do you incorporate teachers’ expertise into your school leadership practices?

3. What are some of the challenges you have faced in establishing a more distributed form of leadership? (distrust, workload, hierarchical structure, unwillingness to change, insecurity, dishonesty, accountability)

4. Some scholars have said, “Leaders influence followers by motivating actions, enhancing knowledge, and potentially shaping the practice of followers.” Can you describe some of the ways individuals in your school have done this?

5. During our last conversation, you shared your belief about teachers being responsible for the success of their students. Can you tell me more about how you developed this principle?
   a. What role do teachers play in perpetuating this culture?
Other Building Leader Interview

Questions:

1. Please tell me about you and your position.

Read: “I am conducting a study on shared leadership in middle schools. The concept of distributing leadership throughout a school and flattening the hierarchy of traditional school leadership is becoming discussed more and more in literature on school leadership.”

2. Do you see this type of leadership at your school?
   a. How is it perpetuated by the school leadership?

3. How have you been prepared to assume a leadership role in your building/district?

4. Do you see yourself as a school leader?
   b. Why/why not?

5. What are some other ways that teachers are exhibiting leadership in your building?

6. Have you encountered challenges in your leadership role that may be attributed to being a teacher and not an administrator?

7. How does the middle school model play into this type of leadership? (Teaming, teacher roles, smaller learning communities)

8. Some scholars have called for a fundamental change in organizational thinking in schools and have redefined school leadership as the responsibility of everyone in a school. Can you respond to that?
Appendix G

Data Analysis Codes and Themes

1. Research Questions
   a. RQ - How do principals utilize DL in their schools
   b. RQ1 - Action or activity helping facilitate DL practices
   c. RQ2 - Barriers or challenges encountered when implementing DL
   d. RQ3a - Formal strategy put into place to overcome barrier
   e. RQ3b - Informal strategy put into place to overcome barrier
   f. RQ4 - Effect of interdisciplinary teaming

2. Distributed Leadership
      i. Theoretical lens looking at activity of leadership
      ii. DL as human capacity building
      iii. DL for democracy
      iv. DL for efficiency and effectiveness
      i. Collaborated Distribution
      ii. Coordinated Distribution
      iii. Collective Distribution
      i. Emergent Property
      ii. Openness of Boundaries
      iii. Leadership According to Expertise
      i. Followers
      ii. Situation
      iii. Leaders
         1. Routines
         2. Structure
         3. Tools
   e. Oduro (2004) DL Promoters and Inhibitors
      i. Inhibitors
         1. Accountability
         2. Dishonesty
         3. Distrust
         4. Hierarchical Structure
         5. Insecurity
         6. Unwillingness to Change
         7. Workload
      ii. Promoters
         1. Appropriate Skills and Knowledge
         2. Common Vision
         3. Recognition
         4. Risk Taking
5. Support
6. Trust
7. Willingness to Challenge
8. Willingness to Change
9. Willingness to Share

f. Teacher Leadership
   i. Barriers to TL
      1. Contractual Limitations
      2. Principal reluctance to share authority
      3. Resist new role relationships with administration and teachers
      4. Time - Full Workload, Overwhelmed
   ii. Teacher Leader Categories of Tasks - mutually supportive and interrelated
      1. Advocating for Children
      2. Coordinating and Managing
      3. Engaging in Curriculum Work
      4. Navigating the School Organization and Securing Resources and Support
      5. Nurturing and Negotiating Relationships
      6. Promoting Change
      7. Promoting Professional Development

   g. Distributed Leadership and Teams
      i. Increased member capacity - learned from one another
      ii. Principal developed capacity
      iii. Principal monitored instructional decisions
      iv. School culture conducive to instructional communication
      v. Shared Beliefs
      vi. Shared Culture
      vii. Shared Purpose

3. Middle Level Education
   a. Core Practices of Middle School Concept
      i. Advisory - relationship building
      ii. Flexible Scheduling
      iii. Interdisciplinary Teaming
         1. Common Plan Time
         2. Longevity of Teams
         3. Shared Vision or Goals
         4. Team Size
   b. Turning Points and Turning Points 2000 Recommendations
      i. Advisory Groups
      ii. Alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment
      iii. Common Planning Time
      iv. Emphasis on relationships for learning
      v. Importance of professional development
      vi. Instruction emanating from a core curriculum
      vii. Interdisciplinary Teaming
      viii. Representative participation in school governance
ix. Smaller Learning Community
x. Shared decision making

4. Reoccurring Themes
   a. RQ1
      i. Foster a culture of collaborative decision making
      ii. Create varied opportunities for feedback in the decision-making process
      iii. Regard teachers as experts in curricular areas
      iv. Build leadership capacity by cultivating teachers as leaders
      v. Engage teacher leaders to facilitate and lead professional development
      vi. Utilize a network of administration, faculty, and staff to distribute managerial tasks, allowing time to focus on leadership for learning
      vii. Communicate a common vision for student learning
      viii. Develop an atmosphere of trust, empowering teachers to address significant issues
      ix. Assemble a group of strong teachers that fit into the school culture and are aligned to the mission
      x. Build positive relationships with faculty and staff
   b. RQ2
      i. Leadership development is a process
      ii. Surround yourself with good people
      iii. Some people are more collaborative than others and may require multiple opportunities to become engage
      iv. Accurate communication can be a challenge when addressing groups through multiple leaders
   c. RQ3
      i. Team leaders serve as formal building leaders
      ii. Interdisciplinary teams are used as a platform for collaborative decision making
      iii. The collaborative nature of the middle school may support an organizational structure designed to capitalize on distributed leadership.