A PRINCIPAL INTEREST: LEADING FOR LEARNING
IN HIGH SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION

BY
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Abstract

The growing body of research on school consolidation does not detail the role of the high school principal. This revelatory case study examined a principal in an Illinois high school during the first year of consolidation. Furthermore, this study is informed by two separate bodies of literature. The first relates to school district consolidation. The second body of literature framing this study emanates from the leadership for learning literature. Ultimately, understanding any influence the principal exerts on student learning within the context of school district consolidation is of notable interest to legislators, state education officials, local community residents, and school administrators confronted with the reality of school consolidation. Using a case study design, I drew upon interview, observation, and document review to analyze the data from this revelatory case. Four research questions framed this study: (a) how does the high school principal maintain a focus on student learning in the first year of a school district consolidation; (b) what factors facilitate or support the principal’s ability to maintain a focus on student learning; (c) what factors inhibit or are barriers to the principal’s ability to maintain a focus on student learning; and (d) does leadership for learning as a conceptual framework inform the principal’s practice and focus on student learning in the first year of a school district consolidation?

I examined the influence of school consolidation on the principal’s ability to maintain the school’s focus on student learning in a newly consolidated high school. To guide my data collection and analysis, I utilized a conceptual framework developed by Knapp, Copland, Ford et al. (2003), leadership for learning, which based on five areas that learning-focused leaders address: (a) establishing a focus on learning; (b) building professional communities that take learning seriously; (c) engaging external environments that matter for learning; (d) acting
strategically and collaboratively along pathways of activity aimed at different aspects of student, professional, and system learning; and (e) creating coherence. The primary conceptual underpinning of this study is aimed at better understanding the nature of successful educational leadership and how it influences student learning.

The findings emanating from this study initially indicated a relative absence of a focus on student learning, because the immediate context mandated that the principal focus on the managerial/structural components of opening the merged high school. Ultimately, the principal became more involved with learning-focused leadership and more strategic with her actions. However, the principal did not maintain a focus on leadership for learning and ultimately did not believe she was fully successful in functioning as a learning leader. The data confirmed she was ultimately not fully successful in this area of leadership. The factors that facilitated a focus on student learning were found in the areas of effective leadership practices, acting strategically, and implementing distributed leadership. Problematic governance practices, ineffective communication practices, and the influence of the development of the school’s culture on the principal’s focus on student learning were identified as barriers to a focus on student learning. Although research suggests that a leadership for learning framework may be relevant and applicable for student learning in the context of consolidation, the findings from this case study indicated an initial absence of a strategic process or framework to focus on student learning or curriculum and instruction issues.

Three themes emerged from this dissertation: (a) the influence of school governance issues, (b) strategic communication as a core leadership practice for principals interested in improving student learning, and (c) the importance of creating a positive school culture. Perhaps the most significant findings illustrate how these three primary themes contributed to the success
or acted as barriers to student learning during the school consolidation process. Clearly the findings of this study depict certain benefits and describe potential barriers to a high school principal’s ability to focus on student learning during the first year of school district consolidation. Obviously, all educational research is influenced by the context, and this fact was most certainly the case for school consolidation as well.

School district consolidation continues to be an area of policy interest to state legislators in the state of Illinois. This study provided several insights into the influence of school consolidation on the building principal’s focus on student learning in this Illinois high school. The findings of this study raise a number of implications with regard to how building principals and school districts may consider the influence of consolidation on their students’ learning. This study provides nearly a dozen recommendations for policy and practice before advancing three additional areas for future research.
To my family:
Meg, Chase, Whitney, Abbigail, and Kale I love you!
And remember...
“Every now and again, bite off more than you can chew!” Will Rogers
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The completion of this dissertation would not have been possible without Divine intervention and the thoughtful support of my family, doctoral chair and committee, and colleagues from the EOL 2005 cohort. This dissertation truly was a test of my mettle. Often, I would reflect on the following verses: “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be the glory” (Ephesians 3:20-21). “Let each generation tell its children of your mighty acts” (Psalm 145:4). “Take captive every thought and make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). God has never left me or forsaken me.

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 1
  Statement of Purpose .......................................................................................................................... 6
  Research Questions ............................................................................................................................ 6
  Conceptual Framework ....................................................................................................................... 7
  Personal Interest ................................................................................................................................... 8
  Significance of the Study .................................................................................................................... 10
  Limitations and Delimitations .......................................................................................................... 13
  Definitions ............................................................................................................................................ 13
  Organization of the Remainder of the Study ...................................................................................... 15

Chapter 2: Literature Review .................................................................................................................. 17
  Research on School Consolidation .................................................................................................... 19
  Theoretical Framework: Leadership for Learning ........................................................................... 36
  Conceptual Framework: Leadership for Learning ......................................................................... 44
  Modified Conceptual Framework .................................................................................................... 56
  Critique of Leadership for Learning ................................................................................................. 57
  Summary ............................................................................................................................................... 62

Chapter 3: Methodology .......................................................................................................................... 64
  Research Questions ........................................................................................................................... 65
  Overview of Research Methods ....................................................................................................... 65
  Participants .......................................................................................................................................... 67
  Human Subjects Approval ................................................................................................................. 69
  Participant Selection .......................................................................................................................... 70
  Researcher Role and Positioning ....................................................................................................... 74
  Data Collection and Sources ............................................................................................................ 77
  Data Analysis ....................................................................................................................................... 82
  Standards of Validation ..................................................................................................................... 85
  Conclusion ........................................................................................................................................... 86

Chapter 4: Findings .................................................................................................................................. 88
  General Structure for Reported Findings ........................................................................................ 89
  Context of Consolidation .................................................................................................................. 90
  Context of Learning ........................................................................................................................... 97
  Research Question 1: The Principal’s Focus on Student Learning ............................................... 100
  Research Question 2: Facilitating Factors ....................................................................................... 107
  Research Question 3: Inhibiting Factors ........................................................................................... 128
  Research Question 4: Does the Conceptual Framework Inform Principal Practice ...................... 156
  Summary of Major Themes .............................................................................................................. 158
  Summary of All Findings .................................................................................................................. 159
Chapter 1

Introduction

Although it is ultimately a local concern, school district consolidation has been the subject of continuous debate within local school districts, across numerous states in the United States, and in Canadian provinces (Alsbury & Thomas, 2008; Duncombe & Yinger, 2007; Fleming & Hutton, 1997; Heinz, 2005; Howley, Johnson, & Petrie, 2011; St. Cyr Davis, 2005). The number of school districts in the United States has dramatically declined by nearly 90% over the past 70 years, decreasing from approximately 100,000 districts in 1938 to 14,166 districts in 2006 (Duncombe & Yinger, 2007; National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2007). Internationally, school amalgamations have also occurred in many Canadian provinces. Fleming and Hutton (1997) reported that school district consolidations were initiated in Canada for various reasons, including “the promise of greater efficiency, the need for fiscal restraint, and the aim of reducing inequities among districts” (p. 8). School consolidations have occurred throughout the United States for similar reasons (Howley, et al., 2011; Verstegen & Grider, 2000; Zimmer, DeBoer, & Hirth, 2009).

The consolidation of school districts has been a controversial topic for legislators, educators, and citizens in rural communities in the United States since the 1800s (Bard, Gardener, & Wieland, 2005). A brief review of Illinois history (Illinois State Board of Education [ISBE], 2008a) suggests that school district consolidation and reorganization conversations have occurred in Illinois since 1899, with the first consolidation petition initiated in 1903. Prior to the end of World War II, Illinois supported nearly 12,000 school districts. These districts steadily declined to the current number of 869 school districts (Illinois Association of School Boards [IASB], 2010), as numerous consolidation initiatives have occurred during this period of time.
Key aspects of school reorganization, or district consolidation, have been studied in Illinois and across the nation over the past 20 years. Through these studies, it has been suggested that fewer, “stronger” districts would serve communities and students more efficiently and effectively. The majority of this research relates to projected improvements in the financial efficiencies of school systems typically based on economies of scale. However, consolidation often is marketed to the public under the promotion of enhanced benefits for students (Alsbury & Thomas, 2008; Hall & Arnold, 1993; Hall, Kelley, Melhus, & Closen, 2007; Howley et al., 2011; Nitta, Holley, & Wrobel, 2008). For example, in the state of Arkansas, Act 60 was enacted in 2003 and was designed to encourage voluntary school district consolidations. In Illinois, Public Act 84-126 was introduced in 1985 to make sweeping changes and to mandate the reorganization of many smaller districts into larger ones. Ultimately, due to tremendous political pressure, the Illinois General Assembly quickly modified this law with Public Act 84-114, which effectively eliminated mandatory consolidation. The only remaining mandate was that each Regional Office of Education (ROE) was required to conduct a consolidation studies within their geographic regions (Phillips & Day, 2004). Politically, this action served to effectively neuter the drive toward mandated school consolidation. However, unless funding for rural districts expands, it is counterintuitive to assume that the siren call of mergers and consolidations will escape rural schools much longer (Dunn, 2001).

The impetus for school district realignments often centers on the necessity of consolidating schools and school systems to improve the quality of educational programming or to increase fiscal efficiency in educating children in rural communities. Given the economic crisis experienced in many states and the U.S. government in recent years, the critical need for fiscal efficiency likely will only intensify these efforts. Within the state of Illinois, legislators
have debated school consolidation and contemplated mandatory legislation since 1985. Although mandatory consolidation historically has been met with vigorous opposition, Illinois school districts have engaged in voluntary consolidation efforts since the late 1980s. The current fiscal health of the state of Illinois may encourage state legislators and education officials to explore mandatory consolidation once again as a cost-saving mechanism.

Consolidation proponents suggest a number of reasons for the merger of two or more existing school districts. Perhaps the most compelling reason (based on the typical rhetoric for consolidation) relates to improved or expanded curricular and extracurricular opportunities for students, particularly those at the high school level (Alsbury & Thomas, 2008; Benton, 1992; Nitta et al., 2008). Such opportunities may involve increasing the number of vocational course offerings, adding or expanding a foreign language program, and/or developing other academic or technological electives. Some school district enrollments may be too miniscule to support such high school capstone courses as physics or calculus or to sustain enrollments in Advanced Placement (AP) courses. Additionally, in some cases scheduling flexibility and increased student choice is attained from merely increasing the number of course sections, particularly in core academic areas. These improvements hinge primarily on an expansion in the breadth and depth of curricular offerings.

In addition to improved academic opportunities, other typically cited reasons for school consolidation include declining enrollments, declining equalized assessed valuation of real estate, state aid incentives, and the limited availability of highly qualified teachers (Alsbury & Thomas, 2008; Jimerson, 2006; Nitta et al., 2008). Canadian researchers (Fleming & Hutton, 1997) have framed the consolidation debate in “either/or” terms: either saving money or improving students’ opportunities for learning.
Opposition does exist to reorganization efforts, and opponents often consider the loss of local control to be a primary deterrent. A more vivid tapestry of opposition exists when schools become regionalized into larger geographical areas (Howley et al., 2011; Post & Stambach, 1999), such as into county-wide school districts. Jimerson (2006) asserted that “induced” consolidation “removes critical decision-making power from the local populace,” which has the unintended effect of creating a “cultural, social and economic void in rural places” (p. 11).

Alsbury and Thomas (2008) identified community resistance to school consolidation related to loss of local control, loss of community identity, and change in school culture or values. Nitta et al. (2008) noted, “opponents argue that school district consolidation inhibits the spread of cultural knowledge and exacerbates a community’s social and economic problems” (p. 3). The opposition also cites reasons directly affecting students, including longer bus rides, larger class sizes, and a loss of school identity (Alsbury & Thomas, 2008; Reeves, 2003; Zimmer et al., 2009).

Additional forms of resistance to consolidation have included concerns related to a real or perceived reduction in community participation in the democratic decision-making process because of a loss of representation on the local Board of Education (Alsbury & Thomas, 2008; Nachtigal, 1982), in parent participation (Howley et al., 2011; Nitta et al., 2008; Post & Stambach, 1999), and in community connection (Alsbury & Thomas, 2008; Bard, Gardener, & Wieland, 2005; Nachtigal, 1982). These negative perceptions often result from the closing of a school, which typically is viewed as the death of civic life within a community. However, opponents can “make no causal argument” (Nitta et al., 2008, p. 3) suggesting that school closure is directly responsible for the disintegration of the local community.
Although the resistance to consolidation is tangible, relevant, and important, overall support for consolidation efforts also has been documented (Nitta et al., 2008). Alsbury and Thomas (2008) cited findings from a national superintendent survey indicating that 86% of respondents favored school district consolidation. Consolidation issues are complex and polarizing, and the responsibility for garnering community support often is assigned to the local district superintendent. However, consolidation initiatives also present significant challenges for school principals, who arguably are the school officials at the front line of this debate, as parents and community patrons passionately argue the merits and disadvantages of this issue. Principals must carefully negotiate this challenging terrain, as students, parents, teachers, staff members, and community residents each present different personal perspectives and concerns.

Both the principal who is faced with a school closure and the principal who is challenged to integrate students into a newly merged school are confronted with difficult charges. Regardless of the scenario, the increased accountability under the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002 (Public Law 107-110) demands that the principal and school faculty maintain a consistent and unwavering focus on student learning. Each year the pressures on Illinois high school educators and students intensify as they struggle to meet mandated benchmarks under the NCLB policy of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as measured by school scores on the Prairie State Achievement Exam (PSAE). Even, newly consolidated schools are expected to have all students meeting or exceeding the state-level benchmarks, as measured on state standardized tests, by the end of the 2013-2014 school year (Lewis, 2010). The emphasis of this reform revolves around high stakes standardized testing as the indicator for student achievement (Popham, 2005). Although, NCLB as a reform policy and influence on the professional identity of the high school principal was not the focus of the current study, the
reform is noted as important to the context of education as I have explored the building principal’s role in the school district consolidation process.

**Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to understand the influence of school consolidation on the principal’s ability to maintain the school’s focus on student learning in a newly consolidated high school. Although external forces often initiate reforms, an internal agent is essential in order to move an organization forward and to facilitate the implementation of needed changes (Elmore, 2000). The premise of this study was that the building principal is this internal agent of change. The intent was to learn how and why the high school principal is able to maintain a focus on student learning during the first year of school district consolidation.

**Research Questions**

This research involved a case study of one Illinois high school, with a particular focus on the principal’s leadership practices as a learning leader. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How does the high school principal maintain a focus on student learning in the first year of a school district consolidation?

2. What factors facilitate or support the principal’s ability to maintain a focus on student learning?

3. What factors inhibit or are barriers to the principal’s ability to maintain a focus on student learning?

4. Does leadership for learning as a conceptual framework inform the principal’s practice and focus on student learning in the first year of a school district consolidation?
Conceptual Framework

This study is informed by two separate bodies of literature. The first relates to school district consolidation. A comprehensive review of the literature on school consolidation shows this topic to be primarily based on pragmatism and not consistently grounded in theory or research. Feasibility studies typically are conducted by organizations that either support or oppose consolidation, thus introducing the potential for bias in their research methods. Many publications contain practitioner-based studies that generally are not rigorously conceptualized and enacted. The exceptions include a limited number of studies exploring the financial aspects of school district consolidation (Coulson, 2007; Duncombe, Miner, & Ruggiero, 1994; Duncombe & Yinger, 2010, 2007), one phenomenological study suggesting mitigating strategies if consolidation is undertaken (Nitta et al., 2008), and a national study exploring the leadership influence of superintendents on the process (Alsbury & Thomas, 2008).

The second body of literature framing this study emanates from the leadership for learning literature. It seems critical to explore the integral role of the principal in promoting student learning. What principals do in response to organizational change demonstrates their critical roles as leaders who promote effective building-wide teaching and learning practices (Darling-Hammond & Friedlander, 2008; Elmore, 2000; Knapp, Copland, Ford et al., 2003; Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003). A research team led by Knapp (Knapp, Copland, Ford et al., 2003) identified four essential tasks of the learning leader. The first task involved identifying or creating pathways with the potential for great influence. Another task was to “mobilize efforts along more than one of these pathways” (Knapp, Copland, Ford et al., p. 37). In addition, helping other members of the organization assume and exercise leadership was another means of
garnering support. Finally, leaders must “mobilize support for an activity along multiple pathways” (Knapp, Copland, Ford et al., p. 37).

Leadership for learning was used as the conceptual framework for this study as the basis for an organized way of connecting all the ideas and practices that define this empirical inquiry into the exercise of principal leadership during school consolidation. Leadership practice is highly contextualized and certainly holds applicability in the reality of school leadership influence for school consolidation. A relatively sound foundational theory present in the scholarly literature on school leadership, leadership for learning assisted in the examination of principal leadership practice in the context of school consolidation. The use of leadership for learning as a conceptual framework provided a guide to understanding how building leaders make a difference in schools through leadership practice.

**Personal Interest**

My interest in this topic stems from my personal experiences in a school consolidation process. I participated in a successful two-district consolidation effort, which followed an unsuccessful three-way consolidation effort with which I also was involved. I served as the principal during this time at one of the high schools involved in the mergers. As principal, I worked collaboratively with my faculty and the community in preparing for expanded curricular and extracurricular opportunities during both feasibility studies. The formal preparation began in March 2004, after a successful vote to consolidate two districts into one reconfigured district. School personnel met frequently to review, refine, and critique the subcommittees’ work from the second feasibility study.
I served as principal of the newly merged high school through the first year of consolidation, and my primary focus during this time was the effective implementation and coordination of curricular and extracurricular programs. I found it challenging to maintain a consistent instructional focus, given the plethora of implementation responsibilities. However, the instructional program was a priority for my faculty and me. The importance of a rigorous, diverse, and relevant curriculum led us to meet frequently to design strategies to address the issues stemming from implementation and to engage in strategic planning for future years. I also met regularly with a retired superintendent who possessed a keen understanding of both the instructional needs of the new district as well the processes of school district consolidation. These efforts permitted our faculty to maintain an instructional focus within our newly reconfigured school.

It is important for me to share two personal biases. First, I did notice that the consolidation increased both curricular offerings and extracurricular activities at the new high school. The addition of several vocational offerings enhanced the curriculum the students previously had been offered in their two former schools. The new Board of Education also approved participation in the Advanced Placement (AP) program. Initially, AP U.S. History was implemented the first year, with plans for AP Calculus to be offered the following year. The English department added a creative writing course and a journalism course that created a school newspaper, which followed the activities of high school students, faculty, and staff. Another important advantage was that the merger allowed our newly reconstituted school to maintain a number of capstone courses in the areas of science, technology, and agriculture, as declining enrollments had placed these sections in jeopardy in the two former high schools.
The benefits identified throughout this process were pivotal in my decision to enroll in the doctoral program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to research the school consolidation process in a theoretical and scholarly process. Additionally, during this time I was involved in discussions with Illinois ROE superintendents and consolidation “experts” who commented that many Illinois state legislators were interested in reviewing data demonstrating whether the process could be successful in promoting academic benefits for students. The interest of these individuals, in combination with the success I witnessed in my personal experiences, provided the impetus for this study.

Significance of the Study

Numerous problems have developed from the dual issues of declining school enrollments and the decrease in assessed valuation of farmland, which have caused many rural school district Boards of Education to consider school district consolidation. State and national governments (Fleming & Hutton, 1997; Nitta et al., 2008) have used financial incentives to entice districts to voluntarily consolidate or to explicitly mandate school districts to consolidate. These investigations create the need for empirical research to determine the extent of leadership influence on teaching and learning practices during these school district mergers.

The role of the principal is noticeably absent in the current empirical literature exploring instructional leadership activities during school district consolidation. In reality, the principal is the key internal agent working to improve teaching and learning practices during this time. Ultimately, understanding any influence the principal exerts on student learning within the context of school district consolidation is of notable interest to legislators, state education
officials, local community residents, and school administrators confronted with the reality of school consolidation.

Although researchers have thoroughly debated the cost savings of school consolidation (Adams & Foster, 2002; Brent, Sipple, Killeen, & Wischnowski, 2004; Coulson, 2007; Duncombe et al., 1994; Duncombe & Yinger, 2007, 2010; Lewis, 2003; Reeves, 2003; Stiefel, Berne, Iatarola, & Fruchter, 2000), a review of the literature does not reveal any consistent body of scholarly, peer-reviewed empirical research from which one can draw critical information about consolidation and its effects at the building level. Although some consolidation studies have explored the leadership role of the district superintendent, there is an absence of scholarly literature concerning the principal’s role in school district consolidation. Given this individual’s pivotal role in the process, it is important to examine the principal’s practices during the initial year of school consolidation. This study was specifically designed to address the leadership role of the principal for improving teaching and learning practices and to help fill the void in the existing research base.

Certainly a building-level leadership role exists in the school consolidation process. However, although the role of the superintendent in facilitating school consolidations has been examined (Alsbury & Shaw, 2005; Alsbury & Thomas, 2008), researchers have not investigated the principal’s role in this complex organizational change process. A successful building-level consolidation must be predicated on the establishment of a new culture that evolves from the merger of two or more high schools from the previously distinct school district organizational structures. Within this process, the potential effects on student learning are a critical consideration. Therefore, it is important to examine how the principal is able to maintain a consistent focus on student learning during the process of establishing a new organizational
culture. Burns (1978) highlighted this difficulty for leaders: “Of all the kinds of leadership that require exceptional political skill, the leadership of reform movements must be among the most exacting” (p. 169).

Bolman and Deal (2008) suggested a common perception exists that incorrectly assumes a leader takes risks and faces challenges in an intuitive manner with unlimited power. Although limited research focuses on educational leadership in the school consolidation process, leadership is a critical component for success and ultimately student achievement for education in general. Elmore (2000) noted,

The logic of large scale instructional improvement leads to differences in kind, rather than differences in degree. If public schools survive, leadership will look very different from the way it presently looks, both in terms of who leads and in what these leaders do. (p. 3)

The conditions as described by Elmore make it even more difficult to generalize a specific set of guiding principles to assist school leaders when opening a new consolidated school or district.

The numerous organizational and systemic changes that can occur during consolidation include modification in the instructional day, such as introducing a block format for the daily schedule, moving from a behavioral to constructivist instructional approach, promoting effective working relationships within the newly merged school, enhancing the physical characteristics of buildings or technology, and developing positive relationships between the school and community. These factors create the differences in degree expressed by Elmore (2000). The literature suggests that through the improvement of leadership practice the organization can promote improved student engagement and achievement (Darling-Hammond & Friedlander, 2008; Elmore, 2000; Fullan, 2001; Knapp, Copland, Ford et al., 2003). Leadership during times of change, Fullan (2001) argued, experiences “a recent remarkable convergence of theories, knowledge bases, ideas, and strategies that help us confront complex problems that do not have
easy answers” (p. 4). It is to this end the ability to confront the complex problems of school consolidation that I was engaged as an ardent student of amalgamation.

**Limitations and Delimitations**

As a single-case study, this investigation was conducted within one high school in the state of Illinois during its first year of existence as a newly consolidated school. One limitation of this study involves the researcher currently being employed within a consolidated school district and having previously been employed as the first high school principal during another consolidated school district’s inaugural year. An additional limitation is due to the fact this is a case study of one school, and it cannot be generalized to other contexts. Although, it can certainly be informative for others experiencing consolidation. Due to these facts, and as is the case with qualitative research, the potential for bias may be present.

An important delimitation is that this investigation only examined the high school organizational structure within a unit district consolidation. Within the state of Illinois, unit districts enroll students from grades pre-kindergarten through 12. This study was delimited to the high school level because of complexity of curriculum, graduation rates, and nature of extracurricular focus at the high school level.

**Definitions**

The following definitions are provided as working definitions for this study.

*Amalgamation* refers to the effort to combine or unite a number of adjacent districts into one district. The term is used more often in Canada, and it may be considered synonymous with consolidation (Fleming & Hutton, 1997).
*Committee of Ten* is a task force comprised of 10 individuals designated in a consolidation petition to act on behalf of all petitioners. These people may be school board members, employees of the school systems, or laypeople. Members must be resident voters of the affected school districts (ISBE, 2005).

*Consolidation* describes the merging of two or more existing school districts in the formation of one new independent school district. Consolidation often is used in a generic sense to refer to any type of school unification, reorganization, or merger (ISBE, 2005). For the purpose of this study, the terms consolidation, reorganization, school consolidation, and school district consolidation are used interchangeably.

*Conversion or school district conversion* describes a new form of consolidation in Illinois in which the formation of a single new high school district occurs from merging numerous unit districts based on the boundaries of the dissolved unit district (ISBE, 2005). Each of the former unit districts retains an elementary district for grades pre-kindergarten through 8.

*Cooperative high school* is a new form of reorganization under Illinois law. It involves the formation of a jointly operated high school by two or more contiguous or high school districts, each with an enrollment of fewer than 600 students in grades 9 through 12. The affected districts retain their individual school boards (IASB, 2010).

*Economies of scale* refer to the principle of financial efficiency based on the premise it is advantageous to make larger quantities as opposed to smaller. As Reilly (2004) noted, “If you want to make a dozen cookies, it is more efficient to bake one batch with twelve cookies than twelve batches of one cookie” (p. 1).

*Feasibility studies* are financed through incentives from the state legislature and the Illinois State Board of Education. These studies are conducted to determine if an advantage
exists from economies of scale, student benefit, or property tax revenues by combining school
districts (Nitta et al., 2008).

Reorganization is an umbrella term identifying the process of combining one or more
established school districts (ISBE, 2005). This combination may assume a variety of forms,
including school consolidation or school district conversion. For the purpose of this study, the
terms consolidation, reorganization, school consolidation, and school district consolidation are
used interchangeably.

School consolidation describes the merger of two school buildings, which may be within
an existing school district or across two or more school districts (ISBE, 2005). For the purpose of
this study, the terms consolidation, reorganization, school consolidation, and school district
consolidation are used interchangeably.

School district consolidation describes the process of merging one or more established
school districts into one new school district (ISBE, 2005). For the purpose of this study, the
terms consolidation, reorganization, school consolidation, and school district consolidation are
used interchangeably.

Unit district is a designation noting the level of educational programming that serves all
levels of elementary and secondary education from pre-kindergarten through grade 12
(Kowalski, 2006).

Organization of the Remainder of the Study

The remainder of this study is organized as follows: Chapter Two reviews the relevant
literature related to two significant bodies of research that frame this study, school consolidation
and leading for learning. Chapter Three presents a detailed description of the case site selected,
the research methodology and methods used for data collection, and the analysis of this qualitative study. Chapter Four presents the findings as related to the study’s main purpose and research questions. Chapter Five contains a summary of the research, interpretation of the findings as related to the literature and theoretical framework, a comprehensive discussion of its implications, and recommendations for further research.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

This chapter provides an overview of two strands of literature that embodied the focus of this study: school consolidation and leadership for learning. The first topic examined is school consolidation, with a specific focus on the historical, legislative, and fiscal influences on its reported benefits and challenges. The second topic examines the literature related to leading for learning as a theoretical perspective from which to consider student learning.

Published studies and unpublished work examining the effect of leading for learning theory on student learning were derived from the literature in education and educational administration. The data sources in this examination included books, peer-reviewed scholarly journals, doctoral dissertations, book chapters, research reports, and very limited work from practitioner journals.

Two reasons exist for this selectivity. First, the lack of scholarship present in the majority of research on school consolidation requires careful analysis of the level of theory provided for the literature review in order to provide the level of rigor necessary for quality academic work. Second, the research currently accessed in practitioner circles largely includes outdated meta-analyses, which pay little or no attention to subgroup data. The averages of these empirical studies can hide significant problems present in some subgroups. For example, Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe’s (2008) analysis of the differential effects of leadership types contained a detailed critique of the “Marzano studies” (Marzano, McNulty, & Waters, 2003; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Marzano & Waters, 2006), noting that these studies reached conclusions from data largely based on “unpublished evidence” (p. 665). Additionally, the context of education even in rural America has changed dramatically since the standards reform movement began.
Therefore, sources that were analyzed and included in this literature review were specifically chosen and critiqued based on these criteria.

The synthesis of literature on leadership for learning began with a search of empirical research specific to the United States and Canada, as historically these regions have experienced recurring periods of public school consolidation (DeYoung & Howley, 1990; Fleming & Hutton, 1997; Strang, 1987). An inclusive approach made a thorough search of empirical studies on leadership and student learning, regardless of theoretical or conceptual frameworks utilized. After inspecting the empirical studies a discriminatory approach was applied to leadership, noting primarily principal leadership, although studies on superintendent leadership also were accessed if they demonstrated a connection to student learning.

Electronic databases initially were examined using the specific combination of leadership for learning as designated specific by the use of quotation marks with the EBSCO search engine. Keywords, citations, and abstracts were considered for the specific leadership for learning theory. Electronic and physical searches of the tables of contents and abstracts of specific educational leadership journals were conducted that considered the types of journals and research methodologies of a study. Although literature primarily was reviewed that related to secondary schools, empirical studies involving elementary and middle level schools also were related to the topic. Empirical studies were considered first, followed by action-based research. The complexity of high schools and the limitation of the research at that level with regard to school consolidation framed the study in this way. Further literature was based on its value for organizational, building, or leading for learning-specific content.
Research on School Consolidation

An extensive review of the topic of school consolidation reveals a dearth of literature steeped in scholarship and critique. The vast majority of literature published to date has been produced by practitioners, laypersons, and the media. Often publications on school consolidation are presented in the form of newspaper articles, state or national conference presentations, policy briefs, and local feasibility studies (Butts & Durflinger, 2006; Coulson, 2007; “It’s Official,” 2007; Jimerson, 2006; Phillips, Day, & Bogle, 2007; Phillips, Day, & Eddy, 2006; Yan, 2006).

Outside of studies debating potential fiscal benefits of consolidation (Duncombe et al., 1994; Duncombe & Yinger, 2007, 2010; Heinz, 2005; Jonjak, 2003; St. Cyr Davis, 2005; Zimmer et al., 2009), empirical research on school consolidation has presented the most detailed data through single case studies, most of which are state-specific in nature (Hottovy, 2003; Hughes, 2003; Post & Stambach, 1999; Self, 2001; Shafer, 2000). This phenomenon of promoting consolidation based on fiscal efficiency has not changed throughout the decades, as consolidation cycles in the 1940s (Phillips et al., 2007) and 1980s (Phillips, 1993) primarily demonstrated a fiscal emphasis. This research has not been open to the level of critique present in scholarly research, which might include an in-depth review of the research methodology, theoretical or conceptual frameworks, and critiques of the research traditions and practices carried out in a blind review process. The most recent analysis of the legal and governance influences on school district consolidation in the state of Illinois was conducted in dissertation research by Phillips (1993), in which he developed a detailed timeline of laws and comprehensive reports on the topic. However, that study occurred nearly two decades ago.

This section provides an overview of school consolidation efforts in the United States, including a synthesis of trends that historically have developed from legislative action related to
the social and economic pressures of each period. Additionally, this section highlights legislation that supported the governance and funding structures used in the Midwest, and where as appropriate, for the State of Illinois. The purpose of this review is to establish a context in which current leadership may view school consolidation as it relates to a broader historical context.

**Rural education: Epoch of local control.** As schools began to develop in the frontier regions of the North American continent, they emerged as the focal point for rural communities. In addition to serving as the physical place to provide instruction for schoolchildren, the rural school in the 19th century also served as the social center for the community (Oberg, 2005). Community functions, important meetings, and symbolic or cultural events took place at this epicenter of the immediate region. According to Oberg (2005), “the rural school, in a real sense, belonged to the local community” (p. 16). A typical school in the 1850s consisted of a one-room edifice, which provided a basic education through grade 8. Tyack (1974) described the integral role of these one-room schools within the local community:

> During the nineteenth century the country school belonged to the community in more than a legal sense: it was frequently the focus for people’s lives outside the home . . . all over the nation, ministers met their flocks; politicians caucused with the faithful, families gathered for Christmas parties and hoe-downs . . . and neighbors gathered to hear spelling bees and declamations. . . . As one of the few social institutions which rural people encountered daily, the common school both reflected and shaped the community. (pp. 15-17)

The initial school consolidation movement in the United States prompted the closing of numerous local, community-based, one-room schoolhouses, as they were subjected to pressures of consolidation and conformity from the “common school” crusade of the 1840s and 1850s (Tyack, 1974, p. 29). Consolidation policies have created the current landscape of public school organizations in rural America (Nitta et al., 2008).
2008a) disclosed that school district consolidation and reorganization conversations have occurred within the state since 1899, with the first consolidation petition submitted in 1903.

The rhetoric of the agrarian society often placed an emphasis on local commitment, governance, and accountability. Rural communities experienced concerns related to the susceptibility of local officials to community pressures and the belief that the pursuit of modern objectives “could not be left to small thinking, village politicians” (Fleming & Hutton, 1997, p. 3). Fleming and Hutton (1997) described an illusion of local control and noted that school boards were granted legal authority for managing and controlling schools, noting that “this control has proved, historically, to be more apparent than real” (p. 3). The pressure for schools to fulfill an integrative function by defining the local community and representing the larger, global society remains ever-present today (Tyack, 1974). The pride that patrons maintain in their rural school districts typically is born of policy and often is developed in a context of both advocacy and adversarialism. The context of consolidation consistently revolves around issues of identity and uncertain benefits for these communities that are often faced with no choice but to consolidate. Whether by mandate or stark reality, they perceive the dilemma leaving little choice if they intend to maintain any modicum of quality in academic preparation or extracurricular opportunities for their students. In either situation, the adversarial commitment intensifies as community members, students, and parents advocate holding on as they can see consolidation as the harbinger to their way of life.

**Epoch of the changing society.** The economic effects of the national and global events occurring during the Great Depression and World War II created numerous hardships on educational systems. The economic crisis resulted in staggering job losses for U.S. citizens, which resulted in an evaporation of property tax revenue for schools. As a cost-cutting measure,
schools eliminated classes, and many schools were forced to close. President Franklin Roosevelt further suggested that school authorities permit high school students to take time off during the school year to help farmers or work in the war industries (ISBE, 2010b). Some students were even drafted into the war before high school graduation. The financial inability of some districts to meet these requirements prompted an increase in school consolidations (ISBE, 2004). In 1945 the Illinois General Assembly enacted the School Survey Act, which was designed to spur local rural communities to close their expensive and inefficient one-room schools (Teachers’ Retirement System [TRS], 2007).

Across the nation, reformers touted the advantages of larger, centralized models as progressive educational systems (Kay, Hargood, & Russell, 1982). Strang (1987) used National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data to review periodic consolidation efforts across the U.S. from 1938-1980. Strang observed:

A common thread runs through the movements for local organizational change from Horace Mann to the present. Historians of education varyingly speak of modernization, the urban model, and the corporate model. In each case . . . they contended that the small scale, informal organization and lack of professionalism of small districts made for fiscal inefficiency and educational ineffectiveness. (p. 356)

This national perspective consistently played out at the state and local level. Sher (1992) reported that school consolidation research often was conducted by scholars who supported the perpetuation of an urban or industrialized model of instructional design. Often, consolidation proponents worked to sell consolidation as worthy reform as opposed to finding any objective truth (Sher).

In 1947 the Illinois General Assembly enacted the Common Unit Law, which resulted in the consolidation of thousands of school districts. By 1950 the number of Illinois school districts had decreased from more than 12,000 to fewer than 5,000 (ISBE, 2004). The prevailing
sentiment of the day was that education would best contribute to an optimal social order by using organizational processes and techniques adapted from industry (Orr, 1992). Tyack (1974) described the process as “a model of perfect urban education imposed on rural districts” (p. 39). However, legislating school district consolidation as a panacea for better education was not a reform unique to only the state of Illinois.

Legislators in many states seized the opportunity to abolish small districts with the enactment of sweeping reorganization policies. These legislators considered the most significant problem of small school districts to be fiscal in nature, thus perpetuating the philosophy that the large, urban, and centralized organizational structure was the most effective model for educating schoolchildren (Phillips, 1993). Dissertation studies (Heinz, 2005; Phillips, 1993; Sher, 1992; St. Cyr Davis, 2005) confirmed the legislative belief that larger centralized structures operated in a more efficient fashion. For example, Act One of 1948 in the state of Arkansas mandated the dissolution of districts with fewer than 350 students, which resulted in an immediate reduction in the state’s public school districts. Whereas Arkansas school districts totaled 2,451 in 1948, this number plummeted to 421 in 1949 (St. Cyr Davis, 2005). In a dissertation study, Heinz (2005) noted a similar phenomenon in Nebraska, citing the existence of 7,264 school districts in 1919-1920 and a significant reduction to 572 in 2000-2001. The consolidation of Nebraska districts was attributed to numerous factors: declining school district enrollments, increased curricular requirements, accreditation mandates, aging school facilities, tax caps, and tax-sensitive communities (Heinz, 2005). Similarly, by 1960 the number of school districts in Illinois had been reduced to 1,567 from 11,996 total districts in 1940 (Phillips, 1993).

In addition to on-going research on economies and diseconomies of scale, the decades since the 1970s have witnessed the development of research designs that consider student
achievement factors. In 1985 the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) reviewed quantitative high school data, including the ACT scores of Illinois students, and considered the effect district type or district size exhibited on student achievement in a report considering if size supersedes economies of scale. The ISBE (1985) research pointed to significantly higher average ACT subject area and composite scores for high schools containing approximately 500 to 1,250 students. As a result of that report, state legislators began to consider and design financial incentives for school district consolidation.

In a dissertation study, Phillips (1993) conducted a comparative case study analysis of three school districts that recently had undergone this type of “reorganization.” He described the ISBE research as using additional data compiled from the Illinois Inventory of Educational Process (IIEP), the Decade Test, and the ACT subject area and composite scores to analyze whether enrollment was a critical variable in promoting school district effectiveness. The data collected from these assessments confirmed significant differences presented in the ISBE report (1985). In addition, the academic performance, noted by the IIEP and Decade Tests, demonstrated that high schools with enrollments of 215 to 1,280 students reported higher scores in each subject area when compared to high schools with smaller or larger enrollments. Armed with these data, the ISBE aggressively implemented their efforts to reorganize Illinois school districts through school district consolidation in 1985 (Phillips, 1993).

**Nadir: Epoch of forced consolidations.** Prior to the nadir, or lowest point, key aspects of school district consolidation were studied repeatedly in the state of Illinois. These studies concluded that fewer, stronger districts would better serve the local communities and students (ISBE, 1985; Phillips, 1993; Phillips & Day, 2004). The primary argument expressed in these
studies was economic in nature. As a result, the nadir began in 1985 with the passage of Public Act 84-126, which mandated the reorganization of many smaller districts into larger ones.

Although this period of forced amalgamation lasted for a very brief time, it introduced the notion that the state should play a significant role in promoting rural and small school district consolidations in the state of Illinois. The Act was repealed immediately due to extreme political pressure from local communities, and the amended law (Public Act 84-114) eliminated mandatory consolidation. The only remaining requirement was that each of the state’s Regional Office of Education would be required to conduct a school consolidation study within its region (Phillips & Day, 2004). Ultimately, no consolidations occurred as a direct result of the 1985 legislation. However, the state of Illinois maintains an interest in school consolidation through its effort to promote and fund financial incentives for those districts that voluntarily elect to consolidate. Since the unsuccessful legislation in the mid-1980s, the impetus for consolidation has come from these voluntary local decisions.

**Epoch of fiscal incentives.** Research conducted on school consolidation as a means to exploit economies of scale and reduce educational costs has an extensive history (Duncombe et al., 1994; Duncombe & Yinger, 2007; Heinz, 2005; Jonjak, 2003; St. Cyr Davis, 2005; Verstegen & Gridr, 2000; Zimmer, DeBoer, & Hirth, 2009). Although local school district consolidation efforts have begun to diminish over the past two decades, numerous state-level funding incentives have been put in place to encourage school districts to consider consolidating (Zimmer et al., 2009). Over the last decade, the combination of decreasing equalized assessed valuation of farmland, declining rural school enrollments, and limited funding for rural schools in Illinois has encouraged efforts to consolidate school districts, again developing primarily for economic reasons. The states of Arkansas, Illinois, Indiana, Nebraska, and South Dakota have
offered state-level incentives or grants to encourage voluntary consolidation (Verstegen & Grider, 2000; Zimmer et al., 2009).

In a quantitative study, Zimmer et al. (2009) used cross-sectional data from Indiana to examine the potential of employing economies of scale on reducing costs by way of school district consolidation. Their analysis of the data demonstrated that “the total per pupil cost function for Indiana school districts is quadratic and convex” (p. 117). Their findings supported claims suggesting significant efficiencies could be realized through the consolidation of school districts. They recommended an optimum enrollment level of 2,000 students per district, noting that “diseconomies emerge beyond an enrollment level of 2,000 students” (Zimmer et al., p. 118). Studies clearly document that the use of financial incentives to encourage consolidation has remained an active policy intent over the past two decades (Phillips, 1993; St. Cyr Davis, 2005; Verstegen & Grider, 2000; Zimmer et al.).

In the state of Illinois, financial incentives are provided through school consolidation grants, which are intended to encourage voluntary mergers between reorganized school districts through the elimination of various fiscal disincentives (ISBE, 2008b). First, two state payments are made annually for four years. One is the general state aid difference payment, which a supplementary payment is covering any loss in general state aid resulting from the consolidation based on the difference between the former districts’ payments. The second four-year payment is a teacher salary difference payment, which is a supplementary payment equal to any salary difference earned by each certified staff member. A third incentive is awarded for one, two, or three school years based on the reorganized district’s enrollment and wealth. This supplementary reimbursement is provided to the consolidated district in an amount equal to the sum of $4,000 per certified employee, who must remain employed by the district for at least one school year.
The final state incentive is a one-time payment that is equal to the difference between the larger and smaller deficits of the merging districts (ISBE, 2008b). The state of Illinois has distributed over $120 million in financial incentives to reorganized school districts (ISBE, 2008a). Data from the IASB (2011) website confirmed that 125 Illinois districts have merged using these consolidation incentives since 1986.

Legislative incentives are not unique to the state of Illinois, and they appear to have been successful in promoting voluntary school district consolidations across the nation. Survey research of consolidation efforts across 22 states conducted by Verstegen and Grider (2000) concluded that the majority of consolidations have occurred in states with voluntary incentive programs. Zimmer et al. (2009) indicated findings collected from cross-sectional data collected on 292 Indiana school districts over a three-year period found the political implications from their research described incentives as ensuring “that consolidation will remain an active policy issue” (p. 104), and noted these findings were similar in Illinois, Indiana, and South Dakota.

These factors have created a financial impetus for change. Due to recent economic downturns, however, the ability of the states to continue to fund these incentives may be in jeopardy.

Epoch of fear: Recurring government debt and deficit. The present educational landscape exhibits some familiar tensions. Hottovy (2003) poignantly stated the recurring financial concern, noting that many of the perceived fears and uncertainty shared by many people “in this one-stoplight town can be attributed to one thing: money” (p. 123). Illinois State Superintendent of Schools, Christopher A. Koch (ISBE, 2009), supported Hottovy’s assertion of financial worries brought about by consolidations:

It has long been stated that school finance reform can never be realized in Illinois as long as there are winners and losers among districts. Of course, one of the responses to reform is to create hold harmless provisions in our state budget. Unfortunately, hold harmless
provisions are generally intended to assist with transitions and not to continue without end. (p. 1)

Approximately 261 consolidated districts have received financial incentives from the state of Illinois since general state aid (GSA) was “held harmless” as an incentive to reorganize school districts. The vast majority of the recent school district consolidations occurred in rural portions of the state (IASB, 2010a; ISBE, 2010a). In July 2009, the ISBE acted upon Dr. Koch’s recommendation to decrease GSA hold harmless funds for the FY 2010 budget. Because Illinois was experiencing a significant financial crisis, an estimated $26.1 million to $36.2 million in GSA hold harmless payments were not fully funded beginning with the 2008-2009 academic year (ISBE, 2009). As of December 2009, FY10, only 86 districts received these GSA hold harmless payments, down from 272 in FY03 (ISBE, 2009, 2010c). The ISBE legislative agenda for 2011 included an initiative to permanently remove the hold harmless funding program (ISBE, 2010).

Recent concerns about funding schools and the fear of the potential job losses mirror the conditions prior to World War II when states turned to school consolidation as one means of efficiency. As jobs are eliminated, homes and farms are subjected to foreclosures, and rural citizens struggle to pay taxes, states may experience significant declines in property tax revenues. These declining economic conditions have negatively contributed to the financial losses the communities and families have experienced through decreased involvement in community activities and closures of local businesses (Duncombe & Yinger, 2010; Heinz, 2005; Howley et al., 2011; Nitta et al., 2008; Post & Stambach, 1999).

**Negative consequences of school consolidation.** School consolidation opponents have noted a decrease in involvement with community organizations and the loss of local businesses as primary arguments against consolidation in rural communities. Local citizens consider a
school closure to be detrimental to the social and economic capital of the community (DeYoung & Howley, 1990; Duncombe & Yinger, 2010; Heinz, 2005; Nitta et al., 2008; Post & Stambach, 1999). Perhaps the most detrimental consequence of school consolidation reported in the empirical research is an overall loss of community identity. Additionally, citizens may find decisions to elect school board members to the newly merged school district based solely on state congressional districts or at-large representation to be confusing, further adding to a perception of loss of local control. Anxiety may increase during board elections, as constituents simultaneously vote for or against the consolidation petition and for representation on the newly reconstituted school boards. Local citizens may be concerned that an imbalance in representation across the geographic confines of the previous school districts may occur on the new school board. Hall (1993) reported that “local opposition” to the petition and “loss of local control” were identified as negative consequences of school consolidation (p. 36). In a qualitative study of 14 superintendents who had been involved in school consolidation initiatives, Alsbury and Shaw (2005) noted a “perceived lack of representation” (p. 113) may contribute to an increasing number of residents leaving the district, as citizens relocate to communities that they believe have better educational systems for their children. Additionally, a survey of 36 superintendents across the U.S. conducted by Alsbury and Thomas’ (2008) determined that two thirds of respondents cited the loss of political control, also noted as a perceived lack of representation, as a significant negative consequence of school consolidation.

Negative perceptions of consolidation initiatives can exist with staff members as well. Hottovy (2003) recorded staff frustration, as one teacher observed the political positioning and negotiating that were occurring and felt the need to emphasize teaching and learning as more important than politics. Additional concerns reported by Alsbury and Shaw (2005) included the
elimination of administrative positions, a lingering sense of animosity within the community, and fear of the marginalization of local values or identity as a result of the consolidation. However, this study involved interviews of only 14 superintendents, who were representative of a total number of 392 districts that had experienced consolidation. Therefore, this study may not fully reflect issues experienced by superintendents throughout these districts. The street-level activities and conversations that occur within communities that are contemplating school district consolidation can be quite emotional and challenging. This dialogue, however, would be incomplete unless both perceived positive and negative features of school district consolidation were identified and discussed.

Opponents assert that cost savings are not realized from the consolidation of school districts (Adams & Foster, 2002; Brent et al., 2004; Reeves, 2003). Adams and Foster (2002) explained that states often do not save money by consolidating small rural school districts, because “state educational costs are driven by school district property wealth, not district size” (p. 854). Other researchers also assert that districts cannot realize cost savings through consolidation efforts (Brent et al., 2004; Lewis, 2003; Reeves, 2003). A critical argument in the “cult of cost-effectiveness” is that “cost-effective factors are very difficult to conclusively determine for rural schools” (Brent et al., 2004, p. 237).

Benefits of school consolidation. Perhaps the greatest potential benefit present in the school consolidation rhetoric is related to the improvement of the school’s curriculum and instruction. Key-informant interviews conducted as part of the qualitative study by Alsbury and Shaw (2005) noted a “broadened and enhanced curriculum as well as increased curriculum offerings” (p. 113) as one advantage of consolidation. These enhancements may take the form of
new courses, the addition or expansion of a foreign language program, or simply an increase in the number of course sections that permit greater flexibility in student course scheduling.

Increased course offerings also were cited by Hall et al. (2007) as beneficial instructional improvements. A survey of 36 superintendents also confirmed that consolidation generally improves program quality and expands the curriculum (Alsbury & Thomas, 2008). Alsbury and Shaw (2005) cited increased extracurricular offerings with greater student competition within these activities, enhanced diversity and citizenship among students, and expanded support resources (e.g., counseling, at-risk programs, flexible services for special education). These superintendents also cited improved funding and a perception of a higher quality of education. However, DeYoung and Howley (1990) described an “intentional concealment” of the benefits of small schools and the presence of other alternatives to the local schools, due to innovations in distance learning and communication technologies. They concluded that typically “political and ideological motives, not pedagogical ones, account for rural school consolidation in the United States” (p. 71).

Several case studies have identified cost savings that are associated with school district consolidation (Coulson, 2007; Duncombe & Yinger, 2007, 2010; Zimmer et al., 2009). This research points to fiscal efficiency in overall cost management as a benefit of the consolidation process, but only up to a point (Coulson, 2007; Duncombe et al., 1994; Duncombe & Yinger, 2007, 2010; Stiefel et al., 2000; Zimmer et al., 2009). Coulson (2007) conducted a quantitative study using a pooled regression, concluding that the state of Michigan could save $31 million annually by consolidating small districts. However, Coulson cautioned that these cost savings likely would be unattainable, because it would require “altering the borders of hundreds of Michigan school districts . . . and while optimal size could be achieved, it would not be easily
Practitioners repeatedly have described cost savings as a benefit of consolidation (Alsbury & Shaw, 2005; Alsbury & Thomas, 2008). As Fleming and Hutton (1997) noted, “recent action to reduce the number of school districts, presumably, the administrative costs of the provincial system is not a radical departure from tradition, but simply part of an established historical pattern” (p. 10). Consolidation proponents are quick to point out that districts will “save” at least one superintendent’s salary through consolidation.

Further benefits may be categorized around improvements to infrastructure. Perceived fiscal and physical benefits are very common in the political arena of consolidation, as consultants typically explain how school district consolidation will spare taxpayers from additional property tax increases to maintain their existing schools (Hall, 1993). Nitta et al. (2008) suggested that larger consolidated schools can provide better facilities for students.

The research on school consolidation (Alsbury & Thomas, 2008; Nitta et al., 2008) does provide documentation that consolidation can create the conditions for a broader, more diverse social experience for students. Superintendents in one study were convinced that the increase in student diversity had “improved and enriched” (Alsbury & Thomas, 2008, p. 32) the school culture. Alsbury and Thomas (2008) suggested that “the promise of a more diverse school culture that provides for the greater good” (p. 33) allows school consolidation to become a testing ground for social justice in future research, although the study did not explain how this could occur. In their phenomenological study, Nitta et al. (2008) found students perceived broader and more diverse experiences primarily through social integration in their newly merged schools. Evidence also suggests that students in consolidated school districts have an expanded array of extracurricular activities available to them, primarily in interscholastic sports, although,
Nitta, et al. (2008) documented that the affects were greater for “moving” students than “receiving” (p. 27) students. These “moving” students were defined as those going into the culture and building of the “receiving” school in the merger. In addition, Duncombe and Yinger (2010) argued that sometimes consolidation makes sense on equity grounds, such as when determining how to improve the fairness of a state’s education finance system.

Other benefits for students include the ability to specialize in academic disciplines or “concentrate on fields of interest” (Hall, 1993, p. 36). Researchers (Hall, 1993; Hall et al., 2007) have suggested increased teacher salary and benefits as influential in improving student achievement. Knoeppel, Verstegen, and Rinehart (2007) supported this assertion, as their findings described teacher quality as related to salary as “the most important factor influencing student achievement” (p. 200). Additional research on teacher quality has reached similar conclusions (Glenn, 2009; Maiden & Evans, 2009). Many researchers suggest that the quality of teaching experiences will improve as a result of the consolidation process including greater disciplinary specialization, better articulation in expansion of the curriculum, increased collaboration, better equipped classrooms, fewer teaching preparations, and increased support services for students (Alsbury & Thomas, 2008; Glenn, 2009; Maiden & Evans, 2009; Hall et al., 2007; Knoeppel et al., 2007; Nitta et al., 2008).

Ultimately, school consolidation may be a means to improved student learning. School communities contemplating this journey must carefully note their unique contextual parameters and history and should proceed using several promising strategies that could be pursued during consolidation. These strategies include “(a) communicate early and often, (b) try to keep an open school facility in each community, (c) develop a new merged identity” (Nitta et al., 2008, p. 12).
**Summary of school consolidation literature.** Although school district consolidation may be viewed as a new concept for those experiencing it for the first time, it is not a new practice. Consolidation efforts typically have hinged on issues such as fiscal efficiency, optimal school size, community identity, legislative mandates, politics and power, and expanded opportunities for students (Heinz, 2005; Self, 2001; St. Cyr Davis, 2005).

School district consolidation carries profound implications for rural communities. As Guthrie (1979, p. 18) noted, “The school consolidation movement reflects one of the most awesome and least publicized governmental changes to occur in this nation during the twentieth century.” Initially, the control of these schools was almost entirely local in nature, as they were built and run by the citizens of the community in which the students lived. Over time, however, the states began to influence a reduction in the number of local schools to provide a more efficient system of operation for public common schools.

Research suggests that school district leaders must fulfill a management function when communities are considering consolidation (Alsbury, 2008; Nitta et al., 2008; Self, 2001; Strang, 1987), including the responsibilities of enrollment coordination, facilities, staffing, a plethora of financial decisions, and transportation concerns (Butts & Durflinger, 2006; Phillips et al., 2007; Zimmer et al., 2009). As a result essential functions such as leadership and learning often are relegated to the back seat of the reform vehicle. The level of complexity with this type of systemic reform requires a clearly defined and effective leadership theory.

Quality empirical research in the area of school consolidation, outside the research on fiscal efficiency, is sparse at best. Nevertheless, interest in school consolidation as a means for improving the efficiency of rural school districts will continue. Illinois State Superintendent of Schools, Christopher A. Koch, reported in his weekly electronic address, “Illinois is in the midst
of a financial crisis and existing programs are not receiving timely payments it simply does not make sense to fully fund GSA Hold Harmless payments for FY10” (ISBE, 2009a). These funds greatly affect some rural districts. Dr. Koch’s comments clearly infer that funding the education in these rural areas is no longer a priority. This attitude is a political reality for downstate Illinois districts as the political power lies in Chicago where the five collar counties constitute nearly one fourth of the Illinois vote. School funding issues will cause consolidation to remain at the forefront in the dialogue of school reform, and was front-page news in the Chicago Tribune (Associated Press, 2011) as Governor Quinn proposed school consolidation plans that would reduce the number of Illinois school districts to fewer than 300.

Unless the property tax base and other resources to fund rural districts improve, it is counterintuitive to assume that the school consolidation discussion will escape rural schools much longer (Dunn, 2001). Although school district consolidations cannot generate enough cost savings to be beneficial at the state level, the fiscal incentives may provide cost savings for individual districts. The vast array of Illinois school districts, which numbered 869 in 2010-2011, and the absence of money in the state coffers continue to provide ample fodder for school district consolidation conversations. These efforts may produce one consolidated unit with ties to some local traditions and community identities as well as retaining a modicum of local control. However, external forces will repeatedly work to ensure consolidation remains an active policy issue, causing districts to be more susceptible to central initiatives and central influence (Verstegen & Grider, 2000; Zimmer et al., 2009).

Although external forces often stimulate reform movements, an internal agent must always work to initiate change within the organization. It becomes the leader’s responsibility to maintain a clear focus, because so many changes take place while meeting the centralized
accountability requirements of larger educational system. At the school building level, this responsibility falls upon the school principal. Elmore (2000) noted:

The logic of large scale instructional improvement leads to differences in kind, rather than differences in degree. If public schools survive, leaders will look very different from the way they presently look, both in who leads and in what these leaders do. (p. 3)

The leadership for learning framework can be an effective mechanism to understand the principal’s key leadership role in facilitating a school’s consolidation efforts through his or her ability to focus on student, faculty, and organizational learning during the consolidation process.

**Theoretical Framework: Leadership for Learning**

This study examined the concept of whether leadership for learning, a theoretical framework with an abundance of research noting the important effect of building leaders on learning (Colvin, 2006; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Knapp, Copland, Ford et al., 2003; Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Louis, Thomas, Leithwood, & Anderson, 2010; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003) informs a principal’s practice and focus on student learning in high school consolidation. The majority of this research has involved qualitative studies based on data from semi-structured interview protocols (Knapp, Copland, Ford et al., 2003; Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2004; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008), although some research has involved meta-analyses of decades of research (Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2009; Waters et al., 2003), as well as a few quantitative studies (Marks & Printy, 2003; Miller & Rowan, 2006; Printy, 2008; Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2009). A recent study, the largest of its kind, was conducted by Louis et al. (2010) and employed a mixed methods approach to understand how leadership affects learning.
Given the current accountability context under NCLB, any claims regarding successful or effective leadership practices are considered valid only when justified by quantitative research evidence (Louis et al., 2010). In this vein, the Leadership Issue Project was initiated by the Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy at the University of Washington. This research team undertook exploratory research intended to examine the central issues present in the emerging practice of educational leaders. The study was commissioned by the Wallace Foundation and resulted in six reports to date that included the following: data-informed leadership in education; allocating resources and creating incentives to improve teaching and learning; redefining roles, responsibilities, and authority of school leaders; purposes, uses, and practices of leadership assessment in education; redefining and improving school district governance; and leadership for transforming high schools (Knapp, Copland, Plecki, & Portin, 2006). All reports noted the principal’s role and provided implications for that administrative position and its importance in leading the learning process.

Researchers studying the field of educational administration historically have pointed to the importance of the role of the principal in facilitating effective learning cultures. Much of the previously discussed research looked specifically at the qualifying or quantifying effect on student learning (Copland & Boatright, 2006; Louis et al., 2010; Mezzacappa, Holland, Willen, Colvin, & Feemster, 2008; Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2009). Research conducted by Leithwood et al. (2004) found that although the influence of the principal on student learning is indirect, 25% of the variance on student achievement is related to the principal’s influence. Knapp et al. (2006) noted that one way leaders influence learning is by focusing the entire system on quality learning for all students. Additional improvements were noted such as principals visiting classrooms regularly, recognizing teachers publicly for effective teaching and
learning practices, and writing private notes to teachers to encourage their efforts to improve student performance (Mezzacappa et al., 2008). Another improvement in teaching and learning practices was the use of short-term assessments to help students query their own data (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2007). Copland and Boatright (2006) noted the importance of personalized strategies and leadership distribution by principals as helpful in promoting student achievement. Furthermore, Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008) noted that teacher learning and ultimately student success improved when principals exerted pedagogical knowledge on practices or policies related to student achievement.

Research also has noted the principal’s influence on teacher learning and professional growth. Initially, this influence began to be recognized through the process used to clarify the work teaching and learning, which led to devoting more time to instructional issues that were focused on student learning and evidence of program effectiveness (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Knapp et al., 2006; Supovitz et al., 2009). This influence has been noted by other scholars as the strengthening of communities of practice (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008; Louis et al., 2010; Printy, 2008). The formal and informal ways that school leaders shape school conditions best prevail in a shared or distributed leadership environment (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Louis et al., 2010; Murphy, Smylie, Mayrowetz, & Louis, 2009; Printy, 2008).

The remaining components of this review address leadership style, instructional leadership, transformational leadership, and school management even though arguably each of these styles holds merit as elements of the five action points related by Knapp et al. (2003). Table 1 provides information about these action points as present in the leading for learning framework; each embraces certain assumptions that may not be fully relevant for this critique.
Table 1

*Five Action Points: Leading for Learning*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action point</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Establishing a focus on student learning</td>
<td>Persistently and publically focusing attention on learning and teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building professional communities</td>
<td>Nurturing a work culture that values and supports member learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging external environments</td>
<td>Building relationships and securing resources from outside groups in order to foster learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acting strategically and sharing leadership</td>
<td>Mobilizing effort and distributing leadership to focus on student, professional, or system learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating coherence</td>
<td>Connecting student, professional, and system learning with one another and with learning goals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Source: Knapp, Copland, Ford et al., 2003.

**Related research on leadership.** A consideration of leadership style may be prudent when determining appropriate leadership practices during a school consolidation. Several scholars (Adams, 2007; Bolman & Deal, 2008; Fullan, 2001; Glickman, 2002; Howard, 2002; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008) provide suggestions for criteria from which organizations may develop a preferred leadership style for the position within their specific culture and context. The leader should employ a theoretical framework in order to successfully lead student learning for a process as complex as school consolidation.

**Instructional leadership.** Student learning takes the form of outcomes or student achievement in the language of instructional leadership. Although instructional leadership theory presents a strong influence on what learning means in practice, it “typically assumes that the critical focus for attention by leaders is the behaviors of teachers as they engage in activities directly affecting the growth of students” (Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 2003, p. 8). This
instructional leadership perspective tends to focus primarily on the act of teaching while often overlooking a focus on student learning. Although instructional leadership lacks an explicit, defined focus, research discussing its relation to practice is present in the literature (Fullan, 2001; Leithwood et al., 2003; Louis et al., 2010; Marks & Printy, 2003; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008).

A frequently cited conceptualization of instructional leadership was developed by Hallinger (2001). Hallinger’s model proposes three areas of instructional leadership: (a) defining the school’s mission; (b) managing instructional programs; and (c) promoting a positive learning climate in the school. These areas of instructional leadership are briefly explained in the following paragraphs.

The first area of instructional leadership involves developing the school’s mission and goals (Hallinger, 2010; Murphy, 1990). Marks and Printy (2003) noted the instructional leadership model “considers the principal as the primary source of educational expertise” (p. 372). Here the principal’s focus in working with the staff is to develop clear, measurable goals focused on students’ academic strengths and weaknesses (Hallinger, 2003). It is also the principal’s responsibility to communicate these goals to the broader community. There is a clear emphasis on the principal’s management of the school’s instructional program (Hallinger, 2005, 2010).

The next dimension of instructional leadership, managing the instructional program, focuses primarily on the “coordination and control of instruction and curriculum” (Hallinger, 2003, p. 332). Murphy (1990) premised that principals emphasize such activities as coordinating, monitoring, and evaluating curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Again, the principal’s educational expertise is paramount in the supervision of classroom instruction (Marks & Printy,
Quality instruction is required to ensure substantial gains in student learning (Leithwood et al., 2004).

Hallinger (2003) described the final area as “promoting a positive school learning climate” (p. 332). Climate includes several elements: “protecting instructional time, promoting professional development, maintaining high visibility, providing incentives for teachers, developing high expectations and standards, and providing incentives for learning” (Hallinger, 2005, p. 15). Hallinger (2003) described this dimension as being broader in scope and intent.

Fullan (2007) noted the importance of principals creating a culture of continuous improvement, specifically for teaching and student learning in the school. The principal must model these values and behaviors in order to enhance school capacity (Fullan, 2007).

Finally, an important critique of the instructional leadership literature is that it is incomplete because it does not address the organizational components specific to student learning. The leading for learning framework, described later in this chapter, is much more detailed, addressing 23 pathways connected to student, faculty, and organizational learning. Overall, this research has demonstrated that student achievement is highly related to the quality of instructional leadership in the school (Hallinger, 2010; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Louis et al., 2010; Printy, 2008; Supovitz et al., 2009).

**Transformational leadership.** The ability of organizations to function as learning communities and sustain performance often requires effective leaders who demonstrate the capacity to transform an organization. The empirical research on transformational leadership is extensive. Articulation of this theory began with Burns’ (1978, 2003) initial studies of historical and political leaders and continues as the study of transforming leaders. Transformational leadership has been researched in the field of business as well, noting the goals of organizational
change and effectiveness (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Kouzes & Posner, 1995). Many scholars note transformational leadership within the field of education (Copland & Boatright, 2006; Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2003; Marks & Printy, 2003; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008; Schein, 2004; Sheppard, 1996). The utilization of its inspirational power has been cited as meeting the needs of complex and diverse systems by these researchers.

Transformational leadership has become a popularized concept in the field of education primarily through the research of Kenneth Leithwood (1994), who developed a transformational leadership model containing seven specific dimensions. These dimensions include the following: (a) building a school’s vision and goals; (b) providing for intellectual stimulation; (c) offering individualized support; (d) modeling best practice and professional values; (e) creating high expectations for performance; (f) creating a productive organizational culture; and (g) developing structures that foster shared decision-making (Leithwood, 1994; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Leithwood et al., 2003). Leithwood’s (2003) model of transformational leadership asserts that the central focus of leadership exists to enhance organizational change, specifically “the commitments and capacities of organizational members” (p. 9). The model continues to be refined by Leithwood and his colleagues. Leithwood concluded that the next frontier in transformational leadership will need to deal with the “identification of values to which those exercising leadership will need to adhere in order to help schools transform” (p. 205).

An interesting critique presented by Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008) disputed this integrated approach, noting that instructional leadership practices demonstrate an impact three to four times that of transformational leadership. Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe noted, “Transformational leadership is focused on the relationship between leaders and followers and not on the educational work of school leadership” (p. 665). It is not surprising that student
learning often is jeopardized when school leaders choose to focus primarily on relational development and building and sustaining morale. Fullan (2001) cautioned that adults may have different practices, goals, and commitments—again related to the teaching influence of instructional leadership that may not address student learning or may have a negative effect on student learning. The leader must maintain the teachers’ focus on student learning and prevent interference with this pivotal commitment.

**Integrated leadership.** Many researchers have studied the marriage of instructional and transformational leadership theories to improve the overall effectiveness of practitioners (Hallinger, 2003, 2005; Leithwood et al., 2003; Marks & Printy, 2003; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008; Sheppard, 1996). Marks and Printy (2003) investigated the importance of what they termed “integrated leadership,” which they described as “transformational coupled with shared instructional leadership” (p. 392) as a model for the improved effectiveness of teachers. The two theories were combined in the empirical study, and evidence was presented displaying high levels of performance on student achievement measures. Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008) noted that leadership in higher performing schools was developed around leaders and faculty working together to review and improve teaching as “distinguished by active oversight and coordination of the instructional program” (p. 662).

**Management.** When considering the effectiveness of various leadership theories, the importance of management practices also must be investigated. Leadership style and management practices have been examined thoroughly in the literature (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Kouzes & Posner, 1995; Miller & Rowan, 2006; Ray, Candoli, & Hack, 2005; Schein, 2004). It is apparent that an effective building leader cannot function well without fully addressing both
management and leadership functions. White (2007) described management as fundamentally about order and control, and leadership as more about achieving goals and making change.

High quality management practices are essential in leadership for successful school consolidation. Management is essential for cost-benefit analysis, management information systems, enrollment forecasting, program planning and evaluation, formative and summative evaluation, human relations, and communication (Ray et al., 2005). Additionally, Datnow and Castellano (2001) noted specific management functions that are essential at the building level: such items include fiscal and human resources, various building schedules, and the assessment practices used for monitoring progress. However, unless an unwavering leadership focus is placed on student learning, routine and basic managerial responsibilities can readily consume the principal’s time. Screwtape affectionately promoted this form of distraction to Wormwood in C. S. Lewis’s work (1996): “You don’t realize how enslaved they are to the pressure of the ordinary” (p. 2). The ability to successfully manage an organization is required in order to maintain the continuous improvement necessary for student learning.

**Conceptual Framework: Leadership for Learning**

The conceptual framework for this study is based on the Knapp, Copland, and Ford et al. (2003) research and has been adapted in Figure 1. Knapp, Copland, and Talbert (2003) developed a leadership for learning framework based on five areas that learning-focused leaders address: (a) establishing a focus on learning; (b) building professional communities that take learning seriously; (c) engaging external environments that matter for learning; (d) acting strategically and collaboratively along pathways of activity aimed at different aspects of student, professional, and system learning; and (e) creating coherence (pp. 19-43). The primary
conceptual underpinning of this study is aimed at better understanding the nature of successful educational leadership and how it influences student learning. The breadth and depth of this framework make it an excellent tool to consider when leading in an environment dominated by the complexity and chaos such as that present in school consolidation.

Although an emphasis on leadership for learning has been evident in the North American and Australian education literature (Knapp, Copland, Ford et al. 2003; Leithwood et al., 2004; Louis et al., 2010; Mulford & Silins, 2003; Sheppard, 1996) for the better part of a decade, there is no literature explaining its use in understanding the effects of the school consolidation process on the principal’s ability to maintain a focus on student learning. The analysis that follows addresses the five areas highlighted in the conceptual framework in relation to students, professionals (faculty), and systems (the organization) learning.

**Focus on learning.** Schools should be focused on learning, because, schools are fundamentally about learning; this definition of learning includes students, teachers, administrators, and the community at large. The traditional structure of schools typically serves to mitigate teacher learning and collaboration (Ehrich, 2000). The leader’s important role within this definition of schools cannot be overstated. In these instances, school leaders must establish a
collective focus on learning without allowing compromises that jeopardize that focus (Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003; Murphy et al., 2010). Leaders must sustain a clear and coherent focus over time in order to prevent oscillation from one focus to another each year (Knapp, Copland, Ford et al., 2003). Oscillation is clearly a concern as schools focus on specific learning goals each year, which if not addressed may annually be mitigated by curriculum reviews or the test results of individual classes or students that were assessed at one moment in time.

Research suggests an educational process of learning is focused on the student (or learner) rather than on the teacher (Ballenger, 2004; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1996; Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, & Bryk, 2001; Senge, 2000; Sleeter, 2005) and also supports a focus on the leader’s behaviors as key to promoting improved student learning (Copland, 2003; Copland & Boatright, 2006; Hoy, Tarter, & Hoy, 2006; Newmann et al., 2001; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). Murphy (2005) asserted that teachers can make a major difference in the learning of students, themselves, and their colleagues, and they also can enhance student learning by strengthening their personal and interpersonal capacities. A consistent theme in the research is the importance of maintaining a central focus on adult learning in guiding building-wide conversations about learning (Fullan, 2001; Knapp et al., 2006; Kouzes & Posner, 1995; Leithwood et al., 2003; Murphy, 2005). Through this process, leaders establish a “persistent, public focus on learning at the school level” (Knapp, Copland, Ford et al., 2003, p. 21).

To keep learning at the center of their practice, principals must visit classrooms regularly, participate alongside their staff members in professional development activities, and initiate and guide conversations about student learning (Datnow & Castellano, 2001; Elmore, 2000; Galluchi, 2007; Knapp, Copland, Ford et al., 2003; Murphy, 2005; Senge, 2000; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). One method for creating these conversations is for principals to
make student learning the central focus of performance evaluation (Elmore, 2000; Knapp, Copland, Ford et al., 2003; Leithwood, et al., 2004; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, and Orr (2007) provided a scenario describing a principal’s intensive focus on learning:

With each class she visited, Leslie collected notes on the strengths and areas of need she identified during her observations. As she reflected on her instructional observations, she began to think through the conversations she planned to have with specific teachers about what she had seen. She framed these planned conversations in terms of inquiry: asking teachers for assessments of what was effective for students’ learning, their rationale for their strategies, and their views about how to improve. She also used her notes from these classroom visits to plan for grade-level and school-wide professional development focused on supporting student learning. (p. 14)

One mechanism to initiate or guide these discussions is through the use of data. The analysis of results, including student achievement data, and the development of strategies for improvement based on that analysis were documented in three empirical studies (Copland, 2003; Hoy et al., 2006; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). Assessment for learning is an important component of this type of analysis. Black et al., (2007) described assessment for learning as the use of assessment in a formative way, allowing students to partner in their own learning and teachers to adapt instruction to meet immediate and individualized student learning needs. Other researchers describe this process as frequent, on-going assessment to determine individual students’ progress (Boyle & Charles, 2010; Chappuis, Stiggins, Arter, & Chappuis, 2005; Wormeli, 2006).

Another essential component of formative assessment is providing feedback to the learner (Black et al., 2007; Boyle & Charles, 2010; Chappuis et al., 2005; Wormeli, 2006). Obviously, the method through which assessment or feedback is provided is contextual, and it is of critical importance for educators and students to reflect collaboratively on assessment data. However, certain realities exist that will influence any practice. The initial step includes
structures for collecting, maintaining, and using student learning data. The process must involve setting goals individually and as a learning community. Students and educators must be willing to openly discuss and debate their learning activities and challenges. This practice encourages students and teachers to scrutinize student work samples in an effort to facilitate and improve learning (Black et al., 2007; Chappuis et al., 2005; Darling-Hammond & Friedlaender, 2008; Knapp, Copland, Ford et al., 2003; Senge, 2000; Wormeli, 2006).

Ultimately, the needs of each student, as determined from self-assessments and other forms of feedback, are considered when creating and providing student supports and interventions designed by members of learning communities. Interestingly, school consolidation typically has been undertaken for students and to students, but rarely in consultation with students. Work with the learning community may improve this sordid history and eventually may improve student learning and facilitate students’ progress toward their learning goals (Black et al., 2007; Chappuis et al., 2005; Knapp et al., 2003a; Wormeli, 2006).

**Professional learning communities.** It is important for schools to develop cultures in which learning opportunities and structures for continuous improvement and accountability are present (Ehrich, 2000; Knapp, Copland, Ford et al., 2003; Louis et al., 2010). The development of this culture does not occur by chance. Campbell (2005) noted one of the most entrenched norms of collegiality

is one which equates ethical treatment of colleagues with a kind of unquestioned loyalty, group solidarity, and an essential belief that teachers as professionals should not interfere in the business of other teachers, criticize their practices, or expose their possibly negligent behavior even at the expense of students’ well-being. (p. 209)

Research suggests that principals often provide the initial catalyst necessary for change at the onset of the school’s reform efforts (Copland, 2003; Deal & Peterson, 1999; Louis et al., 2010; Murphy et al., 2009; Spillane, 2003). Galluchi (2007) found that once teachers’ and
administrators’ learning is codified into structures and policies, it can begin to institutionalize specific concepts and practices across all systems in the organization. Thus, the process ultimately is embedded within the organization.

How is it possible for formal leaders to continuously improve their organizations, given the complexities of change if management directives are not sustained over time? The key to sustaining continuous improvement is found in the formation of interpersonal relationships. Fullan (2007) asserted that the improvement of relationships must be a core strategy for change: as positive relationships develop, trust typically will increase, along with other measures of “social capital and social cohesion” (p. 52). Numerous researchers have highlighted the importance of building relationships (Fullan, 2001; Knapp, Copland, Ford et al., 2003; Kouzes & Posner, 1995; Murphy, 2005; Schein, 2004), and others assert that trust is a necessary part of these relationships (Barnett & McCormick, 2004; Fullan, 2007; Senge, 2000). In education, the concept of respect suggests that an emerging staff voice is an essential component of the leadership structure (Barnett & McCormick, 2004; Copland, 2003; Murphy, 2005; Senge, 2000). Ideas of trust, caring, and collaboration are considered important elements of healthy educational relationships (Fullan, 2001, 2007; Kouzes & Posner, 1995; Senge, 2000). There is an important distinction that separates effective and ineffective leaders: They “really care about the people [they] lead” (Kouzes & Posner, 1998, p. 149). This distinction also has been described as an ethic of caring, as teachers are supported by leaders who are committed to the professional growth of others (Ehrich, 2000; Starratt, 1991).

A final element that must be considered in the structures for interaction among professionals in a learning community is time. If an organization is chaotic or disorganized as it may very well be at the onset of school consolidation the leader must begin “with immediate and

49
regular communication with staff about the school, their work, and the leader’s commitment” (Knapp, Copland, Ford et al., 2003, p. 27). Developing and maintaining effective communication will occupy a significant portion of the leader’s time, and it also will take time for teachers and staff members to review, reflect on, and assimilate this critical information from the leader. To ensure effective time management strategies are being employed, it is important for the leader to carefully analyze how time is spent on various administrative tasks (Mezzacappa et al., 2008). Research has discussed the importance of a commitment to focused, collaborative time as one fundamental premise and as the greatest potential factor for actual change in schools that display student achievement gains (Darling-Hammond & Friedlaender, 2008; Day & Leithwood, 2007; Ehrich, 2000; Fullan, 2007; Murphy, 2005). Miller and Rowan (2006) have documented the positive effects of common planning time on improved student achievement at both the elementary and secondary levels.

In light of the literature on leadership for learning, the critical question during school consolidation becomes: How does a leader create an institutional culture that places student learning at the forefront of all other considerations? In reality, the leader may need to recruit and hire new teachers in order to overcome any resistance to the culture that is emerging within the newly consolidated school (Copland, 2003; Knapp, Copland, Ford et al., 2003). However, there exists a strong possibility that this will not occur. The very nature of bargained agreements and teacher seniority typically affects who will remain on staff. The positions of key teachers may even be eliminated as redundant as a result of the merger. Regardless, even well trained, consistently mentored, and highly motivated teachers will need structured time to meet to review, discuss, and reflect on the quality of student learning and the effectiveness of their instructional methods. Ultimately, this use of time and instructional resources must be
orchestrated so that teachers and administrators can work intensively on instructional issues (Knapp et al., 2006).

**Engaging external environments.** Successful leadership behaviors that address improved student learning require leaders to build relationships and secure resources with constituents and stakeholders outside the school or district (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Darling-Hammond & Friedlaender, 2008; Knapp, Copland, Ford et al., 2003; Louis et al., 2010). Leaders build these relationships through anticipating, identifying, and addressing concerns that may be perceived by external stakeholders. Leaders engage the external community in a variety of ways. They actively partner with parents and communities to engage, encourage, and solicit support for the learning agenda (Fullan, 2007; Knapp, Copland, Ford et al., 2003; Senge, 2000). Leaders must allow full participation of members of the community when collaboratively determining the vision and direction of the school. The leader must work strategically to include a representative community voice in order to promote trust and communication, thus strengthening family, community, and educational cultures. Leithwood and Riehl (2003) cited specific strategies designed to strengthen relationships with members of the school external constituency that can be facilitated through resource allocation to families, providing education and support for families related to parenting and learning, and by adjusting school practices to reflect the educational culture of families.

Through the use of these strategies, effective leaders anticipate and prevent conflict from developing that may negatively influence the faculty’s teaching and learning practices (Knapp, Copland, Ford et al., 2003). Knapp, Copland, Ford et al. (2003) offered two suggestions for interacting with the school’s external environment: involving potential critics in the school improvement process and partnering with neighborhood groups focused on improving learning,
particularly those with a traditionally limited voice. Strategic leaders work to shape the culture of the school by including these groups in school-wide conversations.

Effective leaders also work to build relationships in order to find and procure all available resources, including fiscal, intellectual, and human capital, in order to support the learning agenda (Knapp, Copland, Ford et al., 2003). Often school officials provide tangible rewards to celebrate the victories of students, faculty, and the organization. These rewards can include such elements as MP3 players, extended lunch breaks, and personal time. Although these resources may not always be tangible, school leaders must build relationships with external constituencies in order to procure the resources necessary to allow leaders to maximize particular aspects of their learning improvement agenda (Knapp, Copland, Ford et al., 2003). Numerous researchers note the importance of providing rewards to reinforce the positive attributes and successes of those working within the school organization (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Bolman & Deal, 2008; Darling-Hammond & Friedlaender, 2008; Fullan, 2001; Galluchi, 2007; Kouzes & Posner, 1995; Leithwood et al., 2003; Senge, 2000).

**Acting strategically and shared leadership.** The leading for learning framework promotes structural change through the distribution of leadership activities across the organization (Copland, 2003; Louis et al., 2010; Marks & Printy, 2003; Murphy et al., 2009; National Association of Secondary School Principals [NASSP], 2004, 2009; Spillane, 2003; Spillane et al., 2001). Distributed leadership theory is premised upon the understanding that leadership is not held entirely by positional leaders such as principals but is “stretched over a series of formal and informal actors and artifacts” (Spillane et al., 2001, p. 23). A key premise in this concept is the development of leadership density: The presence of committed individuals throughout the organization who have sufficient skills to enact the leadership responsibility.
Leaders can be strategic in distributing their leadership activities by identifying staff members who possess specialized expertise relevant to the specific learning needs or goals of the organization. Knapp, Copland, Ford et al. (2003) suggested drawing on faculty expertise in order to develop and fulfill school improvement initiatives. Leaders must strategically place importance on initiatives that have the greatest potential to positively influence learning. A framework developed by Elmore (2000) supports the multiple learning areas of the Knapp, Copland, Ford et al. (2003) research by noting the importance of leadership distributed across the entire system. Elmore (2000) asserted, “The roles and activities of leadership flow from the expertise required for learning and improvement, not from the formal dictates of the institution” (p. 21). Empowering others to exercise leadership and make significant decisions in this collegial concept of authority must evolve by utilizing individual expertise (Copland, 2003; Elmore, 2000; Leithwood et al., 2004; Marks & Printy, 2003; Murphy, 2005; Murphy et al., 2009). The internal and external support necessary for continuous improvement will come from a concerted effort on the part of individuals with different areas of expertise and roles to connect people, purpose, and practice (Elmore, 2000; Murphy, 2005).

Although the concept of distributed leadership may resonate with practitioners, its effectiveness in improving student achievement has been questioned, because relatively little empirical research has been conducted to date (Leithwood & Mascall, 2008; Mayrowetz, 2008). Furthermore, the involvement of teachers in formal leadership roles outside the classroom has been difficult to investigate due to hierarchical norms that typically exist in traditional school organizational structures (Murphy et al., 2009). These norms often work against the empowerment of teacher leaders because the formal leaders, such as principals, typically control the distribution of leadership (Mayrowetz, 2008; Murphy, 2005; Murphy et al., 2009). Murphy et
al. (2009) asserted that “formal leaders are in a position to move initiatives forward or to kill them off, quickly through actions or slowly through neglect” (p. 181). Therefore, it is incumbent upon the principal to develop, support, manage, and model a distributed form of leadership.

Creating coherence. Research conducted through the utilization of a leadership for learning framework refers to coherence as a commitment to continuous improvement during the reform initiative (Copland & Boatright, 2006; Fullan, 2001; Knapp, Copland, Ford et al., 2003; Knapp et al., 2006). The literature draws a parallel across the learning of students, teachers, and organizations and the availability of quality professional development (Fullan, 2007; Murphy, 2005). This research suggests leaders, in multiple areas of the organization, must create the incentives necessary to support both student and teacher learning. The ability to embed professional development within the organization, specifically all learning aspects, is critically important in creating and sustaining coherence throughout the process of continuous improvement.

Coherence is described by Knapp et al. (2006) as a collection of compelling ideas about learning improvement. The challenge for leaders is “to seize opportunities in such a way as to maximize the connections among different programs or activities in support for learning” (Knapp et al., 2006, p. 53). This research suggests that leaders exert influence within an organization by setting clear learning targets, which they continuously monitor and address with their followers. However, doing so may prove difficult because many state and local settings require leaders to be accountable for multiple goals some of which may compete with those designed for student learning.

The essential task of creating coherence at the building level frequently is tied to teacher professional development. Fullan (2001, 2007) suggested that coherence develops as leaders
build professional development around data relevant to their specific practice. Senge (2000) described a similar process when referring to team learning. Knapp, Copland, Ford et al. (2003) advised leaders to situate professional development as close to practice as possible by conducting it within the classroom setting. Embedding professional development in practice allows the immersion, reflection, and inquiry necessary for continuous improvement and collaborative planning (Fullan, 2007; Knapp, Copland, Ford et al., 2003). This team learning approach will ensure the consistency of goals that are aligned with the values of school community.

When considering the process of school consolidation, it is important to understand that tough decisions require trade-offs and often arise as a result of “environmental turbulence” (Knapp, Copland, Ford et al., 2003, p. 43). Murphy (1991) emphasized that reorganization consistently has more to do with politics than with increased efficiency or enhanced quality. The political dynamic introduced through the environmental turbulence present in school consolidation can cause the organization to drift away from its original goals. Organizational drift can occur as leaders lose sight of the larger learning goals and become fortified around management requirements and responsibilities that are mandated in legislation or policy. The politics present when competing reform agendas simultaneously exist within the school can create a tenuous political topography for schools. Leaders may find it difficult to function as change agents when they are confronted with the myriad challenges present in creating program coherence. Knapp, Copland, Ford et al. (2003) suggested that the pace of reform may move faster than the ability or willingness of schools and teachers to assimilate and internalize new knowledge. Teachers do not always have the requisite expertise needed under these conditions. Further, leaders must develop dynamic structures “by creating teams and other processes for
encouraging the dialogue, expectations, and support necessary for collaborative work” (Knapp, Copland, Ford et al., 2003, p. 43).

**Modified Conceptual Framework**

This review of the literature, specifically the key components in the Knapp, Copland, Ford et al. (2003) leadership for learning theoretical framework, demonstrates a strong and promising structure for school consolidation when that process maintains a clear and consistent focus on learning at the student, professional, and organizational learning levels. These three learning areas are present and primed for learning as they relate to the consolidation process. The value of learning at each of these levels and their relevance to student learning create an intriguing conceptual frame for examining the realities of school consolidation activities.

Conceptually, the principal must set the learning direction of the school, which obviously is aligned with the vision established by the board of education and superintendent, in order to maintain a consistent focus on student learning during the school consolidation process. The framework developed by Knapp, Copland, Ford et al. (2003) has been adapted in Figure 2 to highlight the importance of the principal’s ability to transcend the management-directed process of school consolidation, much like an eclipse, with the leadership for learning framework. Metaphorically, in much the same way that the Greek God of the Sun, Apollo, would drive his fiery chariot across the sky each day to provide light, the building principal must integrate the leadership for learning framework each day across the management of school consolidation in order to illuminate effective leadership practices.
An inability to reframe leadership as an organizational quality and remain trapped only in the management function is comparable to when Apollo’s human son, Phaethon, borrowed the sun chariot and lost control driving across the sky. As Phaeton tried to control the chariot, he came to close to the earth and scorched portions of earth and sea. Exhausted, he eventually was burned from a lightning bolt thrown by Jupiter. Considerable irony may be present in comparing Phaeton’s ride with the burnout many principals feel when employing a traditional form of leadership to lead such complex change. Although the metaphor offers an interesting visual, it does present a comparison of how the leader, as well as constituents, can experience organizational drift in the absence of a research-based structure to provide guidance for their local context.

**Critique of Leadership for Learning**

Leading in the midst of change often creates opportunities to adapt organizational paradigms and improve leadership practices. To achieve strategic objectives, principals must critically examine their personal beliefs and professional practices while collaboratively examining the values and processes of the organization. This examination cannot take place in a
Mulford and Silins (2003) suggested that “reforms in schools, no matter how well conceptualized, powerfully sponsored, brilliantly structured, or closely audited are likely to fail in the face of cultural resistance” (p. 175). Resistance can come either from those working within the schools or stakeholders outside the organization. Often leaders fail to respond to the voices of their stakeholders, particularly voices that raise concerns of diversity and equity.

**Issues of social justice.** Although the leadership for learning framework holds promise for research in school consolidation, it is important to note that a significant limitation exists in this framework: It falls short in fully addressing issues of diversity and equity. These issues clearly are present in research on educational institutions, and the context of school consolidation provides fertile ground with which to collect evidence on issues of social justice. Although certainly collaborative, the framework does not provide for the deconstruction and reconstruction of cultural knowledge frameworks. Discussions about the existence and rich descriptions of differences (such as those between student and teacher) or research related to critical theories or transformative styles of leadership are absent. These “dialogic relations” as described by Shields (2007, p. 66) are necessary when leaders examine their positions “and the importance and possibility of action given alternative or conflicting perspectives” (p. 66), many of which are present in the school consolidation process. Nevertheless, it does allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the influence of school consolidation on a principal’s ability to focus on student learning. Further research should be conducted to address the absence of leadership for social justice in this framework and for school consolidation as a whole.

**Communication.** How leaders effectively communicate with their constituents and stakeholders is essential in any leadership enterprise. The importance of clear, consistent, and continuous communication is explicitly noteworthy, yet often is overlooked in the empirical
studies on educational administration and related literature on leadership for learning. Many forms of dysfunction that are present in schools are a result of poor communication with constituents and stakeholders. Earl and Fullan (2003) conducted a case study in Manitoba, Canada that explored principal control over data and the determination of what information was released to external stakeholders. They noted that principals often did not understand the need for communicating the information (data) to external stakeholders.

Effective communication practices have been mentioned in research studies conducted by Murphy (2005) and Senge (2000); however, this research was focused on teacher leadership and was far more limited in addressing the communication of educational administrators. Additionally, Murphy (2005) characterized communication skills as an “indispensable element” in teacher leadership (p. 72). In contrast, the discussion of communication in research conducted on business leadership (Collins, 2001; Kouzes & Posner, 1995) is much more rigorous. This literature discusses an array of communication styles, contexts, skills, methods, mechanisms, and perspectives.

The context of communication for school leadership must be taken into account. Mulford and Silins (2003) cited recent research examining effective leadership in schools that were facing challenging contexts. They documented that effective leadership in these schools was tightly coupled around values, purposes, and direction but loosely coupled on involving others in leadership activities, and as a result developed clear-direction and widespread involvement. Fullan (2007) expressed caution with command-and-control strategies within the too-tight/too-loose structural dilemma, noting that “command-and-control strategies do get results in these circumstances, but only for a short time and only to a degree” (p. 43).
Leaders in the context of school consolidation may find it informative to review recent empirical studies on continuous improvement. Analyzing this research can have value for learning through the practical ideas and questions that revolve around conceptualizing the improvement of communication strategies (Colvin, 2006; Copland & Boatright, 2006; Knapp et al., 2006; Leithwood et al., 2004; Mezzacappa et al., 2008; Wallace Foundation, 2009a, 2009b). Barnett et al. (2001) suggested caution during significant and long-term reforms, noting a visionary as a head teacher may actually distract teachers from concentrating on teaching and learning and detract from their development of ownership of the vision. Murphy (2005) discussed the importance of confronting barriers in school contexts through a “chain of analysis” (p. 98), which he used to describe the multiple difficulties and obstacles present in current forms of teacher leadership. Leadership roles must become embedded within the school culture and be sustained in order to overcome these obstacles.

Research conducted by Mulford and Silins (2003) reviewed the Leadership for Organizational Learning and Student Outcomes (LOLSO) in Australian secondary schools. This research study for school reform considered the link between leadership with organizational learning and student outcomes. The mixed-methods approach was conducted in four phases: surveying 3,500 students and 2,500 teachers, conducting cross-sectional and longitudinal case studies at four sites, resurveying the respondents (two years later), and using the qualitative and quantitative data to pilot professional development interventions for school leaders. This project described the interactive effects of the educational environment on leadership. The research suggested that leadership that makes a difference in secondary school improvement was both distributive and based upon one’s position within the organization. The findings of this research exhibited transformational leadership as defined by participation, facilitation, and consensus.
when including teacher voice in distributed leadership as successful reform styles of leadership. Leithwood et al. (2003) described how leaders must influence the unique circumstances or problems present in their local context. Additionally, variations in context obviously require different and varying leadership responses. These ideas, which Fullan (2001) titled “learning in context” (p. 125), may point to leading for learning as even more critical, given the need for learning to take place wherever educators work including a new school building or culture that teachers work in after a school consolidation.

**Role of the principal in school consolidation.** Simply stated, leadership matters (Barnett & McCormick, 2004; Collins, 2001; Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood & Wahlstrom, 2008; Mulford & Silins, 2003; Spillane, 2003). Although Leithwood et al. (2004) asserted that leadership comes from many sources and not just the “usual suspects,” superintendents and principals, these usual suspects are often very influential in the school setting. Gallucci (2007, p. 19) has categorized the building principal as “strategic.” Other researchers supported the concept as well, in which the principal is actively involved in providing leadership for learning (Day & Leithwood, 2007; Fullan, 2001; Hallinger, 2010; Senge, 2000). Additionally, the literature makes direct reference to the principal as an important formal figure in the learning process (Ehrich, 2000; Hallinger, 2010; Knapp, Copland, Ford et al., 2003; Leithwood et al., 2004, Louis et al., 2010; Murphy et al., 2009). Although teachers are directly responsible for student learning, several empirical studies (Barnett & McCormick, 2004; Hallinger & Heck, 1996, 2010; Newmann et al., 2001; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008) suggest that indirectly, so are principals. Leithwood et al. (2004) noted that “leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn” (p. 7). The researchers reported that the direct and indirect effects of leadership accounted for one fourth of the entire school’s effects on student
learning. Furthermore, exemplary leaders can positively facilitate a culture for student learning while ineffective leaders can negatively affect student learning. As research has begun to confirm the important role of the educational leader in promoting student achievement gains, this “enhanced recognition has been accompanied by increased scrutiny” (Murphy, Moorman, & McCarthy, 2008, p. 2174). Principals are “levers of change” (Mulford & Silins, 2003, p. 190).

Given the context of school consolidation, an analysis of the principal’s ability to nurture leadership opportunities for teachers is essential in acquiring commitment from teachers (Leithwood & Mascall, 2008; Murphy et al., 2009). Teacher commitment is essential, because teachers themselves have been identified as factors that inhibit teacher and organizational leadership (Hallinger, 2003; Marks & Printy, 2003; Mulford & Silins, 2003; Murphy, 2005). These empirical studies clearly note the importance of effective principal leadership.

A gap exists in the current literature with regard to the role of the principal in maintaining a focus on student learning within the context of school consolidation. Existing empirical studies on leadership in school consolidation revolve entirely around the role of the superintendent in facilitating this process (Alsbury & Shaw, 2005; Alsbury & Thomas, 2008). Additionally, phenomenological research on consolidation has centered on the costs and benefits of school consolidation policies (Nitta et al., 2008). Ultimately, these limitations create fertile ground for the examination of principal leadership practice within the context of school consolidation.

**Summary**

This chapter reviewed and summarized empirical research and related literature specific to the topics of school consolidation and leadership for learning. Although the role of the principal is important and even significant in contemporary research in educational leadership,
principals cannot single-handedly influence learning (Leithwood & Mascall, 2008; Mayrowetz, 2008; Mulford & Silins, 2003). Hallinger (2003) noted that a major obstacle to effective school leadership can be the leader attempting to carry the burden alone. As principals navigate the complexities of school consolidation, it is essential that they utilize any untapped leadership expertise in their school. In order to provide successful building-level leadership for student learning within a context of school consolidation, it is vital that the principal maintain a focus on student learning, develop learning communities, build external connections, center the structure on distributed leadership, and commit to continuous improvement through coherence.

Additionally, the importance of communication in the context of consolidation must be explored further in order to develop explicit conclusions designed to benefit students during the process. The difficult leadership challenges present during school consolidation highlight the importance of communication in such a hypersensitive environment, which is evident as many people acknowledge uncertainty and avoidance as they face their fears of the unknown (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Kouzes & Posner, 1995).

Given the body of research concluding the principal’s leadership plays a significant role in students’ learning successes (Leithwood & Mascall, 2008; Mayrowetz, 2008; Mulford & Silins, 2003), the principal’s importance in setting the direction for student learning is embodied in the Knapp, Copland, and Ford et al. (2003) leading for learning theoretical framework. As adapted, the framework contains the potential for tremendous benefit as a valuable guide for examining and understanding the influence of school consolidation on the principal’s ability to focus on student, professional, and organizational learning.
Chapter 3
Methodology

The purpose of this study was to document and explore the influence of school consolidation on a high school principal’s ability to maintain the school’s focus on student learning. A premise of this study is that the building principal is the internal agent of change. Therefore, examination was focused on the extent to which the principal maintains a focus on student learning during the first year of school district consolidation. Additionally, the examination illuminated the factors that facilitate or support a focus on student learning, as well as the factors that inhibit or create barriers to a focus on student learning. The focus of the study was to identify the experiences of this educational leader, to understand the influence of school consolidation on the principal’s ability to focus on student, professional, and organizational learning. The study includes recommendations that were developed to guide educators, communities, and policymakers when considering school district consolidation and its effects on student learning.

This chapter begins by discussing the importance of utilizing a sound theoretical framework as a guide for examining the influence of school consolidation on the principal’s ability to focus on student, professional, and organizational learning. The chapter describes the research methodology for this study: a single, revelatory case. The remainder of the chapter will include sampling techniques, data collection, data analysis, standards of validation, and significance.

Research Questions

This research involved a case study of one Illinois high school, with a particular focus on the principal’s leadership practices as a learning leader. Specifically, the study was designed to
identify facilitating and mitigating factors to the principal’s efforts. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How does the high school principal maintain a focus on student learning in the first year of a school district consolidation?

2. What factors facilitate or support the principal’s ability to maintain a focus on student learning?

3. What factors inhibit or are barriers to the principal’s ability to maintain a focus on student learning?

4. Does leadership for learning as a conceptual framework inform the principal’s practice and focus on student learning in the first year of a school district consolidation?

**Overview of Research Methods**

This study used qualitative research methods, through the use of a case study. This form of empirical inquiry allows the researcher to conduct an in-depth investigation in the actual and often unique context of a case in order to critically examine something that the researcher wants to know but clearly does not understand (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). Lincoln and Guba (1985) described the case study methodology as extremely advantageous to the researcher because it provides an unparalleled means for representing contextual information that is grounded “in the particular setting that was studied” (p. 360). Numerous researchers (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994) have noted the importance of a naturalistic ontology when studying a phenomenon in its natural setting in order to examine the entire context. Because studies need to explore the historical and political life of their institutions in order to be clearly understood, qualitative researchers often participate in the local context.
Through the case, my research analyzed a myriad of formal and informal data. The case study method allows collection of data specific to the context in understanding the principal’s ability to maintain a focus on student learning during the first year of high school consolidation. Based on the paucity of research on principal leadership during school consolidation, the very nature of this study was focused on investigating and documenting the untold story of the building principal.

To develop the story of the principal, the unique nature of this case must be revealed in detail. Yin (2009) noted that case studies may have a revelatory design where “selection of a single-case design grants an investigator access to a phenomenon previously inaccessible to scientific observation” (p. 49). I chose this case believing it to be revelatory because it illuminates the practice of the principal during the implementation year of the school consolidation process. Furthermore, according to Yin (2009), a revelatory case of this nature may in itself likely be regarded as a discovery.

A single-case design was selected based on Yin’s (2009) description of a revelatory case, in which the researcher has access to a situation previously inaccessible to scientific observation. Miles and Huberman (1994) noted, “Single cases are the stuff of much qualitative research and can be very vivid and illuminating, especially if they are chosen to be critical, unique, or revelatory” (p. 26). Yin (2009) agreed that such conditions justify the use of a single-case study.

The situation existed in which I had a unique opportunity to access and explore one high school principal’s experience leading the initial year of her high school’s consolidation. Previously, this phenomenon has not been examined at the implementation stage, and it primarily has been viewed after the fact (Alsbury & Shaw, 2005; Alsbury & Thomas, 2008; Coulson, 2007; Duncombe & Yinger, 2007; Heinz, 2005; St. Cyr Davis, 2005). The potential to
form a significant case study justifies “the use of a single case study on the grounds of its revelatory nature” (Yin, 2009, p. 49), as few researchers have previously taken the opportunity to study school consolidation during the first year of implementation.

Participants

In designing my case, I deliberately decided to investigate the specific perspective of a high school principal, who was directly involved in the school consolidation process. Therefore, I approached my sampling decisions using a purposive technique. The selection of participants in a purposive sampling is an ideal strategy for this type of research because cases often are information rich and can provide insight about the phenomenon (Patton, 2002). Miles and Huberman (1994) suggested that the idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select sites and individuals that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research questions. Creswell (2003) explained that purposive sampling assists the qualitative researcher by informing the focus of an investigation. My primary participant was chosen based on the following three criteria: Previous experience as a high school principal and the total number of years of administrative experience, reputation as a leader focused on student learning, and willingness to share personal and professional recollections for data collection. These selection criteria were very important as experiential knowledge was central to the study.

Criterion 1: High school experience and administrative experience. The traditional high school evidences numerous complexities that are unique to that organizational structure. Some of these complexities include the following: (a) the nature of student discipline at the secondary level; (b) the prevalence of extracurricular activities at this level; (c) the isolated and traditional departmentalized structure of the high school; (d) administering a comprehensive
building system at this level; (e) understanding, analyzing, and developing programs that promote student learning and achievement; and (f) the elusive nature of community and parent participation, outside of major extracurricular activities at the high school level. Building principals are responsible for addressing these factors as they affect the students and professionals, as well as guiding systems learning within their immediate organizational contexts (Knapp, Copland, Ford et al., 2003).

Another important element of this study was to record any barriers or facilitating factors to the principal’s ability to maintain the school’s focus on student learning in the newly consolidated high school. In order for an informed discussion to take place, it was beneficial for the respondent to have previous administrative experience upon which to draw. This experience allows the respondent to distinguish between issues that are specific to the principalship and those that are unique to the influence of the school consolidation process. Within the context of school consolidation, these lived experiences were paramount to the validity of this study and took precedence over the existing pragmatic knowledge and scholarly theories with regard to school consolidation. It was important for this case for the principal to have a minimum of five years of administrative experience.

**Criterion 2: Reputation as a learning-focused leader.** The second criterion for the study was the educational reputation of the primary respondent. For this criterion, I was interested to discover if the principal’s decision making was student and learning focused, as opposed to other options such as a building manager. In addition, I was curious if the principal used data to inform decisions about student learning including the following: the type of data, the frequency of data use, and the desire or reputation for training the faculty in its use. I was also
concerned with the level of collaboration expressed in the principal’s comments for improving the unique learning situations of individual students.

**Criterion 3: Willingness to share personal and professional recollections.** The final criterion used for the study was the principal’s ability to remember and share experiences from the school consolidation process and a willingness to share these recollections with me. Anticipating that any principal would be concerned about the context of the consolidation, I hoped to share information from this type of study as it was of great benefit to study the intended or unintended effects of school consolidation on the principal’s ability to maintain the school’s focus on student learning in a newly consolidated high school. It was important to select a subject from whom the most would be learned.

**Human Subjects Approval**

The Internal Review Board (IRB) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign is the body responsible for approving all research conducted with regard to human subjects. The primary role of the IRB is to ensure that the confidentiality, rights, and welfare of these human subjects are protected. Allowing me to collect empirical data on the daily work of the building principal required a serious commitment on the part of the participant, who was actively working as a high school administrator. After reviewing in detail the process of informed consent, my research design, and the interview process, in detail, the principal agreed to participate in the study. This principal allowed me to interview and observe her actions because she was convinced it would help other principals faced with consolidation, and she would be able to benefit from the study herself. The IRB evaluated this benefit and the knowledge the research expected to gain in order to determine that the benefit outweigh the possible risks involved with
this form of single-case methodology. IRB approval was obtained, and all research procedures adhered to policies set forth by the University of Illinois prior to their administration.

**Participant Selection**

A purposive sample was developed by reviewing the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) website for information on recent school consolidations. The data from this search revealed just three opportunities to study reorganization during the 2009-2010 school year (ISBE, 2010). Although all three potential sites involved high schools, a delimitation of this study was to select a high school in a unit district consolidation. Only two of these districts fit that specific criterion.

One of the principal candidates, Mr. Kent (pseudonym), was scheduled to lead a newly consolidated high school with an approximate enrollment of 450 students in grades 9-12. Mr. Kent had completed five years of experience as a principal for grades 6-12. He also had completed four years of teaching high school in the same district. Through electronic correspondence, it was evident Mr. Kent had experience with the curriculum, high school handbooks, and graduation requirements. As a secondary administrator for the past five years, he was well aware of the prevalence of extracurricular activities and administering a comprehensive system involving grades 6-12.

Mr. Kent did have previous administrative experience, but only with one of the districts planning to consolidate, which was not viewed as an ideal arrangement. However, his prior experience would allow him to distinguish between issues specific to the principalship and those unique to the school consolidation process. I was unable to determine his reputation as a learning leader through our limited correspondence and had no associations in my professional network.
with additional information regarding Mr. Kent. Voters in both districts had approved the consolidation, but the merger had not yet occurred. Based on this information, I elected not to pursue this option.

Through my professional network, I had contact with a colleague who was a Regional Office of Education (ROE) administrator within the area of the remaining consolidated school. It became apparent that this remaining site afforded me the opportunity to use my professional network to gain knowledge about the other principal candidate. My ROE colleague scheduled a meeting to introduce me to the superintendent of the newly consolidated district and also introduced me to the potential respondent for the case: the principal of the newly reconstituted high school.

This candidate, Mrs. Megan Wayne (pseudonym), had seven years of prior administrative experience as a high school administrator: four years in her current location, which had elected to consolidate and appoint her principal, and three years in another district. In both settings, she was a principal for the high school containing grades 9-12 with enrollments of approximately 250-300 students.

During the initial meeting, I discovered that Mrs. Wayne had spent seven years as a classroom teacher in a core academic area and she had a total of 14 years of educational experience. The conversation quickly centered on academic issues related to formation of the newly consolidated district. Megan was discussing the merger’s anticipated effects on the new high school’s Prairie State Achievement Exam (PSAE) scores. Further discussion involved components of the ACT college entrance exam and her belief that formation of professional learning communities (PLCs) concept would be important during the new venture.
After this initial meeting, I consulted my network of professional colleagues to further investigate the claims from the principal. We discussed the principal’s reputation for everything from effectiveness to leadership style, but much of the discussion focused on student learning and achievement. The conclusion of all three professional colleagues was the claims were consistent with the principal’s actions. Two colleagues, one a school psychologist and the other an interim superintendent, cited specific examples to reinforce their statements about the principal. I elected to have reservations about this information (Stake, 1995) and remained open to discovering what the data collection and analysis would reveal.

**Participant profile.** The subject of my case study was the high school principal, Mrs. Megan Wayne. Megan was raised in the Midwest. She attended public schools and graduated from a mid-sized suburban high school located outside a major Midwestern city. She proudly displayed her high school diploma in her office.

Megan attended a university in her home state that was renowned for its teacher education program, earning her baccalaureate degree in English. Upon graduation, Megan was employed as an English teacher for seven years at a small, rural high school. During this time she completed a master’s degree in educational administration at a nearby university. In addition, she ran a business with her family that specialized in a unique niche market for the agricultural industry.

Megan had been a secondary administrator for seven years, serving as a principal of two different Illinois high schools prior to the consolidation. She was an active member of the state principal association, although her primary involvement consisted of participating in professional development opportunities provided by the association. For four years, Megan was the principal
for one of the schools involved in the consolidation before being employed as the high school principal for the newly consolidated district.

Secondary participants. In addition to the building principal, I interviewed select members of the school’s building leadership team. Once Megan agreed to participate in the study, I used a purposeful sampling strategy to identify and select three secondary participants. The additional purposeful sampling was done in order to further strengthen this case study. This approach was used with the understanding that it is difficult to study leaders without considering the voices of those who were being led as an effort to improve the study through the triangulation of data.

The specific criterion for these secondary participants centered on their involvement as members of the school’s building leadership team (BLT). These individuals were selected based on their previous leadership experiences. Two BLT members previously had served on the leadership teams from their respective schools that were closed; the third participant was newly employed in the consolidated district but had served as a BLT member in his former school district.

All three BLT members held current Illinois teaching certification and had earned degrees in education from universities in Illinois, Ohio, and Indiana. One participant was a National Board certified teacher. Two held master’s degrees, with one having earned a degree in educational administration, and the third participant was pursuing a master’s degree in educational administration. One participant had 20 years of public school teaching experience, the second had 7 years of public school teaching experience, and the third had served 5 years as a public school teacher, including 1 year in a public alternative school. The experience base of all
participants was exclusively at the high school level. Table 2 provides demographic background information for of the study’s participants.

Table 2

Participant Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (pseudonyms)</th>
<th>Years in education</th>
<th>Core/Non-core teaching experience</th>
<th>Degrees earned</th>
<th>Years in the district</th>
<th>Unique merit(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Megan Wayne</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Core - English</td>
<td>Masters degree in educational administration Baccalaureate degree in English</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Previous sustained experience as a principal in another district</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Chase Grayson</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Core - economics and social sciences</td>
<td>Masters degree in curriculum/Instruction Masters degree in history Baccalaureate degree in elementary education</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Teacher Administrator Coach Previous experiences in large public school systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Abbigail Pennington</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Core - mathematics</td>
<td>Baccalaureate degree in mathematics</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>President of the union Member of the Committee of Ten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Whitney Dent</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Core - mathematics</td>
<td>Baccalaureate degree in mathematics</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>NBCT AP Instructor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. NBCT = National Board Certified Teacher, AP = Advanced Placement

aBLT experience in former district, new to the district during consolidation year.
bBLT experience in former district, employed previously by one of the merging schools.
cYears totaled include the initial year of consolidation and previous years in one of the merging high schools.

Researcher Role and Positioning

The culture of school consolidation was familiar to me because of my prior involvement in a successful two-district consolidation effort; I served as a building principal for one high school involved in the merger and as the principal of the consolidated high school. As I
conducted the study, I was curious to identify barriers or facilitating factors that existed for the principal as she addressed the implementation issues stemming from school consolidation while simultaneously maintaining a focus on learning. Although my experience was limited by my context, I did possess some tacit knowledge that was germane to the phenomena of this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Because of my prior experiences, I elected to assume a participant-as-observer role in this case study. Fraenkel and Wallen (2009) described this approach as one in which the researcher often participates in group activities while making it clear that he/she is conducting research. My role as a participant observer was overt because all the faculty and staff members, including the interview participants, knew I was engaged in the iterative process of this study as a researcher. I came to the participant-as-observer role as significantly influenced by my pragmatic experiences as principal of a newly consolidated unit district. I had fully experienced consolidation, having participated in pre-planning conversations, implementation activities that included the design of every detail related to the high school, and the assessment of many programs during that first year. Although this case study occurred six years after my own consolidation experiences, it is important to note my experiences and how I chose to position myself within this case.

Within the context of this study, I attended the first district institute day of the newly consolidated district where the case was located, which occurred in March, 2009. To my surprise, school officials from my former consolidated district were included on the afternoon agenda as a panel of experts. Subsequently, I was called out of the audience as an “expert” to answer questions related to the high school implementation process. Fraenkel and Wallen (2009) explained, “In participant observation studies, researchers actually participate in the situation or setting they are observing” (p. 441). Therefore, it is important to note that my participation in
this initial district meeting influenced how the high school principal and teachers at the site of my study viewed me in light my “expertise.” As a result, they became noticeably more excited about the opportunity to share their experiences with me. Through my positioning in this study, I was actually studying a group of which I now indirectly had become a member. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), researchers bring the latest trends of interviewing into the study when they position themselves within it.

Stake (1995) asserted that the research literature provides many examples of participant observation, yet it has provided limited guidance on the use of this interpretive role as a data collection technique in case studies. However, Yin (2009) discussed how the participant-as-observer may be employed as a source of evidence that can be insightful into interpersonal behavior or motives in case study research. To further strengthen this approach, I used a clear process to determine my role. My case was informed by the practices, concerns, and traditions of being a participant, with this involvement negotiated between the primary participant the high school principal and me as the researcher. Through this collaborative discussion, we agreed that my involvement as a participant would occur only upon direct invitation of the principal. So, the primary respondent would be the only person allowed to directly engage me in the “expert” role.

Creswell (2007) further defined participant observation as researcher gathering information in many ways, but noted that the primary approach is to observe and become a participant in the study. Immersion is noted as a component of case study, to allow themes to emerge as they develop during the study. Fraenkel and Wallen (2009) also described participant observation as the researcher fully participating in activities such as conducting a series of interviews, observing faculty meetings, and talking with the principal. Although I participated in these activities, it was made clear that my primary role was as a researcher.
It was important for this study to be conducted in such a way as to provide quality research based on reliable, factual, and confirmable data. My intent was to develop a naturalistic objectivity based on the data themselves. Creswell (2003) indicated the presence of a literature review bias in frameworks when used for doctoral dissertations. Although my biases were explicit, they were not critiqued with any study and, therefore, the positive outcomes suggested were subjective. My biases were context specific, as well; based on my personal experiences in a specific local context.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted, “The delicate balance between adjusting a design to newly discovered knowledge and overreacting to the loudest noise” (p. 211). In order to critique this emergent design, Lincoln and Guba (1985) further suggested engagement in debriefing interviews, which should be done with peers not directly involved in the study to test emergent themes, check for bias, solicit advice on next steps, and introduce related literature to the researcher. For this study, I called upon two colleagues to aid me in debriefing my interview data. Both of these colleagues had earned doctoral degrees in educational administration from major research universities, and both had conducted case studies in their dissertation research.

Data Collection and Sources

This case study consisted of one subject, the high school principal, and multiple forms of data were collected and analyzed for both descriptive and thematic development during the study (Creswell, 2003). Interviews were the primary method of data collection; Seidman (2006) described in-depth interviewing as the root of understanding the lived experience of people and what meaning they made of their experiences. My research included several additional sources of evidence in the development of converging lines of inquiry (Yin, 2009), including documents,
direct and participant observations, and the study of physical artifacts. The instrumentation for
the process used to collect data involved all data being collected at the site during the school day,
and I attempted to collect each type of data on a monthly basis (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). The
use of these multiple methods served to enhance the validity of my findings (Merriam, 2002).

I collected interview data from the principal and three teachers who were BLT members.
Prior to beginning each interview, I reviewed the informed consent form with each participant
and then explained the purpose and intent of my study. All participants were given the
opportunity to refuse and revoke participation at the beginning and during each interview
session. In addition to digitally recording each interview, I kept computer-generated notes on
each session.

The principal was interviewed a total of 10 times between October 2009 and June 2010,
using a semi-structured interview protocol developed through the review of the related literature,
the research questions of my study, and my personal consolidation experiences as a building
principal. Eight interviews were approximately 60 minutes in duration, with the remaining two
interviews lasting approximately 40 minutes each. The initial set of interview questions
(Appendix A) were related to the Knapp, Copland, Ford et al. (2003) leading for learning
framework, as adapted in the literature review of this study. After the initial interview, the
principal and I conducted an iterative interview process and developed a list of the important
contextual activities that I attended for observation. The participants present at those activities
were not interviewed but were observed to provide further illumination into the principal's
leadership practices. I maintained notes on my laptop computer for each observation.

Additionally, I conducted six interviews with the three key members of the building
leadership team, to strengthen my research and develop a triangulation of the data. This approach
was important, because instructional leadership does not take place in a vacuum in the absence of followers. Each secondary participant was interviewed twice during sessions that were approximately 60 minutes in duration. The initial interviews occurred in January 2010, following the conclusion of the first semester, with the second round of interviews conducted at the end of the second semester in June 2010. As with the principal interviews, interview questions (see Appendix B, p. 209) were asked and data were collected through an emergent process of conducting qualitative research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The initial set of interview questions was related to the Knapp, Copland, Ford et al. (2003) framework, as adapted in the literature review of this study (Appendix B). To gather multiple forms of data, I considered both emic data an “insider’s perspective” of the principal and etic data, noting an “outsider’s view” of the teachers (Merriam, 2002, pp. 6-7).

Pre-established interview questions are valuable because they often are used to obtain information that will be compared or contrasted at a later time (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). The specific intent of these in-depth interviews was to understand how the principal views her practice. Additionally, I was interested in the principal’s perception of how she influenced teaching and learning practices in the school, which is consistent with the qualitative approach and fitting for the purpose of this study. Moustakas (1994) reinforced this characteristic of qualitative research by describing it as a search for participants’ experiences that are not possible through quantitative approaches. Additionally, good interviews provide rich data that reveal the respondents’ perspectives (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

In determining principal Megan Wayne’s perspective, I did not approach the interviews as a means intended to capture her mistakes. The intent of this study was not to shine a light on any negative practices that occurred during this study, but instead to gain an understanding of the
challenges the principal faced as she influenced the processes of student learning in the school. Throughout this study, my intent was to learn what the principal perceived to be the effects of the school consolidation on her ability to sustain the school’s focus on student learning. Furthermore, I asked the principal to reflect on any barriers, as well as existing support for student learning during this initial year of school consolidation. I did not explicitly explore leadership for learning theory with the principal during these interviews, but instead used the theory as a means of informing the construction of the interview protocol and subsequent data analysis.

Immediately after each interview, I recorded my observations, impressions, and feelings in a digital field journal. In addition, I listened to the digital recordings of each interview and transcribed the digital recordings. This process provided me with the clarity to identify themes and begin to understand the complexities of my case. Eventually, as the accounts, stories, and descriptions of all participants began to develop into certain themes, I began to create codes for the data, and additional questions began to develop as I reflected on my perspectives regarding the collected data.

After the interviews were transcribed, I forwarded the interview transcript to each participant via electronic mail. Member-checking is very important in providing critical interpretations as participants review the material for accuracy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stake, 1995). The participants were given the opportunity to review the transcripts, to clarify their comments, add further explanation or comment, and ensure the elimination of any identifying information in the transcripts as a form of member-checking the data.

To understand “the here and now experiences in depth” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 273), I capitalized on the advantage presented by direct observation. Specifically, observations of
faculty meetings and building leadership team meetings were conducted to determine if the principal’s rhetoric matched her actions with regard to instructional practices and student learning. Informal interviews are an important mechanism to supplement and triangulate data gleaned from formal interviews (Kvale, 1996). This practice truly was important during the study, as I often held very short informal interview sessions with faculty members in the school. For example, I twice engaged in conversations with the athletic director, who provided me with significant detail into some of the building and district administration’s interactions with the Board of Education. These conversations also occurred on two occasions with the superintendent. These informal sessions served to maximize the scope of the information obtained during the data collection process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), thereby providing a more complete and holistic collection of the data.

I maintained an electronic file of field notes of observations from my interviews, monthly faculty meetings (of which I attended five of the seven held throughout the year), and the four school improvement activities (of which I attended four out of eight). In addition, I kept written digital notes on the key exchanges, including my own reflections and questions about the documents provided by the principal in order to further understand and develop the context. Additionally, I reviewed and reflected on minutes of the Board of Education meetings and materials prepared by the Committee of Ten, in an attempt to situate the historical background and learning priorities of the community to the context. I used these personal reflections to guide the preliminary coding of all my interviews and field notes in preparing for further clarification in subsequent interviews. These documents supplemented the information obtained from the respondent interviews and non-focal participant observations.
Document analysis also was used to address the complexities of the content in a logical way. To begin, I conducted an initial analysis of the external and internal documents. These documents were public, and the examination included the report of the Committee of Ten prior to consolidation, the feasibility study conducted for the potential reorganization, community flyers with frequently asked questions, and local newspaper articles. In addition, I reviewed the minutes of the board meetings and agendas from the high school faculty meetings and school improvement day activities for the first year.

Data Analysis

Qualitative researchers describe data collection and analysis as an on-going, iterative process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The data analysis in this qualitative research relied heavily on my description of the events, observations, and interviews conducted during this study (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). Creswell (2007) confirmed this idea for a case study, in which the analysis involved making a number of detailed descriptions about the case in context. I used an explicit leadership for learning conceptual framework, provided by Knapp et al. (2003), which served to guide the analysis of the issues, politics, and themes facing the principal in my study. The five action points of the framework (Knapp et al., 2003) led to the development of my case study and shaped my data collection plan. According to Yin (2009), use of this type of theoretical orientation allows one to guide the analysis of the case, helping to focus attention on certain data throughout the process. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated, “The issue is no longer the investigator’s characteristics but the characteristics of the data: Are they or are they not confirmable?” (p. 300).
The in-depth formal analysis of data requires considerably more than describing what has transpired during the course of one’s research. Upon completion of data collection, I began to analyze the data methodically. I initially reviewed my data, searching for regularities and patterns as well as for topics my data covered before representing notes and ideas in writing (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Consistent with the empirical procedures for qualitative analysis, data must be organized through the process of coding (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2005, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

I used a coding strategy in which the preliminary set of codes were adapted from the Knapp, Copland, Ford et al. (2003) leadership for learning framework. The coding from this conceptual framework was based on the five identified action points, defined as establishing a focus on learning; building professional communities that take learning seriously; engaging their external environments; acting strategically and collaboratively on student, professional, and system learning; and creating coherence. Consistent with the empirical procedures for qualitative analysis, data must be organized through the process of coding (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2005, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

After reading each interview transcript at least twice, I began to further refine the preliminary codes. Coding allowed me to organize large amounts of data into categories for analysis so that I could better conceptualize the emerging themes from my data to be re-organized into smaller units. The use of the pre-existing codes from the categories described in the theoretical framework allowed me to manage the voluminous amount of data collected from the 16 interviews alone. Numerous researchers (Creswell, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Stake, 1995) noted the importance of creating a list of codes prior to fieldwork and throughout the iterative process of data collection. Yin (2009) also suggested that relying on a theoretical
proposition is the first and most preferred strategy a researcher should use when analyzing a case study. Therefore, additional theme analysis was used to analyze and address the primary research questions for this study. Appendix C provides information about the theme analysis of this study.

Table 3

_Emergent Themes Through Coding Process_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>5 initial codes from framework</th>
<th>Emergent themes after first reading</th>
<th>Distillation of themes after second reading</th>
<th>Final themes developed through axial coding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A focus on student learning</td>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Micro-management</td>
<td>Governance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Continuous Improvement/Change</td>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building professional communities</td>
<td>Support</td>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>Shared leadership</td>
<td>Governance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Distributed leadership</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professional development</td>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging external environments</td>
<td>Support</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Change</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acting strategically and collaboratively</td>
<td>Expectations</td>
<td>Micro-management</td>
<td>Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>Shared leadership</td>
<td>Governance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Distributed leadership</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assessment/Feedback</td>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professional development</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating coherence</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Shared leadership</td>
<td>Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professional development</td>
<td>Distributed leadership</td>
<td>Culture</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>Governance</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Support</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

To assist with the thematic analysis of data, I used the NVivo 8 computer coding software program for data coding and sorting. Miles and Huberman (1994) explained that software programs are helpful for the researcher to “chunk” data for analysis (p. 312). The program proved invaluable in enabling me to easily code the same segment of data in multiple ways. Additional benefits were accrued through the comparison of data that had been coded.
differently but related to similar themes, which allowed me to determine the saturation level of a theme as well as to search for the frequency of use for specific terminology in one instance (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

**Standards of Validation**

Due to the qualitative nature of this research, it was important to access multiple sources of data for data triangulation and to enhance the credibility of the findings (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2009). As previously noted in this chapter, I used a variety of data sources including interviews, observations, and document analysis for this study. Furthermore, qualities that provide a trustworthiness criterion when conducting qualitative research including confirmability, dependability, credibility, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were used during this study. These concepts provide a framework for establishing confirmability where findings maintain a degree of neutrality, dependability where findings are repeatable given the same data, credibility where confidence exists in the findings, and transferability where data are applicable to other studies and contexts besides this case study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additional threats to the trustworthiness of the findings are addressed and outlined in the following paragraphs.

To address the concept of confirmability, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested the strategy of peer debriefing as “a process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytical session for the purpose of exploring the aspects of inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer’s mind” (p. 308). Two colleagues who were experienced with qualitative analysis were consulted as an external check or audit as peer debriefers to ensure the dependability of this research. These peer debriefers provided a thorough
critique of the analysis of the study. Creswell (2007) concurs, as “both dependability and confirmability are established through an auditing of the research process” (p. 204).

It is important that the research data build thick descriptive data, because it provides an emergent narrative description of the context of the case. This thick description is necessary to afford a measure of transferability to the data. Stake (1995) noted that particular perceptions are unique to the participant. Indeed, this study focused on a particular context. In order to improve the quality of this research, I applied an analytic technique known as pattern matching to further build a thick description from the perceptions and dialogue of the particular context in this study. Pattern matching is a process of organization in which codes are developed in local context or through relationships (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Often, these codes are known in advance, although they can emerge during the study (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). Yin (2009) considered the use of pattern matching in case study analysis as “one of the most desirable techniques to use” (p. 136) because it may serve to strengthen internal validity. Miles and Huberman (1994) asserted this pattern coding is used as a way to identify emergent themes, which provided interpretations and identify explanations in the study.

**Conclusion**

This chapter presented the methodology used to conduct a revelatory case study examining the effects of school consolidation on one school principal’s ability to maintain the school’s focus on student learning in a newly consolidated high school. The methodology and significance of this research were affected by the relevance of the leadership for learning theory on student learning. As adapted, the conceptual framework of leadership for learning contains notable potential to illuminate the importance of the building principal’s influence on student,
professional, and systems learning. This research hopefully provides a mechanism for a more intentional focus on student learning before, during, and after the process of school consolidation. Stake captured the essence of this specific revelatory case story when he inferred that the case was, “not for the purpose of generalizing . . . but for understanding the complexity” (Stake as quoted in Krathwohl, 2004, p. 333).
Chapter 4

Findings

Informed by my own experiences as a principal in a newly consolidated high school and guided by a conceptual framework focused on leadership for learning (Knapp, Copland, & Ford et al. 2003), I began this study to investigate and understand the influence of school consolidation on the principal’s ability to maintain the school’s focus on student learning in a newly consolidated high school. In conducting this research, I focused specifically on how or if and why the building principal was able to maintain a focus on student learning during the first year of school district consolidation. The following four research questions guided this study:

1. How does the high school principal maintain a focus on student learning in the first year of a school district consolidation?

2. What factors facilitate or support a principal’s ability to maintain a focus on student learning?

3. What factors inhibit or are barriers to a principal’s ability to maintain a focus on student learning?

4. Does leadership for learning as a conceptual framework inform a principal’s practice and focus on student learning in the first year of a school district consolidation?

In this chapter I begin by setting the context in which the principal’s and other interview participants’ lived experiences took place as situated in context of school consolidation and positioned around student learning. After establishing the context of this specific consolidation, I introduce three themes that emerged as significant factors during the course of this study. Then, I present the specific findings from the data that were described as facilitating or inhibiting factors that influenced the principal’s ability to maintain a focus on student learning. This focus was centered on the principal of a high school during the first year of a school district consolidation.
General Structure for Reported Findings

The findings of this study began with a brief discussion of the local context for consolidation as well as the local context for learning. Then the findings of the study were used to examine the four research questions that considered how the principal was a leader for learning. The application of the Leadership for Learning five action points (Knapp, Copland, Ford, et al., 2003) provided a framework through which I examined a list of recurring terms. Additionally, I identified and analyzed the emergent themes of governance, communication, and culture. Given the context of the research questions, each of the major themes were further developed into codes and were repeatedly reviewed with regard to how each influenced and informed the data collection process.

The principal was asked to respond to numerous interview questions (Appendix A) over the span of 10 interviews in order to examine her influence on student learning during the initial year as a consolidated high school. However, the following questions produced the most insight into her process of leading for learning:

1. How do you influence the way you’re learning agenda is shared between the school and the district?
2. Describe how you allocate resources or guide activities in order to make things happen.
3. How do you encourage and recruit others to assume and exercise leadership?
4. How do you work to build the critical mass necessary to implement programs or processes?
5. Describe any and all measures your high school uses to assess how well the faculty and staff are learning.

These responses initially were analyzed using the Knapp, Copland, Ford et al. (2003) five action points: (a) establishing a focus on learning; (b) building professional communities that take learning seriously; (c) engaging external environments that matter for learning; (d) acting
strategically and collaboratively along pathways of activity aimed at different aspects of student, professional, and system learning; and (e) creating coherence (pp. 19-43). After the first reading, several emergent themes began to develop. This additional step in the coding process brought forth leadership, support, feedback, communication, professional development, and relationships as additional emergent themes. Further thematic distillation after the second reading narrowed these themes to micro-management, shared or distributed leadership, communication, and collaboration. The final themes that were developed through an axial coding process included governance, communication, and creating a positive school culture.

**Context of Consolidation**

The majority of the data collection for this case study took place between October 19, 2009 and June 10, 2010 in a small town, Gotham City, in the shadow of a large metropolitan area in the state of Illinois. The Gotham City population fluctuated between 3,500 and 5,000 people over the past few decades, generally decreasing over the past decade. Another neighboring small town, Metropolis, contained a declining population of approximately 300 to 500 people. The loss of manufacturing jobs, small businesses, and other blue color jobs accounted for much of the population declines in the area. Gotham City has a flourishing Chamber of Commerce and has received several awards for its local economic efforts. Gotham City boasts a number of community facilities, including a hospital, library, YMCA, and two golf courses (one public and one private). Approximately 15 miles from Gotham City, Metropolis is also a bedroom community to the large metropolitan area. Metropolis’ primary businesses include only one lumberyard and gas station. These two neighboring towns and the surrounding rural countryside comprised the geographic area of the newly consolidated school district.
The Gotham City School District (GCSD) and its high school boasted a long history of educational pride. The educational attainment for the Gotham City High School (GCHS), as reported by the Interactive Illinois Report Card, noted PSAE scores were flat over the past six years. For example, reading was reported as 59% of the students meeting and exceeding state standards in 2004 and 60% of the students meeting or exceeding in 2009. These trends were representative of the science data, as well. Although mathematics had experienced some peaks and valleys during this time, 60% of the students generally were identified as meeting or exceeding the state standards in mathematics. The PSAE writing subtest showed steady growth, from a low of 36% to a high of 51% of the students meeting or exceeding the standards, although students were not tested in writing on the state examination for the years 2005 and 2006. These scores were sufficient to permit GCSD to meet the NCLB adequate yearly progress (AYP) requirements of NCLB in the middle of the decade but currently are not adequate for meeting AYP.

In addition to PSAE scores, information was reviewed from the Interactive Illinois Report Card that documented student progress on the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks from 2006 to 2009. These data reflected significant increases in the number of students prepared for a college-level freshman curriculum in the Reading and English subtests. However, the data in mathematics represented a low four-year average of 31.5% and the science data was lower still with an average of 19.5% of students meeting or exceeding the standards on the state examination. All students in the class were tested, as noted in the AYP Report of 2009. GCHS did not make AYP in 2009 but had not been identified at the time of this study for mandatory school improvement according to the NCLB requirements.
The GCHS student demographics in 2008-2009 included a school population in which 95.5% of the student body was White, 1% Hispanic, 0.7% Asian, and 2.8% biracial or multiracial. The student population was characterized by 23.0% of the students as low income, with a 7.0% mobility rate. During the 2008-2009 school year parent involvement was reported at 99.0% and GCHS had no reported chronic truants. The Educational Environment Report noted additional indicators such as an attendance rate of 93.8% and a graduation rate of 100.0% with a 0.3% dropout rate. The GCHS student enrollment was 287 students in grades 9-12 for the 2008-2009 school year.

GCHS was recognized in the conference, region, and state for a number of highly competitive athletic programs. Numerous boys’ and girls’ interscholastic teams had competed at the state level, but GCHS primarily was known statewide for the school’s longstanding tradition of football success. A legacy of outstanding teams, athletes, and coaches that included numerous state final appearances was solidified with back-to-back state championship titles in the last decade. It was not uncommon for attendance at Friday night football games to exceed the population of the town.

Compared to GCHS the Metropolis School District (MSD) had lower academic test scores and less athletic success. Even so, Metropolis may boast of two former district educators who had served as chief educational officers at the state level in Illinois. The educational program for the Metropolis High School (MHS), as reported by the Interactive Illinois Report Card, noted PSAE scores that did vacillate over the past six years. The student trend data in reading was representative of the science and mathematics data as well. The mathematics student performance averaged 51% of the students meeting or exceeding the state standards during the previous six years with an upward trend of 63%, 64%, and 67% over the three years preceding
consolidation. Science scores fluctuated as well, with the highest percent (52%) of students meeting or exceeding the state standards in 2008-09. The PSAE writing subtest showed steady growth from a low of 34% to a high of 48% of the students meeting or exceeding the standards, although students were not tested in writing by the state for the years 2005 and 2006. MHS was successful in meeting the AYP requirements of NCLB for 2008-09 with 65% of students meeting standards in reading and 68% of students meeting the standards in mathematics. The state target for meeting or exceeding the standards was 63% in 2008-2009. The ACT College Readiness Benchmarks from 2006 to 2009 showed the largest number of students prepared for college-level freshman curriculum in the Mathematics and English subtests. However, reading scores were relatively low given the four years of data that were reported with an average of 28% of students meeting or exceeding the standards and science was notably lower with an average of just 9.5% of students meeting or exceeding the standards on the state examination. All students in the class were tested as noted in the AYP Report of 2008-09. MHS did successfully meet AYP in 2008-2009.

The MHS student demographics noted 99.3% of the student body was White and 0.7% was Asian in 2008-2009. The student population also was characterized by 30.7% of the students as low income, with a 27.3% mobility rate. During the 2008-2009 school year parent involvement was reported at 100.0% and MHS had reported five chronic truants. The Educational Environment Report noted an attendance rate of 91.8% and a graduation rate of 100.0% with a dropout rate of 2.9%. The MHS student enrollment was 140 students in grades 9-12 for the 2008-2009 school year.

The Gotham City and the Metropolis school districts were consolidated by a majority vote of residents from both districts in November 2008 to form Lakeside School District (LSD),
almost one full year before the actual merger. The geographical area of this newly consolidated district has a 150-year history that is rooted in agriculture. Additionally, a number of residents work in the nearby metropolitan area. The consolidated district characterizes itself as having a long history of educational excellence, stakeholder involvement, and community support. As with many consolidations, the district cited the ability to provide a broad array of increased academic and extracurricular activities for its new student body. This priority was noted in the community recommendations on the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) sheet prepared by the Committee of Ten prior to the vote considering the consolidation question. Specifically, it was twice stated that an important priority in the reasons to consolidate was to provide a quality education for all children and to provide better educational programs. In addition, the home page of the district web site also boasts numerous National Board Certified Teachers, including four at the secondary level.

The newly consolidated district is geographically one of the largest in the state. Approximately 1,500 students attend one of the district’s five schools with approximately 400 students enrolled in the merged high school. The students at Lakeside High School (LHS) attend classes on a 35-acre campus located at the edge of Gotham City that was previously the Gotham City High School site. Although a strategic and focused effort was made to repaint and update the campus, it is still housed in the exact same physical location where approximately two thirds of the students attended high school the previous year. The high school includes 48 faculty and staff members, of whom 70% had been employed by GCSD and 30% had been employed by MSD. Only one new certified staff member, the dean/assistant principal Mr. Chase Grayson, was hired as a result of the consolidation. The faculty/staff ranks of newly consolidated LHS include
the principal, two school counselors, one athletic director, and one dean/assistant principal. The principal, Mrs. Megan Wayne, previously had served as the GCHS principal for four years.

The high school campus is comprised of four buildings. The largest of these, the main high school building, is comprised of three separate wings connected in the center by an auditorium, cafeteria, administrative offices, and the library. The two-story northern-most wing houses all the core academic classrooms, laboratories, and computer labs. The eastern wing connects to the auditorium and is home to the fine arts and the industrial technology classrooms, counseling center, and other administrative offices. The southern wing contains all the physical education facilities, including the gymnasium, locker rooms, weight training facilities, and wrestling room. The building was built in the early 1960s and has been extremely well maintained over the last half-century.

Three additional structures are located on the high school campus, in addition to a swimming pool and outdoor tennis courts, which all are located near the main building. A metal Morton building called the vocational building, houses the agricultural classrooms and shop areas. Adjacent to this building is a large greenhouse that the school uses as a practical laboratory for the horticultural and plant science components of its agriculture curriculum. The final exterior structure is a small metal building used as a practice facility for extracurricular programs during the winter and summer seasons, as well as for storage.

Megan and Chase initially described these physical high school structures as cultural barriers in the eyes of the students. Even though the district administration made a significant effort to erase the former GCHS colors during the summer of 2009, the fact that the high school facility is located in the former GCHS campus proved to be an initial concern to many students and parents. The collective student body was concerned enough about the past identity of each
school to ask Megan if students would be disciplined for wearing memorabilia or spirit wear from either of the two former high schools. Megan further discussed that some of the MHS students and parents held an initial apprehension about coming to the “new” high school facility.

Chase also explained:

In one of the graduation speeches a girl said it you walked into class and you saw the barrier, the physical barrier because the Metropolis kids sat on this side of the room and the Gotham City kids sat on this side of the classroom. It was over a month before they were able to sit together.

Chase continued:

If you really are going to consolidate it’s got to be 100%. It can’t be, “Well we’re going to take care of that later.” No, while you’re painting you go over there (pointed) and you’ve got to address some things. A lot of that’s been ignored. Whether its expense whether it’s . . . if we hang onto something.

The tension between the two former districts was felt not only by the students but also by adults in the school. Megan noted that there was hesitancy among the faculty and staff in developing a new building culture, especially because the new district was using the former GCHS building for the new high school. She commented:

The Metropolis teachers felt that they were moving into the Gotham City teachers’ territory, although there was not as much territorialism as anticipated. We spent a lot of time repainting and making this as new for everybody as we could. So psychologically when people were walking into the building it was a new school; it wasn’t just Gotham City turned into Lakeside High School.

Megan and Chase stated that the initial hesitation and uncertainty experienced by the students and faculty did not continue throughout the entire first academic year, although it was more prevalent and challenging for the teachers. Both stated that when the faculty witnessed the students coming together as a whole, it created some motivation and momentum for the faculty to begin to coalesce as a unit as well. Chase explained:
A good percentage of students and teachers and parents alike have gotten over it, moved on and said, “Okay, this is the world we have now and let’s make it the best world we can.” That’s positive. That has just happened.

It was important to Megan that the students felt secure in their new identity as LHS students and safe in their new environment, which she believed was necessary before they could become actively engaged and committed to their own learning. All participants noted that the students had successfully made the transition to an acceptance of the changes and their new identity. Several of the participants interviewed cited specific examples of how this transition happened in their classrooms. Mrs. Abbigail Pennyworth presented one such example in math:

My geometry kids just did this for the final project. It’s a reflection and all you have to do is write and answer these seven questions. What did you like or not like about how this class worked in general. They said they didn’t like the homework every day but they liked that we learned stuff. They liked that we pushed through the material and they were made to work at it. They acknowledged it was good they weren’t just allowed to sit around and do nothing.

**Context of Learning**

As was previously noted, the rhetoric of consolidation cited the newly merged district’s ability to provide a quality education and better educational programs for all students, including an improved curriculum and expanded extracurricular opportunities. The 30-page report of the Committee of Ten was reported on, and mainly focused on curriculum with nearly three fourths of the report addressing curriculum recommendations. Nearly one fourth of the report focused on recommendations for transportation and projected finances. Much of the report addressed information gathered from surveys of students and members of the community.

In contrast, the feasibility report prepared for the proposed consolidation only spent 8% of the 117-page report discussing improvements to the students’ curriculum, with 3% devoted to expanding extracurricular opportunities. The majority of this report examined course
comparisons, student achievement data, and extracurricular activities. Interestingly, 42% of this report (49 full pages) was concerned with financial recommendations and financial research. The feasibility study provided an in-depth look at local, state, and federal funding as well as operating fund rates, levies, revenues, and expenditures.

Although the Board of Education was elected and began to meet bi-monthly beginning in July 2009, an analysis of the minutes from the first year’s board meetings disclosed the board did not address curriculum issues until their October 14, 2009 meeting. The minutes were brief, noting only the recommendation to form a curriculum council. No additional information related to curriculum appeared until the December 2, 2009 board meeting, which included a notation of a recent stakeholder meeting in which a number of school and community members, including students, were present to discuss Response to Intervention (RtI), Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), Title I, the need for more technology training for the faculty and staff, and open computer labs for community access.

The primary interviews conducted during this case study centered on Megan Wayne, the high school principal. These interviews documented the principal’s consistent rhetoric with regard to her efforts to work directly with students and faculty to improve the learning opportunities and outcomes for the students in her school. The principal interviews prompted a thorough examination of this case’s leading for learning, as well as self-reflection into my own thinking about the most critical aspects of leading for learning in high school consolidation. In addition to the assisting the principal with identifying essential goals for her leadership (such as “personally I need to be visible more”) through this examination, I also served as a sounding board, therapist, confidant, and even mentor to Megan by the end of the school year.
Although the interviews certainly served to illuminate the leadership issues with regard to student learning, it is prudent to address my ultimate conclusion that the entire consolidation story was not completely and candidly disclosed to me by the principal. This understanding was supported by a few instances in which the principal wanted to talk off the record, and what she described as “mounting tension” between herself and the school board. In addition to the reserved form of communication the principal displayed throughout the study, her review and assessment of the overall district climate and her professional interpretation of the current organizational forensics was influenced and perhaps muzzled by the context as well. For example, her statement that “consolidation is good for kids but not for administrators” provided evidence of a growing defeatist perspective of the principal as the study progressed. Interview data collected in the last half of this study disclosed an individual who was becoming increasingly frustrated with the challenges of leading a newly merged school. When asked what advice she provide to principals who were facing a potential consolidation, on three different occasions, her response was to either “run away” or “run.” Furthermore, these interviews noted a transition in the rhetoric of her stated goals from the initial focus on student success to “survive, surviving,” or “survival” and being in “survival mode” even near the end of the school year.

Both observational data and faculty interviews confirmed the development of a more positive building culture and climate where faculty were beginning to focus on student learning issues.

In addition to the individual interviews held with the principal and three building team leaders, data collected through the document review further documented a cursory focus on any topics related to student learning, curriculum, or curriculum issues. The document review produced only five data points, and each was very limited and sporadic information lacking in detail. These five instances—33% of the potential to be recorded in the meeting minutes of the
board—only discussed three issues: course selection, course selection as related to the master schedule, and the grading summit (meetings to lower the district’s grading scale thus creating a “competitive” advantage).

The remaining sections of this chapter report the study’s findings related to the primary research question and each of the ancillary research questions. The research questions explored the presence or influence of any facilitating factors and examined any and all barriers noted in the data. Again, the data were examined and reported through the Leadership for Learning framework’s five action points.

**Research Question 1: The Principal’s Focus on Student Learning**

The first research question addressed the extent to which Principal Megan Wayne worked to keep learning at the center of the school’s practice. Although Megan often elaborated on the importance of student learning during our interviews, data collected through observations and reviewing documents, such as the School Improvement Plan (SIP) and faculty meeting agendas did not clearly document a consistent focus on student learning. No one reported or collected the minutes of these meetings throughout the first year, thus the faculty and administration did not have written records to document issues they considered or decisions they reached during this critical first year of implementation. During my observations, much of Megan’s administrative behavior and communication was focused on management and operational issues or concerns that frequently arose during this initial year. Although topics related to learning were noted on SIP and faculty meeting agendas, the discussions frequently centered on pressing managerial/structural functions, such as student discipline issues, student motivation, or challenges presented by the high school’s new student management software. The additional
stakeholders who were interviewed perceived discussions related to the SIP to be along the lines of a “make it up as we go” approach to developing the SIP, which they felt created additional challenges for the new learning context of the high school. Interviews with individuals from the high school confirmed that Megan primarily focused her energies to the managerial/structural issues related to the newly merged school and, therefore, did not dedicate sufficient time to student learning.

These consistent comments, supplemented with notes from my observational data, supported Megan’s belief that throughout the school year many faculty members were acting on their own or freelancing away from the priorities of the SIP. A notable challenge in this process was that teachers typically were teaching the same lessons that they had for years with no consideration for the new goals and processes outlined in the SIP. Although the consolidation created new goals and new challenges for the high school, teachers continued to function the way they had in their former contexts for at least the first nine weeks of the school year. This adherence to previous practice was illustrated in the following exchange:

Interviewer: How are your academic or school improvement goals progressing for this year? The last time we met you were still developing these goals.

Megan: Teachers have met as departments. One of the goals was to reduce the level of student apathy. Of course those were the teacher’s goals and not necessarily my personal goals, which is as it should be. The departments have sat down to try to make those goals concrete. That’s the take I have from most departments.

Another goal was to work on reading comprehension. Again it had to be departmentalized. We did not go as far as developing a 15-minute period each day devoted directly to reading. So right now it is more departmentalized and they are working on alignment. A final cultural goal was for the faculty to be out and about between passing periods to try and reduce the number of serious discipline issues like we’ve had at the beginning of the year.
Mrs. Whitney Dent, a mathematics teacher and member of the initial BLT, echoed the importance of one of these goals:

I think it’s very important that if we are going to work on student apathy that we (faculty and staff) promote a positive atmosphere. We need to engage students in all types of different learning techniques or strategies.

Ironically, Whitney commented on Megan’s concern about the goals related to the faculty maintaining a supervisory presence in order to thwart the serious discipline issues:

When the police were called in which, by the way, I’ve never seen a fight. There’s never been a fight on the second floor hallway I was really surprised when I showed up and all the police were here.

A disconnect was observed between Megan’s espoused beliefs and her administrative practice, because student learning clearly and repeatedly was articulated with regard to goals in Megan’s interviews. She clearly voiced that student learning consistently was the focal point of her practice during the initial months of the merger. My October 2009 interview with Megan began by discussing one of the primary educational reasons for consolidation as focused on providing a more comprehensive educational program for all students including: adding programs to increase student opportunities by offering more vocational offerings, Advanced Placement (AP) classes and on-site dual credit classes, and developing mandated initiatives such as Response to Intervention (RtI). For the inaugural year the high school course manual included the addition of AP Calculus, AP Chemistry, and dual credit English Composition 101, with plans to gradually add more of these courses in the future. Megan described the additions:

Academically we’re offering 36 additional courses either to one district or the other. Metropolis has 25 or 26 new opportunities, while Gotham City has 10 or 11 new opportunities. The fact that we’re offering dual credit English on-site for Comp 101 and Comp 102, the fact we’re offering a dual credit welding class as well for the vocational kids, and the addition of AP classes in science and math this year are key.

Whitney reinforced the importance of the AP curriculum:
The choice (consolidation) was to stay the way we were or to attempt to implement some AP classes. Because we were so small it felt like we didn’t have the numbers to offer AP classes. Now with the increased population we should offer AP classes. Really, adding AP Calculus has advanced the math curriculum and the science curriculum as well.

Mrs. Abbigail Pennington echoed the importance of adding AP courses:

We are adding an AP Art class for next year. They are talking possibly of AP Physics not next year but the year after. I think we are all really pushing in that right direction. That’s where we would like to go.

Apart from the AP curriculum, Megan was only able to identify a few conversations in the fall semester of 2009 that specifically related to curriculum or student learning. In our December interview, she noted that there was an absence of this focus in the district’s priorities, giving the impression that she was waiting for the district administration to initiate curriculum leadership activities. Whitney also commented that there was a dearth of curriculum discussions even among the district administrative team (consisting of the building and district administrators) up to this point as the first semester was coming to an end. Although the district employed a curriculum director, the district administrative team had not met to hold any form of curriculum discussions by the end of the first semester. Megan believed that in order to lead her new team with a focus on student learning, she needed specific direction from the district office and the board. Megan agonized over her need to be more directive in her style but hoped to be more strategic in this process by leading her faculty and staff, albeit indirectly through “individual” conversations, to becoming a collaborative team. Whitney knew this process would be difficult because each of the high schools previously “operated as independent contractors,” as was the generally accepted practice in the GCHS building prior to the consolidation.

Given the context of learning, the secondary participants noted an absence of leadership for learning practice that was observed to be the bane of student learning for the first three nine-
week grading periods in this initial year of consolidation. Megan expressed her leadership efforts as consistently focused on the managerial/structural elements throughout the first semester of the school year while “allowing” departments to collaborate for curriculum mapping purposes. Megan frequently pointed to the math department faculty as diligent in pushing themselves in this pursuit. She also discussed how the math department had embraced this initiative early, prior to the start of the school year. Additionally, she shared how Whitney had worked tirelessly to bring the AP Calculus program into the math course offerings in the first year of the consolidation.

Document analysis included a thorough review of minutes of the Board of Education meetings, faculty meeting agendas, and activities on school improvement days. Specifically, data from the first semester clearly suggested that what Megan considered a strategic focus for developing Lakeside’s School Improvement Plan (SIP) was interpreted by her to be a “make it up as you go” or (teachers) to “pull this out of thin air philosophy. Consequently, observations of meetings and supporting interviews from two of the three Building Leadership Team (BLT) members reinforced the absence of leadership for learning practices as an indirect barrier to student learning. The data collected from interviews, observations, and document reviews demonstrated that Megan was observed to have operated primarily from a managerial/structural approach when it came to providing leadership on curriculum matters and that her curriculum leadership responsibilities primarily were enacted through her obligation to complete personnel evaluations of certified staff.

Throughout the course of our interviews, Megan repeatedly discussed the importance of being directive in her managerial leadership style for administering the consolidation. However, Megan was not observed to have engaged in leading for learning practices until the beginning of
the fourth quarter. Interview notes, observation notes, and document reviews pointed to a process in which curriculum and learning tasks were delegated to others. Although Megan frequently shared her desire to use a distributed leadership style, it appeared to her faculty that she was pushing off work onto others in an attempt to reduce or avoid conflict with her teachers. The data did suggest that perhaps even avoidance was a strategy in some tough circumstances.

Nonetheless, Megan cited several barriers that she believed prevented her from utilizing the leadership style she felt was necessary for this context of consolidation: not enough time to conduct all the teacher evaluations, bogged down in student discipline, faculty and staff isolation, time limitations in the district calendar, lack of time to plan and collaborate, the contract was settled very late, not enough time for SIP and goals, and less time to be visible and available to faculty and staff. She further lamented:

I am bogged down so much due to my involvement with discipline that I am not making those extra contacts with students, teachers, and parents that are necessary to push them forward. I am still spending a great deal of time on discipline issues throughout the day, so my teacher evaluations are behind. I feel more pressure to get those done than using them as intended to improve teaching and learning.

Although Megan frequently articulated the lack of sufficient time as a reason why she had not exercised learning-focused leadership, she was perceived in interviews to have a significant concern for addressing conflict. Megan often cited her obligation to keep up with the personnel evaluations of 60 faculty and staff members. In our December interview, Megan expressed a great deal of frustration about her time, as she conveyed: “Teacher evaluations are still an issue; our contract is still not settled.” Student discipline issues also consumed a significant portion of Megan’s daily routine, even though the school district had hired Chase in the role of assistant principal to handle student discipline in addition to his teaching duties. She
expressed concern, “I am still spending a great deal of time on discipline issues throughout the day.”

Additionally, in the interviews during the first semester and into the first part of the third quarter, Megan repeatedly hinted at her trepidation, making repeated comments about her future employment in the district and her efforts to delegate tasks to others in the building. This apprehension manifested itself in two separate interviews, as Megan suggested that principals who were faced with a potential school consolidation should “run” away from that type of responsibility. She certainly wanted to please others and often designed her strategies around “tag-teaming and working through those issues” as opposed to being assertive and directly addressing those issues. She wanted to ensure that the faculty heard the same message from authority figures within the organization in addition to herself. She explained the reason for her hesitancy in January when the students had returned from their winter break:

I guess the primary reason is I made the mistake of trying to get teachers involved when I first came to the district. I had the tech director come in and make a formal presentation we tried to do during an early faculty meeting. I was very quickly put in my place by the union representative and told, “Faculty meetings were for disseminating information from board meetings and things like that and they’re not school improvement days unless the teachers were given a stipend.” When that came up and I looked to the higher-ups for support, I had no support. So I was very quickly put in my place (laughter) as far as what could be accomplished during faculty meetings.

The data collected from the interviews, observations, and document review consistently revealed three emergent themes that were affecting the principal’s ability to maintain a focus on student learning in the first year of a school district consolidation: school governance issues, communication barriers, and creating a positive school culture. The remaining research questions were structured and reported around these three themes in order to emphasize the importance they held to this study.
Research Question 2: Facilitating Factors

The second research question examined the factors that facilitated or supported the principal’s ability to maintain a focus on student learning during the first year of school consolidation. The data collection methodology for this question included personal interviews, document reviews, and observations. For the purpose of analysis, the notion of governance primarily was conceptualized as the methods through which decisions were made and how formal and informal power was used to implement those decisions. Furthermore, governance emerged from this case as relational between the building and the district (central district administration and the school board) and also between the stakeholders in the building and the principal. The facilitating factors related to governance included effective leadership, acting strategically, and distributed leadership.

Governance. One complicating factor present in this case was data that suggested the practitioners (the group consisting of building administrators, faculty, and staff) preferred the decentralization of control and fully expected to make decisions in the field. Interview data indicated that the participants expected to make decisions at the point the situation arose whether these occurred in the classroom, teachers’ lounge, or the main office. Megan and the members of her BLT felt the most effective decisions would involve applying their collective knowledge and competency to make good decisions in accomplishing the goals set forth by the district. Megan explained her desire for the school board to view this process as: “Okay, we hired you as principal. Now go do your thing and report back to us about how things are going. Or we will bring concerns to you as they come up.” She felt in this way the faculty was able to sharpen the focus and reveal insight into the mission while ensuring that their decisions were in alignment with the district vision. Megan explained that effective leaders were strategic about creating a
culture, and the culture she wanted to establish had not fully materialized at LHS. She articulated the need to put her BLT directly in front of the rest of the faculty so the process was perceived as colleagues talking to colleagues in what she phrased “a professional learning community” so the teachers could collaborate and instead of seeing nothing but barriers, move forward and make progress. Abbigail also thought if the BLT were directly involved it would create ownership and help the BLT build a stronger building team. She described how the BLT included representation from each department, thereby creating opportunities for input from every direction. Megan emphasized throughout the study that she needed to create these conditions to encourage trusting relationships in order for others to lead in the high school.

Effective leadership. Megan was described by two of the secondary participants as employing a hands-off style until the final six weeks of the school year. At that point in the year, Megan finally realized the importance of her role as a learning leader. Upon reaching this realization, she began to become more involved and more strategic, clearly assuming full responsibility for her role as a learning leader, while adopting an approach where she coordinated these efforts and put teacher leaders in charge. She began this process in April through the use of effective leadership strategies. Chase commented on Megan’s knowledge, training, and skills to do the job: “She’s a terrific leader.” Megan noted that Abbigail had begun to develop her leadership skills by enrolling in a master’s degree program in educational leadership. Midway through second semester, Megan and Abbigail began to collaboratively identify the key people from each department to serve on the building leadership team for the following year. Abbigail felt that they specifically wanted to exert their leadership influence on some individuals who were not necessarily advocates for change and were hard to convince. She rationalized, “We thought if we could get them involved, maybe that would help build a stronger
team.” All of the participants were in place. However, another important element was to influence these participants in order move any necessary building changes forward.

To convince the faculty to change, Megan had to provide evidence of the school’s progress and her rationale to address the concerns of those who were skeptics in her building. She relied heavily on her newly developed BLT to help address these issues. The faculty required a compelling reason to sacrifice the time and energy necessary for engaging in the change process. Fortunately, a district in-service in January provided that reason: district-mandated changes for every building to address Response to Intervention (RtI). Megan began to utilize the district mandate with her BLT as the impetus to create the collaborative culture she envisioned in the building. RtI was new to all faculty members, because it was not implemented in either of the two previous districts, which created fertile ground for the seeds of collaboration to be planted for future growth. Megan altered her previous hands-off approach to distributed leadership for a more focused one aimed at developing key strategic leaders from the building. She and Abigail identified these key strategic leaders and included them on the repurposed BLT. Yet she expressed apprehension about this approach: “I know my key stakeholders and need them moving forward whether it be professional learning community or whatever philosophy they adopt. But if I put them out there right now, I’m afraid they will be eaten alive by the rest of the faculty.”

Eventually, Principal Wayne recognized that she had to actively involve these teacher leaders in order to make forward progress within the building. Still, the secondary participants noted that, as the formal leader of the Lakeside High School, the secondary participants noted Megan needed to display the courage to stop controlling, or managing, everything in this new endeavor and to allow these newly selected leaders the opportunity to engage in authentic and
meaningful collaboration in their leadership roles. Megan articulated core values from the school improvement plan in order to initiate the critical work of the BLT. As the BLT implemented components of the plan, focused teacher leadership began to emerge and Megan began to gain confidence with her distributed idea for leadership. As she began this nascent process, Megan listened for successes in the building, the area, and around the state to find and hopefully replicate examples of effective leadership. She made site visits and contacted other leaders in her professional network to locate expertise related to RtI.

Megan praised the leadership efforts of all faculty members, including her “dissenters,” when they made notable progress on RtI. She began to find evidence that things were working in a very strategic and focused way. Her role and influence as the principal was amplified and became instrumental to the educational success of two of the three participants of this study as she allowed their ideas to influence her own thinking and leading practices. Abbigail explained how she liked that:

> We pushed through it that you made teachers work at it and that they didn’t just sit around and do nothing. I think we are all really pushing in that right direction . . . bouncing ideas off of her (Megan) has been good. I think that has really helped me.

Chase further explained:

> She was then (after RtI and PLC) able to put together a SIP team, a SAFT team, and a building leadership team. All of these groups are the most effectively run things that I have ever been around. Megan did a very smart thing. She took everybody (on the teams) and required that we figure it out. I’m on this team too and it’s awesome! As far as a SIP-we’ve got plans now.

It was observed that as Megan gave up more control over more of these responsibilities, she obtained more results through collaboration. This practice played into one of her purported natural leadership tendencies “to delegate.” She articulated her goal with clarity: as many faculty members as possible must understand how to put those ideas from RtI into practice.
**Acting strategically.** In Megan’s initial interviews at the start of the school year, she discussed a greater need to focus on student learning. Furthermore, she felt the need to make it happen in her building early in the consolidation and could not wait for the district administration to make the next move. She knew at least two departments were prepared to move forward with curriculum reforms at the onset of the consolidation and allowed them to do so.

Whitney described how this worked in her department:

> Right after the vote for consolidation I sent out an email to meet with the staff of my department. We met at a neutral site and went through and prepared a document of what we thought would be the best direction for our department to go with regard to curriculum in the first year.

Megan noted there was no formal departmental leadership at this time, which she cited as problematic to a strategic focus because she did not have department heads in place. She described it as “you don’t have anyone overseeing the curriculum on a regular basis and noting what’s been accomplished or what been marked off.” Neither school had any time for collaboration prior to consolidation. In this first year of consolidation, formal collaboration in the new high school was limited to a sprinkling of school improvement days inundated by a multitude of learning and management foci. These full- and half-day sessions had proven to be ineffective and inefficient in the eyes of the participants in this case study. Megan felt that initiating the “late starts” or “early-outs” for faculty collaboration was instrumental to the building’s future success as a collaborative learning community focused on student learning.

Megan developed a plan to use the remaining school improvement days to focus the BLT’s work on the introductory RtI movement for next school year. She also articulated the importance of developing collaborative time focused on a Professional Learning Community model. Megan began to realize here was a chance to lead and influence teacher learning in the way she wanted. By acting strategically, she was able to pair teachers familiar with best practice
with those not as well versed in those practices. She stated, “They are familiar with all the researchers: They’ve read Marzano and they’ve read Reeves.” Megan believed she would rely heavily on these teacher leaders to model best practice and push their departments toward RTI implementation. Megan described herself as fortunate to have selected a group of faculty members, from across the core departments, who had that best academic backgrounds and experiences. Megan commented frequently during the interviews that collaboration through shared leadership was essential to the success of this process at the building level.

**Implementing distributed leadership.** The data contained several examples of a distributed leadership style near the end of second semester. Three fourths of the interviewees noted the need for a distribution of leadership as the year progressed in order to effectively address building-level needs. Megan was observed to have strategically pushed the concept of distributed leadership ahead by involving a few of her dissenters in key leadership roles within the BLT. She often commented that it was essential to hand-pick potential leaders for her building leadership team, to whom she intended to delegate the responsibility for addressing student learning needs. She considered her initial approach of forming a team comprised entirely of “volunteers” as an ineffective strategy. Therefore, by handpicking her leaders, Megan began to observe the leadership resolve from these new teacher leaders that she often lamented was missing from the initial BLT.

By second semester, Megan began describing the importance of collegial interaction formed around a focus to improve student learning. She shared, “Obviously I need to empower them and keep them grouped in an academic setting and not just a social setting outside the school day.” Ultimately, Principal Wayne decided that she could no longer wait on direction from the board or superintendent and noted: “We should be head and shoulders above where we
are now.” She felt the faculty focus was beginning to drift by the start of the second semester, so she decided she was required to act for the best interest of the students. Interestingly, the idea for focused, academic collaboration became top-down from her since it was not top-down from the central office or school board. She personally rallied stating, “Well, at some point I think it has to be top-down in how it takes place.”

During the first semester, Megan’s attendance at department meetings, outside the English department, was described as quite sporadic by the other participants in the study. In addition, two participants noted that she had cancelled most of the faculty meetings and maintained occasional attendance at the monthly BLT meetings. Megan explained that “time limitations” and being “bogged down with discipline” were responsible for her inability to fully engage with these activities. Ultimately, she began to recognize that she was not fulfilling her role as a learning leader. Near the end of the third nine weeks, she began diligently attending the building leadership meetings and had a greater presence at the department meetings, grading committee work sessions, and RtI planning meetings. She asserted that the building leadership team needed to continue to meet on a very regular basis and cited specifically the use and analysis of data in those meetings as a primary reason. Megan began to strategically distribute leadership to these building leaders. Initially, documentation reviewed suggested she had not structured this collaborative time at all, which was perceived by Whitney and Chase to create a focus on social issues within the building, as opposed to academic issues, as the top priority for the faculty.

Megan’s rhetoric changed from “surviving” the very first year and waiting for the district administration “to get things in place and move forward” to an attitude where the BLT was making decisions related to RtI and creating a building-level mission for the mandate. She
pushed for this shared leadership to evolve by requiring bi-monthly meetings with the intent that her building leadership team members would create a sense of urgency among “the rank and file.” She knew that she “wanted this to be more than looking at today’s test and pontificating, but to disaggregating the data around areas of focus in the SIP.” She indicated it was critical to develop ownership for learning among the teachers. She rationalized her focus at the department level, because of the importance that key individuals were in place: “That is what makes sense at the high school level. I am in the process of hand-picking key people from each department to serve on what will be my building leadership team for next year.” Megan explained:

My intent was to have departments meet on most of those days and for me to travel sometimes scheduled and sometimes unscheduled to see where they’re at. I feel that’s where the peer pressure or peer interaction comes in. I’m hoping there’s going to be more movement off dead center. I want them to share with their peers about good training or success they’ve had using a certain method with kids.

In order to create accountability among her teacher leaders, Megan sensed that it was critical to move away from the voluntary leadership structure that had been in place to one based on strategic appointments. She believed significant progress finally came in late spring after she attended a professional development workshop on the topic of RtI. Her building had maintained RtI as a target initiative since their January District Institute, which mandated RtI implementation within each building. The district mandate requiring buildings address RtI allowed her an opportunity for the distribution of leadership to her BLT to initiate the development of the building’s action plan and implementation of RtI. The professional development session created a unique opportunity allowing Megan and Abbigail to discuss moving the building leadership team forward in a significant way. Megan spoke at length about the progress after this specific event:

It has been playing out well because I have some key people. I took every one of my dissenters and I put them on my building team leader committee for next year. Now they
have to come up with solutions and be part of the solution instead of part of the problem. I’ve met with them (BLT) several times. It’s a group of 10-12 people, faculty members from here in the building, each discipline or each area. They put together our first step in formalizing our RtI plan at the high school. It basically outlines incorporating an advisory. Sometimes those individuals surprise me and they come up with suggestions that are surprising. It’s working like magic so far. It might turn around and bite me but we’ve made a lot of progress.

I think I’ve made more strides school improvement wise in the last six weeks (of the school year) than in the rest of the year. Just with the team leader meetings going into next year and trying to have a focus in establishing both academic and behavioral incentives and expectations.

Abbigail echoed the value of the collaborative experience at the event:

We just started a building leadership team this year. Mrs. Wayne and I happened to go to the same RtI workshop in Peoria one day. We sat and brainstormed who we would want from each department on the team. I think that’s going to be good because it is going to be more of a consensus from the entire building. We both agreed on who we wanted to ask. So we got some people we knew were going to be on top of it, bring their “A” game, and be ready to go. We also brought some people in that aren’t necessarily for change and a little hard to convince. We thought if we could get them involved that would help us build a stronger team. There are enough of us in this group that we can get a sense from the entire building but not too many of us that we can’t make a decision.

After empowering these potential leaders, Megan realized the importance of training her leadership team and her departments to stay the course and see the process through the implementation of the RtI process. She altered the content of the spring semester stating that the remaining “institute and school improvement days focus on developing RtI at the high school level.” Chase believed the additional time to focus on “leading the building” was extremely important in this regard: He articulated how Megan then was able to put together a school improvement team, a student assistance team, and a building leadership team because the teachers needed to understand their importance in the school process. He noted, “All of these groups are the most effectively run things that I have ever been around. Mrs. Wayne did a very smart thing. She took everybody that was a PIA [pain in the ass] and threw them on the same
team and said, ‘Okay, figure it out.’” Chase felt that it took really strong leadership to change things.

Abbigail noted the value of teacher ownership in empowering these potential leaders:

Once we realized that leadership is a process, team building is a process, and things don’t happen overnight . . . once we really sat down to analyze that and get our own feelings out of the way just for a minute, I think that we began to be far more successful. By the end of the year were we able to collaborate better with one another.

Whitney also described feeling validated through this empowerment, yet also noted concerns about teachers who were not completely engaged:

We did that for three in-service days and that I was like this is nice we needed this. Everyone commented that we needed this, but it was directed by a teacher. It was teacher led. So I think that combination allowing ownership was very valuable. Then there are the teachers who don’t want to. They’re kind of getting left behind.

In terms of empowering students, Megan clearly stated her intent was to involve students from the outset. During our first interview, she recited multiple examples indicating the importance of capturing and including the students’ voices in the process. She consistently maintained the importance of the student voice via her monthly “Principal’s Cabinet” in interviews throughout the entire study. This cabinet was made up of 16 students, with four students from each grade level, who represented a cross-section of students from all different social groups. The “diverse group” was often described as “candid” about what was good, bad, or ugly at Lakeside High School. Megan described it as “extremely refreshing” to hear the collective student voice:

They obviously know about the discipline issues and that they are being dealt with. They are very pleased with the opportunities that they have schedule-wise this year. They are very pleased with how consolidation is going. They don’t feel that the logistics of the classroom are a disadvantage or anything of that sort. Their biggest concern is that they would like more detailed explanations in the course manual for selecting classes, and more options in the vending machines (laughter) real teenage opinions, academics and food.
At the very least, Megan was observed to have considered student input in the development of her new leadership structure at Lakeside High School. Megan stated that this collective voice was essential in developing and enhancing a program designed to ensure the students have the necessary skills to be successful in their post-secondary endeavors. She was thankful for the cabinet’s “candid compliments and suggestions” and commented that the time was sacred to her.

**Strategic communication.** Arguably, one of the most essential tasks for leaders that emerged from the data in this study was for the principal to consistently communicate the centrality of student learning. The ability and degree to which Megan communicated the centrality of student learning was observed to either build trust or create roadblocks for her followers. The following aspects of communication were observed to further facilitate or support the her ability to maintain a focus on student learning in this case study: shared understanding and the use of dialogue and open conversation.

**Developing shared understanding.** Megan articulated a number of reasons in support of the consolidation of the two districts. These reasons were designed to enhance student opportunities and included the following: the expansion of programs by offering advanced placement and more dual credit options, the creation of professional learning communities for teachers, and being proactive in combating declining enrollments of both high schools. Many community members, as well as the faculty and staff from the two former districts, understood these reasons and supported the vote for consolidation. However, when setting the direction of the new high school, Megan’s initial focus was less clear. As the researcher, my initial observations found unclear goals that were negatively affected by a great deal of top-down direction related to managerial issues rather than learning, too much talk, and little attention to
implementation or action. She began to regularly comment that the absence of action had to change.

Eventually, Megan formulated a shared understanding of the building’s needs, issues, and future direction. After the January district institute, she identified a significant disconnect between the school district’s initial professional development on RtI and the pedagogical understandings of her high school faculty. I personally observed the training to be video-based, primarily intended for a K-8 audience, and run by a consultant who had little practical or theoretical knowledge on the topic. The training reinforced a concern that Megan voiced throughout the initial year of this consolidation: The high school staff typically was expected to implement programs with little or no preparation. She realized that in order to develop an understanding of the building’s needs, issues, and direction in addressing the RtI mandate and other building initiatives such as PLCs or grading scale issues, she must bring key people into the conversation.

Megan articulated a clearer understanding of the distribution of leadership after attending a number of regional trainings delivered by the state principals’ association and attending a site visit of specific schools. These focused on RtI, PLC, high schools using a schedule within a master schedule for more content specific course instruction, and advanced placement courses. After listening to her teachers, she also realized much of the information she was communicating to them was disconnected from practice, thus making it difficult for them to understand and ultimately support. She believed she had to delegate much of this process to create “buy-in by enhancing the faculty’s ownership” in these key areas. She described creating a shared understanding by bringing the right people to the table. Megan noted:

So again it’s part of my vision of where I would like us to be. This year I do think that they (BLT) were instrumental in helping to bridge the gap between the two districts. It
has been playing out well because I have some key people. In fact, I plan to keep some of my key people on my team for next year. I’d like to hand pick those with advanced degrees in the content area because obviously they have some more effective teaching methods.

My other intent is to probably pick my dissenters. I will probably not include all of them but several of them on the team because they are leaders. If I can get them over the fence and headed in the right direction they are going to be instrumental in whether this (PLC) is going to be successful in terms of school improvement because they’ll see the value in it.

Megan and the new BLT (initially designed for the following year) began immediately working to create a contextual plan for PLCs and RtI at Lakeside High School. In creating the plan, the collaborative focus Megan and the BLT formulated gave voice to faculty concerns with regard to addressing problems of practice, connecting pedagogical practice to content knowledge, finding time for collaboration, and improving student learning. Megan noted that through frequent meetings with the faculty, she and BLT intended to “communicate the RtI plan and PLC framework.” Megan described the sequence of events:

I’ve met with them (BLT) several times. They put together essentially our first steps in formalizing our RtI plan at the high school. This plan was presented at the board meeting last week. It basically outlines incorporating an advisory period (for conducting 3 tiers of interventions). My plan is to meet with them on the off weeks because we have either 1st and 3rd or 2nd and 4th Fridays out (PLC) so the opposite weeks I’ll meet with the team (BLT). It will be at least twice a month.

The BLT then planned to evaluate feedback they received from the faculty to determine how things were going. They would use this information to look for ways to build in small victories in an effort to garner support for additional reforms. They also planned to celebrate stories of success. Still, building mutual understanding between multiple groups is a difficult task. Megan and the BLT had to handle delicate situations and conflict with both tact and power. Trust began to develop in handling the tough situations this way, as more people were included in building discussions about the RtI process and they had time for collaboration designed into
the PLC framework for the following school year. These discussions began to lead to professional and productive forms of confrontation.

**Establishing dialogue and open conversation.** Initially, Megan described dialogue as a one-way process of her dissenters “just being extremely vocal in their complaints.” She had not involved the majority of her faculty dissenters in two-way communication, because although they were a powerful group, she feared they would sabotage her efforts. By mid-year, interview data depicted how she had implemented advice from other colleagues experienced in consolidation and chose not to hold meetings that included the entire faculty. However, as Megan began to consider who would argue or disagree, she delineated the need to include those faculty dissenters who had been left out of the discussion. She believed it was the very absence of their voices and the lack of opportunities for dissenters to participate that created increased levels of anxiety, complaining, and sabotage among the faculty. Megan knew the changes the building experienced were being done to or for them and not with them. She described the importance of change in that “now they have to come up with a solution and be part of the solution instead of part of the problem.”

Megan expressed the need to address, acknowledge, and restore the ability to engage in appropriate professional confrontation with her subordinates in order to influence the learning of students during school consolidation. She believed that the message here must be understood and acted upon by her teachers. Chase reflected on the process:

> Once we realized that leadership is a process, team building is a process, and that things don’t happen overnight; once we really sit down and analyze that and get our own feelings out of the way, just for a minute, I think that we’ll be far more successful in the future.
Chase felt they did not need to “beat around the bush” or over-communicate, which may have been causing confusion. He believed: “As far as SIP we’ve got plans now; all of these things that should have been in place since day one.”

Chase believed the issue came back to how the building leader communicates for “valued and beneficial open conversation.” It is done by not talking at or to people but working in close collaboration with them. Whitney commented, “I think you can get more flies with honey than you can with vinegar.” At the end of the school year, Megan acknowledged the importance of open conversation as a facilitating factor: “I think I’ve made more strides school improvement-wise in the last six weeks than in the rest of the year.” To establish dialogue and open conversation, she had to create an atmosphere of collaboration with less isolation of the isolation that both of the high schools experienced prior to consolidation. She concluded stating, “It’s working like magic so far. It might turn around and bite me but we’ve made a lot of progress.”

**Creating a positive school culture.** The final theme that emerged from the study addressed issues influencing the developing school culture at Lakeside High School. A newly consolidated school is not a finished product. A well-designed plan for the systematic induction and assimilation to a new culture is vital in order to maximize the positive enculturation of students and faculty to a new school. The development of a positive, thriving, learning culture will not happen by accident. The conception of culture is unique to each local context. Even so, culture has generally been defined as the beliefs, values, assumptions, and institutional norms that guide how people work in an organization. Culture begins to be communicated by what people value. In educational institutions, these values may be influenced in part through the lens each individual uses to view the organization. A leader’s lens, most likely, will produce different variations of a value than perhaps a follower’s lens. As many school systems still operate under a
traditional hierarchical governance structure, their individual and distinct culture certainly is influenced by the leaders within the system. The findings from this study suggest the importance of a strategic process of building relationships when developing the school’s institutional norms and culture.

**Follow the leader.** Unsolicited and unstructured student leadership began to become a motivating factor for the faculty and certainly for Megan near the end of the academic year. Ironically, the students were the leaders in the development of the school culture. At the end of the first semester, Megan and Chase both commented that the faculty should follow the students’ example. Early in our interviews, Megan noted how the school’s identity crisis was not as prevalent with the students as much as it was with everyone else and commented that the students were unconcerned about the school’s identity by the end of the school year. However, it was still an issue with some parents, faculty, and community members. She considered one of the year’s high points was watching the students come together and internalize the new mascot and the new school district as their own. Megan also referenced the students’, especially the seniors’, talks at the end of the year. She shared how students, in their graduation speeches, described their initial hesitancy coming into the school at the start of the academic year versus how they felt as the year closed, which she viewed as a significant step forward in the creation of a positive and welcoming school culture.

As Megan reflected on the experience in several interviews, she expressed “that has just happened. I don’t really think any one person can take responsibility for” the process of the kids uniting as one group. She noted that students no longer identified themselves as students from the two shuttered high schools: “It doesn’t really matter if it’s Homecoming or Prom court or anything the kids have been involved in this year; it’s ended up being a 50/50 split.” She was
thrilled that student recognition was equally distributed between the students from the two
previous high schools. Megan described how the students’ collegiality began to positively affect
some teachers during the high school’s Homecoming activities:

As far as the kids working together, the number of participants we had involved in all of
the activities and the float building, all of those team-building or spirit-building activities,
was very positive and I was surprised at the number. I guess I thought there would be
some hesitation on the adults’ part and on the students’ part. We did not experience that
at all. So that is very positive.

Megan also stated that a large percentage of students and teachers and parents have
accepted the consolidation saying “Okay, let’s move on. This is the world we have now; let’s
make it the best world we can.” She considered that occurrence to be positive momentum.
Abbigail reinforced the importance of the students’ example of unification: “My kids were
wonderful. From the beginning they just kind of took it and ran with it. That part of it has been
great.” She further noted the students’ influence in leading the community:

I think that there are some parents that have finally come around and I think they realize
the kids don’t have issues with it; the kids are okay with being a new school system, so I
think they are okay.

Whitney echoed these experiences, as she noted that “the kids really came together. They were
hanging out anyway with kids from the opposite district and now they are dating each other,
playing ball together, and they’re working together.” Megan reinforced the student example in
coming together: “The kids have helped. The teachers have been watching the kids come
together.” She felt the students’ leadership had influenced the attitudes in following the students’
example and moving from a culture of “me” to a more collaborative culture based on “we.”

From “me” to “we.” At the onset of my interviews, Megan identified a division between
the two former faculties, with teachers “pointing fingers” with regard to student performance
based on what high school they attended previous to the consolidation. She reinforced this
concern in a later interview as she described her decision-making as “being fair in how we address things between the two common faculties.” I found that language “two common faculties” disturbing in light of the rhetoric discussing a new collaborative culture and began to draw inferences given the obstacles discussed in my data. Megan identified barriers during the year she would “try to deal with what becomes top priority every day in just handling those issues with the individuals in trying to make this melding or this consolidation work.” Whitney echoed these experiences as she noted, “We can’t expect these students to come together if we’re not going to come together.”

As the school year progressed, Megan occasionally commented that she believed the two faculty groups from the former schools were beginning to come together. She commented that “from the teachers’ standpoint about two-thirds of them have melded and created new relationships, new bonds.” She reflected on the fact that the district or building had not scheduled any team-building activities for the faculty at the beginning of the academic year. She felt that the team-building idea would have been an effective activity. She commented, “It happened in certain small groups like with the summer painting group, or the math or English departments.” However, these activities materialized on their own and basically were left to chance for those teachers who elected to develop departmental team-building activities of their own accord. Megan lamented that overall it was “on a small scale and of their doing. It was not something that was organized by the district.” Obviously, as the building leader, Megan did not consider doing this on her own and lamented that failure later in the year: “In terms of bringing people together to deal with their anxiety and strengths and inadequacies . . . throwing everybody in a pot or a building together, that was definitely something I should have worked through.”
It was observed that the school faculty wrestled with what they do until they clarify what they value as a culture. As Megan described earlier, what they did at Lakeside High School was certainly for the kids. All the participants clearly valued their students from the very beginning as evident in their interview remarks. Megan consistently expressed a desire to serve the students and to do what is best for her students. This commitment was observed to challenge Megan to overlook her professional popularity and make some hard decisions with regard to student learning. She expressed that an outward focus was necessary to reduce the personal uncertainty many were feeling for much of the inaugural year. In order for Megan to make progress in student learning she had to develop from “I can make more progress with individuals or small groups even if only making baby steps towards an issue.” The interview data collected from the other participants suggested that the building needed some more decisive and visionary leadership from their formal leader, Megan.

As the spring semester began to unfold, Megan began to move out of her comfort zone and began engaging her veteran teachers as “the ones I rely on most heavily for best practice and pushing their departments forward.” She understood she had the individuals in different core departments with that background. “Me” began to evolve into “we” as she started getting individuals to assist the staff in looking at data about student learning in the building. Although it was difficult, she felt the need and stated “we keep presenting them with that information.” Even so, she was not sure how, but “somehow that message is getting out.”

Megan felt compelled to act on the learning issues presented by the RtI mandates. By individually setting the vision for her building, Megan began to affect her followers, deepen trust, and establish loyalty. In my end-of-year interviews it was interesting to note a change in the rhetoric of leadership. My June interview with Abbigail found her using the word “we” 14
times when discussing the BLT. The idea of “we” working together and the intent of creating ownership were noted in final interviews with Megan and Chase as well. As ownership began to be established within the high school faculty, Megan believed the two former faculties formed better relationships, held more effective meetings, and initiated the sharing and analysis of learning-related information. Megan felt that all of the high school faculty and administration were very supportive of the students. In addition, she believed the teacher leaders were providing the students with a safety net so the students were comfortable taking risks. She noted, “I appreciate the fact that the teacher leaders want the students’ opinion about what they would like to see and they will gather and analyze data to determine what is important.”

**Establishing a collaborative culture.** Over the course of the study, RtI and the PLC model began to clearly emerge as Megan’s vehicles for the high school’s choices with regard to learning. She knew that building capacity was essential to developing the foundation of a collaborative culture in the high school. In approaching this change she realized that she had not been sharing leadership with the team. The document analysis and observational data from this study suggest that opportunities for new leadership positions were presented to the redesigned BLT. Megan had already discussed how students played a role and were engaged in a collaborative process through the “Principal’s Cabinet.” The data also demonstrated that the student body as a whole had created some leadership momentum for members of the faculty. Megan noted that teachers needed support “in terms of providing them a safety net where it’s okay to take risks.”

One way that Megan began to develop this safety net was through both formal and informal opportunities for collaboration. In collaboration with Abbigail, she developed a new vision and section of the BLT members. Abbigail noted the process driven collaborative focus as
one benefit of the consolidation: “We opened the door to be able to work with other people. So it’s really helped me to not be so terrified of trying something new with my instruction.” She felt that “bouncing ideas off” another department member allowed her to grow instructionally and develop enough confidence to be an educational leader as part of the BLT. Chase echoed the importance of the process:

Once we realize that leadership is a process, team building is a process, and things don’t happen overnight. Once we really sit down and analyze that and get our own feelings out of the way, just for a minute, I think that we’ll be far more successful in the future.

Megan had to establish roles through her BLT in order for this process to work and “establish that atmosphere of hopefully collaboration and less isolation than what you find in the high school.” In developing these roles it became clear that the high school would “need practical information.” She believed an external expert was needed to help her leadership team and the faculty figure out the demands in a practical manner that would address “time-wise what is manageable, how should we attack it, and how to make it work in the classroom.” Chase later commented that having his leadership role formalized and “in place, for next year will be incredibly important” to the building efforts to improve student learning as a part of the RtI mandates and collaborative PLC design. He also commented, “I think it will make the transition in year two that much smoother.” Whitney believed that practical information “in combination with allowing ownership” was essential as those choosing not to be involved were “kind of getting left behind.” Collaboration appeared to be what many of the respondents were seeking.

For those in leadership roles, the reality lay in their concerns of finding the time to conduct a collaborative process.

Megan touched on the topic of time for collaboration in numerous interviews. She lamented the lack of time for all the process needs of a school consolidation and noted, “We have
a sprinkling of school improvement days so its disjointed because teachers sit down and after a three hour meeting really get going, but they don’t meet again for another six to eight weeks.” She also noted that in order to improve student learning through interventions and enrichment there must be time to for departmental conversations on a regular basis. In order for academic alignment to take place, the faculty needed to sit down and hash out what needed to be done at each level. Megan was determined this time must be a requirement of the collaborative process.

Megan continued to expand this idea of time specifically focused on academic inquiry and discussion about student learning with her BLT. Eventually they made a presentation to the school board, “trying to tie in more to the curriculum and teacher meeting time.” She felt it was “do or die” for student learning that “somehow we need to convince the board that teachers need time to collaborate.” She was thrilled to inform me at our last interview that the teachers had been approved to have an early-out work session every other Friday in the upcoming school year, with these sessions occurring on the first and third Fridays of the month. She commented that this time would be monumental for implementing the BLT ideas for a collaborative culture. She commented: “We can actually work in smaller groups on data analysis to audit our curriculum and make sure we are in line with the college readiness benchmarks.” This time for collaboration on the part of teachers was an intended consequence of the student learning process that Megan longed for much of the school year.

**Research Question 3: Inhibiting Factors**

An additional research question examined the factors that inhibited or were barriers to a principal’s ability to maintain a focus on student learning during the first year of school consolidation. The data analyzed for this question included personal interviews, document
reviews, and observations. One assumption held by Megan about the governance structure was the ideal process would begin with the principal and/or building leaders’ carefully studying and collecting data with regard to a situation. Second, these leaders would develop clarity and empathy for those affected by the situation. Third, the leaders and affected stakeholders would meet to discuss and collaborate on all possible scenarios and alternatives pertaining to the situation. Fourth, this new group would consider any relevant research. Finally, the principal would lead this group in petitioning the board for any assistance or formal actions.

However, the reality of this case as perceived by Megan and her building leaders depicted how the theme of governance emerged as a barrier to the process as described in the principal interviews as occurring primarily between the high school building, the Board of Education, and central office. However, interviews and observations also noted governance issues between the teachers at the high school and the principal. For the purpose of this analysis, the data analyzed in this school consolidation suggests the building faculty and administration did not perceive the governance process as beneficial to the building achieving its academic goals or solving its managerial issues.

**School governance issues.** Governance was perhaps the most significant theme that emerged over the course of the study and was clearly considered the most “significant issue” as highlighted by consistent concern from the participants around the board’s involvement as “micro-managing.” The role and influence of the board on student learning was listed as a problem or a barrier to student learning by all of the participants. The significance of this theme was repeatedly noted in the data as the board was discussed as being a barrier to student learning in 15 of the 16 interviews. With one exception, all participants described the intrusion of the school board into the governance of the school as “micro-managing.”
Micro-management. Each participant spoke at length as well about the problem with micro-management as a barrier to student learning. For example, Whitney stated:

The superintendent likes to micromanage it. He could be the high school principal and the superintendent. I think I’m going to put that out there for you. And then if I was on the board, I would let my superintendent do his job. I think our story starts up there. We have a board who likes to micromanage. We then hire a superintendent who likes to micromanage. We get down into it, down farther, and people are frustrated with the micromanaging because of what I’ve said at the beginning. Who do I go to? Who do I need to talk to get this done? I don’t know because the lines are grayed.

Megan shared numerous examples throughout the study of the board’s tendency to micromanage. She shared that “it has been more of the mentality that the board knows best and the boards going to do what the boards going to do.” So, in all of the things that were decided or handled by the building administration, whatever they anticipated would happen through the typical chain of command process “never happens,” which created a very “unpredictable” environment according to Megan and Abbigail. Megan further commented:

From the political perspective, you don’t know what’s going to happen from one second to the next, what’s going to come your direction. That has been a far bigger issue than any of the administrative job this year, which is sad. The board needs to allow us to do our jobs. Instead of micromanaging things and playing favorites and not doing things based on best practices or data let us do our jobs.

She felt that the Board of Education liked the fact that “they are in control of what they can table and what they can pass and what they can disapprove and they like to micromanage it.” She further lamented, “Every step, every bit of it is micro-managed. Decision making is all behind the scenes.”

On the other hand, Chase did not “believe we, on the whole, in this school are being micromanaged.” He felt the school board exercised more of a right to make decisions in certain aspects at the operational level than what was appropriate. Although he did state that the building was not being “micro-managed,” perhaps his description of some events may actually support
the assertion from his colleagues that micro-management was prevalent during the study.

Ironically, Chase gave an example of when the school board began using police in the high school to address fights. The police involvement was described by all of the interviewees as a surprise where “they (police) just showed up one morning.” Chase recounted:

It’s (sigh) . . . you know the thing with the police was a little bit ridiculous. It didn’t solve anything, cost a lot of money and it didn’t. It really left a bad taste in some people’s mouths. Ultimately, I don’t believe that our school board wants to work with the administration very closely. I think that might be the feeling people get from the micromanaging is that maybe the school board has not allowed them to do their job effectively.

Megan frequently commented on this “intrusion” during our interviews, noting that “I usually have to beg, plead, and grovel before we get something.” She often lamented that she felt the high school did not have a lot of board support. She carried this even further to include the district office: “I do not have board, superintendent support which makes it difficult.” To complicate matters further, she felt the superintendent was not able to assist the administrators in leading their buildings:

I think he’s been cut off at the knees this year also by the board directing and not letting him do his job. There is no cohesive group that says, “Okay, we hired you as principal. Now go do your thing and report back to us, or we will bring concerns to you as they come up.” There is nothing like that and it’s more whatever they decide the issues are going to be and we run around getting things ready for the next meeting. It’s often disjointed and has nothing to do with our vision- whatever that is. After these issues come up we spend the next four or five days picking up the pieces. As we try to lead at the building level it’s next to impossible because we are always at the mercy of what they come up with at a board meeting.

Perhaps the pressure of administering a completely new organization and the inevitable changes in the anticipated decision making structures when compared to past practices in the two merged districts created the perception that new issues were addressed by the board imposing its will on the organization. Even if the perceptions were real, relying on a previous structure that does not take into account the trust, communication, negotiations, relationships, and problems of
a new district is a mistake. Sometimes not making a decision or waiting to make decisions is perceived as a negative response to the situation, when individuals in the organization expect an immediate action. In any event, the inability to decide on a course of action may result in a chain of events with unintended consequences.

**Unintended consequences.** Megan felt many unintended consequences were a result of the Board of Education’s “intrusion into the administrators’ areas of responsibility” thus creating an environment where she did not have the authority to make decisions. However, the descriptions of the governance process by other leaders in the building were somewhat contradictory. For Whitney, many unanticipated consequences of the governance process resulted from Principal Wayne’s inability to make important decisions. Whitney described the issue as Megan deferring decision-making authority by stating that “you need to go ask the superintendent.” She continued: “I’m not sure if this is coming from above down to her or if there’s kind of been a change of command.” Whitney explained through the following analogy:

> As a new employee, your chain of command as teacher is to go to your principal and not deal directly with the superintendent unless it is very, very severe. That has not happened here. If I have to go get something I have to go to him. Every time something changes it’s through him. So I don’t really get what her purpose is.

Abbigail, who had much direct interaction with the Board of Education throughout the year, had a slightly different perspective on the reason for unpredictability in the decision-making process. She felt it was primarily the school board that needed to be more supportive of the authority structures within the building. While Abbigail noted “the flip side is their hands are tied,” she believed that the administration should be able to take the proposed actions generated at the building level to the school board without the school board implementing a different course of action. “After a while you decide why waste your time. You’re just spinning circles
wasting time. That is probably the most frustrating part.” Chase believed that most teachers felt disrespect by the board:

I think our school board could work in a better way as far as those reactions are concerned. What it’s done is to make teachers expect knee-jerk reactions. Collaboration I guess is what I’m looking for instead. The problematic situations in the building repeatedly pointed back to this erratic decision-making by the board as negatively influencing the governance process.

Overall, Megan felt the Board of Education needed to allow the administrators to do their job and should support their administrative decisions. She commented that when the building needed the support of the board in dealing with situations it was not present. Additionally, she expressed when board support was present it was for initiatives or issues not related at all to the building, its goals, or mission. She felt the Board of Education was taking action without ever asking for or considering the input of building administrators. Although she was sure their intentions were good, board members were not in the building on a regular basis and therefore were unsure of how things work. Throughout the first year, very few of these decisions outside of student discipline were even noted in the minutes from the Board of Education meetings. The data collected suggests this intrusion was not codified to the internal workings of the school or district, but affected the outside community as well.

**Difficulties in engaging external environments.** In several instances, Megan described a number of projects exhibiting friction between the Board of Education to work with the entire community as a barrier to her ability to engage with the external environment. Support from the community was observed by her to be a “political game.” She commented that in many instances the Board of Education and the community were in an adversarial position. Megan mentioned a number of facilities projects where there was a friction between the Board of Education and the community as a whole. She observed: “It’s almost like the playground mentality, but they simply
won’t work together.” Megan indicated a great deal of the responsibility in these situations sat squarely with the Board of Education, as they often made unilateral decisions without consulting their constituents. Ultimately, it appeared any engagement that did take place was less collaborative and more of a power-play and political game. Megan felt one board member would not support the athletic facilities renovation project because of the individual contractors involved with the renovation. Even after surveys and focus groups were employed to obtain community feedback, these items were brought up several times during the public comment portion of the board meetings. Some constituents stated that the board was hired by the community to act on their behalf and how dare they not listen to what the community is telling you.

When asked about her personal efforts to engage the external community, Megan lamented that she had not focused on this activity during the current year. She cited increased demands in dealing with student discipline, greater requirements for teacher evaluation, and a lack of any clear direction as reasons for this omission. She noted, however, that this had been a departure from her past practice where she met frequently with local civic groups. Megan did speak to the local Kiwanis Chapter, but only at the request of the superintendent. Although she described these individuals as “the movers and shakers,” when asked by the researcher what she planned to do with the opportunity she commented “just hit some of the highlights.” She went on to state how it was not a critical presentation as she often share information with the external community while shopping at the store or putting gas in her vehicle. In contrast, Whitney cited the fact that Megan did not live in the district as the primary reason for her difficulty in engaging the external community.
Even so, the participants in this study articulated numerous times how the external community generally supported Lakeside High School. According to Megan and Whitney, the parents from both Gotham City and Metropolis were not particularly upset by the consolidation and generally supported the change. They both commented most of the parental support revolved around increased extracurricular opportunities and curriculum enhancements such as the AP or dual credit classes. However, all the participants perceived that this support was beginning to wane as the building and district appeared to be a ship adrift with no one at the rudder.

**Communication.** Perhaps the most interesting findings from the principal and leadership team interviews revolved around the theme of communication. In spite of the communication efforts that went into the research, planning, organizing, development, and implementation of this consolidation process, it was not perceived to be near enough communication. When a district provides a vision of student learning, the principal typically is personally charged with making the vision become a reality. However, the complexity of school consolidation made the alignment of the mission and vision for student learning much more difficult for everyone, according to the principal.

The creation of a new district requires the collaboration of many representative groups in the community including, at a minimum, students, parents, teachers, staff, administrators, and the board of education. These key stakeholders must work collaboratively to develop a consistent approach balancing the differentiated individual needs of each student and school building with the overall mission, vision, and goals of the district. The lack of understanding of this finding on the part of the relatively newly elected school board contributed to communication dysfunctions. Actually, no strategic planning began to occur until near the end of first semester, which was just briefly reported on at the December 2, 2010 Board of Education meeting. The delayed, and
perceived, lack of communication on the part of the board, and at the building level the administration, with regard to a vision with clarity and instructional purpose was considered a notable barrier by all but one of those interviewed.

*Barriers to effective communication.* Mean clearly communicated that developing the purpose and direction for the building is not solely the responsibility of the principal but it also helped the faculty and staff remained focused on their mission and minimize the distractions created by the “crisis of the immediate” issue. The complex organizational change and disruption to all segments of the system that happened as an expressed absence of a clear district vision, inevitably made it very difficult for the principal to maintain a focus on student learning, even when the organizational goals and processes of the building nurture student learning. Numerous barriers to communication were present during the study. Although difficult to schedule, time must be set aside for the faculty and staff to engage in frequent, sustained, collaborative debate to eliminate these barriers. These discussions also must provide for decisions to be made and action to happen on a specific schedule to create momentum and garner support for communication to overcome the barriers.

*Difficulties with communicating vision.* Numerous examples emerged from the narrative interview accounts citing the Board of Education as the primary group responsible for setting the educational direction of the district. Megan articulated multiple examples of the Board’s reactionary decision making: these examples repeatedly pointed to the absence of a clearly understood and consistently communicated vision. All participants interviewed during this study had neither read nor heard an articulated vision for the district, and all but one shared doubts regarding whether a district vision was in existence. Abbigail shared how the superintendent could not produce a copy of the district vision when she asked for one to use in order to fulfill
the requirements of a graduate class. Whitney even commented in earnest, “I think we’re flying by the seat of our pants. I think when a question comes in then we say, ‘We’ll get back to you.'”

It is one thing to have vision but it is quite another to communicate that vision to others. Each leader must communicate within his/her own sphere of influence. Each participant spoke at length about the importance of sharing the vision. For Megan this obviously meant sharing the vision with her faculty, staff, and students. It also means influencing up the organizational hierarchy on occasion as the need arises. Megan attempted to help make her supervisors aware that the district lacked a vision, and she also attempted to develop a vision for her building. When asked about the board’s vision for the district or even the high school building, Abigail’s answer was simple and direct: “I have no idea.”

The lack of a clear and coherent vision that was communicated to others was observed by others who were interviewed, and this deficiency became apparent by actions of the board. Whitney described the addition of school resource officers, who suddenly showed up one day in school the second semester. She stated that nothing had been said by district or building administrators as to the need for a police presence at school. She described it further:

I was really surprised when I showed up (laughter) and all the police were here. I really thought something happened. I thought someone died or there was a terrorist threat to the school. I had no idea. I still don’t really know why they were called in.

Whitney commented that the rumor was a decision had been made at a recent board meeting, which she perceived as the administration’s response to alleged increases in student fights at the high school. Although Chase supported the employment of the school resource officers, he shared: “When you talk about the police force being here, I felt it was a positive thing overall but it wasn’t done in a positive manner.” He believed that when the Board of Education members “come here maybe once every three to four months” that the board should
work in a better way as far as “those reactions are concerned.” Whitney and Abbigail felt that teachers often were left out of the communication channels: Typical communication involved students finding out what was going on and communicating it back to the teachers, who would verify with the principal that the students were correct.

Megan repeatedly articulated her belief that vision must be imparted by both formal and informal means. She believed that even the building vision, typically cited as the “direction,” must emanate from both structured experiences and those that are unstructured or spontaneous. In addition to mandated school improvement and institute days, structure was observed to be developed through regular faculty and departmental meetings. The absence of these meetings prohibits the development and enculturation of the school’s institutional norms, and it creates increased levels of anxiety, complaining, and sabotage among the faculty. All learning leaders desire an ownership in the vision, and know it is a privilege to participate in this strategic work. The principal must communicate vision for the building in such a way as to influence all stakeholders and solidify unqualified support by assuring everyone this enormous task can be accomplished. Total devotion to the vision and mission cannot develop from halfhearted efforts to share, describe, and illuminate the vision. Chase aptly noted, “I don’t think that there was probably as much attention to detail on certain things that there could have been. If you really are going to consolidate it’s got to be 100%. Not well, we’re going to take care of that later.” He felt some of the overall decisions were rather knee-jerk reactions instead of based on a compelling vision of the district.

Absence of faculty discussion. All but one of the participants in this study described their angst with the lack of faculty meetings in the building. Although merely scheduling and holding a faculty meeting does not, in and of itself, encourage discussion or the communication of a
clearly articulated vision, the participants repeatedly discussed the absence of these meetings as a mitigating factor in the building’s efforts to develop communication. Whitney stated plainly, “I think we just need to keep working on our communication.” In addition, she expressed her desire to have regular faculty meetings, noting that only two had been held during the academic year. Chase thought that during “second semester we’ve had a handful, maybe not even that many, three or four staff meetings.” Abbigail echoed these comments:

I struggle with it’s the first year of a consolidation, half of our staff is new, and we don’t have anything to talk about (laughter)? There’s got to be something and there's got to be time built in there, I think, as well. It’s all new, and this wasn’t our building before. We don’t know how to do things. Without communication things are breaking down.

Whitney noted that most of her knowledge about building activities came in the form of information from the students. She expressed her exasperation: “We’re not getting a staff meeting. We’re not getting an email. We’re not getting anything. It's floating out there and then its hearsay. Then you have students coming to you all the time about it.” When asked about the reasons for an absence of these customary discussions, Whitney recalled that scheduled meetings frequently were cancelled. When pressed as to why, she responded: “Well, Megan would cancel the faculty meeting and say it was to allow us time to work on grades.” Abbigail further explained often faculty members did not know if meetings were cancelled or not because they had been scheduled on the calendar since August. She said, “Some have been cancelled and some haven’t. People don’t know if we’re having them or not, so some just don’t show up.” Whitney summed up her feelings: “We’ll get an email here or there from the principal. I’d say the communication overall is pretty poor.” Abbigail reinforced the importance of effective communication from the building administrators: “I think really as building principal it has to be top priority of her job, even if it’s just an email.” Although the number of agendas and other documentation supported these claims, Megan repeatedly commented on the need for relevant
discussions to begin taking place, reinforcing Whitney and Abigail’s belief that communication and faculty discussion were important in any effort to make consolidation work.

Things began to change near the end of the year, as Megan began to assume more responsibility for engaging the faculty in dialogue. Megan remarked that initially she felt at a loss concerning what to share with the faculty. She cited the nature of her relationship with the Board of Education and superintendent along with their inability “to establish a common ground” where she had clearly articulated priorities or objectives as the primary reason. She opined the absence of discussion between the building and the board sometimes led them to “dance around or maybe skirt the issue, to poke at whatever the main issue was a little bit but never really get to it in-depth.” I observed the faculty meeting on March 17, 2010, where it appeared that a key issue was placed at the end of the agenda in an effort to limit discussion. An interesting discussion subsequently emerged between Megan and me about the strategic placement of issues on the agenda to limit discussion and minimize conflict. Megan expressed concern:

Folks need ample time to get ideas, concerns, and issues out and expressed, as many times the opportunity to be heard and validated can improve the suggestions or may suggest flaws in ideas or processes. It is problematic to neglect this important administrative responsibility.

Whitney pointed out that “everything is very time-delayed.” Megan was sympathetic to the superintendent and board’s concern that it was difficult to confront issues people are passionate about, but noted that “some of these issues really need to be addressed head-on,” and observed, “I guess that’s more my approach.”

Through observation and interviews with the building leaders, it appeared that Megan was growing to embrace a “head-on” approach by the end of the year. Her desire to create a collaborative team that was strategically anchored around some of her best teachers, including
dissenters, required the faculty to reduce apathy, help students be more successful, and work to raise student achievement. She changed her previous practice from keeping her young or developing leaders out of the line of fire to one utilizing them to push a targeted focus on curriculum, instruction, assessment, and interventions for struggling students. By April she had strategically involved some teacher leaders, as they presented the new direction to the faculty. Although Megan was taking steps to create opportunities for faculty discussion, she still needed to enhance the communication. In any event, the ability to participate in valuable faculty discussion was beginning to take hold.

Communication challenges. Over the course of our interviews, the principal consistently remarked about the importance of keeping the teachers informed regarding the key priorities of the district’s vision and their resulting effects on the building. She believed the internal stakeholders in her building would need focus from the district’s vision in order to influence the direction or mission of their individual school building. Megan felt the vision was essential for these activities to become engrained into the daily instructional activities of the school. Although discussion sessions were held for comment, questions, and discussion to allow for a more complete understanding of the mission of the building, Megan expressed that this communication often resulted in the plethora of daily managerial concerns eroding the building’s focal point for action. Even though Megan believed informed teachers should continue to communicate the goals and values presented in the vision on to students, parents, and the community it was not observed to be the practice during the first year of this consolidation. Unfortunately, significant challenges arise and communication breaks down if any of the channels for presenting the message experience dysfunction, which was observed to be the case during this inaugural year.
Even though it appeared obvious to the secondary participants, initially no emails were sent, and very few faculty meetings were held, to open communication channels by notifying stakeholders of important upcoming discussions. The data through the third quarter of the school year indicated a general faculty consternation with the lack of face-to-face time among the high school faculty and administration. Discussions in schools typically take the form of formal faculty meetings. However, faculty meetings were held infrequently with many scheduled meetings being cancelled by the principal. Abigail appreciated the fact that Megan was not a fan of staff meetings with no stated purpose; she understood that everyone was busy and preferred to have no more meetings than were necessary. Still, Abigail struggled with the lack of meetings. She noted with some incredulity, “It’s the first year of a consolidation, half of your staff is new, and we don’t have anything to talk about?” Abigail believed time to hold regular discussions had to be present, and believed that formal faculty meetings were essential. Abigail and Whitney believed that even occasional brief email updates them it would be an improvement to communication. Whitney preferred email because “it’s quick and it’s easy and I can check it while I’m in the middle of something here in classroom.” Although email was cited as an improvement strategy, both ladies clearly valued face-to-face meetings, because it was important to get “everyone together as often as we can make that happen.” Whitney believed that holding regular staff meetings was essential in improving the communication. Abigail felt face-to-face time together was desperately needed for staff cohesion and trust.

These ladies expressed that sharing dialogue was a very important aspect of the type of face-to-face communication needed for improvement. The idea of sharing dialogue was believed to be an essential communication skill in the context of this school consolidation, but was repeatedly cited as missing by half of my interviewees. Yet, Megan expressed dialogue was one
of her strengths with faculty and parents. She explained “I pride myself on communication. I keep parents informed. I think a lot of times our parents are probably over-informed as opposed to under-informed.” Megan even commented that she frequently went around each day to check in with her faculty. Whitney explained it another way: “Mrs. Wayne walks the halls about 7:30 a.m. and will just walk by and say good morning. I think she thinks it’s her definition of checking in with us. But it’s never an actual check-in to see if you are you okay. We have to go to her if there is an issue.” Ultimately, Whitney and Abigail believed Megan’s refusal or inability to openly address criticism and answer faculty questions were the greatest roadblocks to change.

During the first half of this study, Megan stated that the staff had “melded” on a few occasions. However, it became evident that because of her preference for informal interactions and dialogue with individuals rather than the entire faculty, her failure to create opportunities for building-wide conversations was threatening the fragile sense of cohesion that initially had developed among the faculty. The members of the building leadership team felt there was a significant disconnect between Megan’s belief that effective communication was taking place and the teachers belief that there was no communication occurring at the end of the first semester. Whitney expressed a concern that she was not really prompted by the principal to do things; instead, Whitney often went to Megan with important suggestions. Her frustration was evident in comments such as, “You know we have to go to her if there is an issue (Italics added).” Whitney also commented that she never was able to speak with Megan unless she created the opportunity. However, as Megan continued to listen to her building leaders, she realized greater dialogue was essential to improve her communication.
The only way to resolve this dilemma was by listening. Despite her preference to hold “individual conversations,” which were frequently noted and detailed in 40% of the interviews, Megan realized that she must develop a strategic process for collaboration. By listening to her key building leaders, she began to create an environment in which dialogue was encouraged. She strategically gave each building member a voice through a collaborative process of designing a new leadership committee with the building’s union leadership. As Megan listened, this new process allowed “other” perspectives to be heard, which began to provide closure for many of the issues causing the faculty’s frustration from their perceived lack of communication.

These efforts to communicate with the faculty were lauded by Abbigail: “That kind of stuff is much easier to explain to everybody at one time. Everybody gets the right tone. Anytime you’re talking through technology, things can get misinterpreted.” Whitney echoed the importance of clarity: “I think we all have the same goals in mind and we’ve talked through our goal. And I get that it’s the team leaders who are to focus on RtI.” Chase expressed that he worked diligently to “try to communicate with teachers exactly what is happening with kids. That is one thing they (teachers) said from the first semester to the second semester that not only was necessary but has been improved.” Although it did not provide an opportunity for faculty dialogue, Megan preferred written communication because it is much easier and provided her with written documentation.

Megan began to allow the free communication of ideas and the ability of the faculty to reason through differences to develop a focus and influence the clarity of the building’s mission. Even so, it was difficult because the faculty and staff needed time to establish a mechanism for the type of face-to-face and transparent collaboration they all desired. Whitney described the difficulties with the process as relating back to communication: “We still had times when the
kids were asking questions about the things that were a normal part of the routine of their school. They knew what their old district did and we did not know what to do now.” She noted that conversations were needed about a variety issues: “We need some communication. We need some communication about this activity period. Before we leave for summer the staff needs some communication.” Chase also noted that “I know there’s this general feeling amongst the staff that things in the office are kind of secretive.”

A key precept in handling these challenges was for Megan to ensure that extending influence and developing a significant change in implementation was accompanied by the capacity to manage and develop the communication structures necessary to change the message, and to ultimately change relationships. Because all these relationships required excellence in communication skills and strategies, each time communication broke down the results were damaging to trust and the key aspects to implementation of the building’s improvement plan. Nevertheless, the BLT repeatedly cited Megan’s position as instrumental in changing and developing a public awareness of all needs in the building. She began to develop her communication skills, create discussions, and directly begin addressing objections and many perceptual roadblocks in creating the conditions for communication to be used as a facilitating factor in arguably developing and maintaining a building focus on student learning.

**Resistance to change and perceived roadblocks.** Leaders must anticipate objections and roadblocks when casting a new organizational vision. Resistance comes in many forms, from legitimate skepticism to outright sabotage. People may be willing to contribute their best efforts only when empowered to do so. Doubts are to be expected in any enterprise, but most certainly in such a complex organizational change as school consolidation. Resistance was present in the Lakeside consolidation. Megan and Chase both noted that many staff and community members
who opposed the consolidation believed that they actually would have the option to dissolve the consolidation and return to their prior school districts after the first year. Not only is this incredulous thinking but it suggests a significant lack of communication from the administrative leaders in providing evidence of the direction the building is going as well as consistent, periodic progress updates.

Perhaps the most difficult roadblock was the feelings of inadequacy in the decision making process expressed by Megan and the other participants. Some individuals perceived that Megan always seemed to be waiting for the superintendent’s or board’s responses on important issues. Whitney and Abbigail commented on a perceived notion of the need for an authority higher than Megan to persuade the powers that be. Whitney provided this reflection:

I end up going to the principal, she doesn’t give me a yes or no answer but she directs me on to the superintendent. I end up at the superintendent being told to go back to my building principal because it’s her budget, and then I’m in this waffle zone. It happened to me a couple of times this year.

Chase concurred: “I think she’s not as forceful as she could be. But I see that she’s also one of the only ones that really understand some of the problems that we have around here.” The perceived hesitancy to assume responsibility for the building-level decisions greatly affected the ability of the teachers to focus on what was expected of students.

In the absence of decisive leadership, it became apparent that competing interests began to develop as another roadblock. Whitney commented that much of the faculty chose to reflect on how the two schools came together. She believed this allowed them to ignore the more difficult and important discussions related to the future direction of the high school’s collaboration, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and interventions. She stated that the faculty needed to stop talking about the process of becoming a new district and building. She explained: “I felt like we’re together now, so we don’t need to talk about how we came together.” However,
Whitney was more concerned about the direction of the AP courses in her department and at the building level. Some teachers opposed the addition of AP courses, because the school had a strong commitment to dual credit classes that were offered at nearby White Eagle Community College (WECC). Some activities designed to facilitate students’ engagement with WECC required them to be absent from school on occasion. The result of students using school time to attend on campus orientations or placement testing created a rift due to the competing interests of AP and dual credit. AP teachers were frustrated as some of these students missed their AP instruction as a result of attending the activities at WECC.

It was important to the secondary participants in this study that someone decide the priorities and answer the difficult questions that evolved as a result of the consolidation of the former high schools. Whitney and Abbigail believed the building lacked a clear direction based on key priorities. Chase agreed: “If we could just focus on one thing and that’s our focus until its better” would help because a united focus would help collaboration.” All of the interviewees believed that although everyone involved must put forth an equal effort for communication, leaders are primarily responsible for anticipating resistance to change and communicating the organizations exact priorities.

**Barriers to the establishment of school culture.** The final theme emerged in data in consistent ways throughout all the interviewees’ descriptions of their work in the high school. The importance of culture as a priority for supporting the principal’s ability to focus on student learning came forward as an unanticipated finding through the stories, priorities, and ceremonies described by Megan and Chase regarding the substantial changes involved with bringing the two former high schools together into one new culture. This theme around culture as an enabling factor in school culture was clarified through descriptive barriers to the development of a
positive school culture. Isolation, traditions, and the complications present in developing a new identity, were all described as projected barriers to establishing a positive school culture in this study.

Identity crisis. The most significant, and certainly the most significant piece of data with regard to culture centered on an identity crisis within the high school. All but one interviewee noted problems in the development of the new high school’s identity. Megan explained: “There was certainly hesitancy in bringing the two groups together.” She went on to note this hesitancy was exacerbated by the new district choosing to use the former GCHS building as the site for the new Lakeside High School. Two participants described the time that went into repainting and providing a facelift for the high school facilities. The intent was for the facility to look like a new school. Megan described the desire for people “psychologically” to believe upon entering the building that this original structure was a completely new school and not just a repainted interior of the original school. Megan believed the Metropolis teachers didn’t articulate that they were concerned, but perceived them to feel as if they were moving into “Gotham City teacher’s territory.” Chase added that greater attention could have been paid to the details. I observed that although the main high school building had completely been repainted, many of the outbuildings were still decorated in the former colors of GCHS.

Similarly, Megan believed the default decision-making agenda was for a majority of the managerial functions to be done the way Gotham City previously had operated within their former high school. As the school year progressed, Megan noted the political intent became to keep the few remaining things “that had been done the Metropolis way intact no matter what.” She discussed her belief that those decisions were not based on data. When she examined data from community, parent, faculty, and student surveys, she found data to the contrary. This
contrary data included student and community survey data that supported changing the grading scale. The grading scale issues even emerged at one school board meeting as frustrated community members demanded answers. She described frustration: “It is an attempt to appease an upset faction of the community by creating the illusion of some balance in the decision-making process.” Megan frequently noted throughout the year that she was repeatedly working to smooth things out behind the scenes in a dialogue often described as “us versus them.” She repeatedly referenced this identity crisis many times during the interviews. Whitney also discussed this identity crisis in her first interview:

It’s not really a new district. They’re (Metropolis) really kind of blending into us more on that level—because the leadership stayed the same, because we didn’t get a new principal or a new superintendent, and I’m not saying that we should’ve.

She felt that the lack of “interpersonal relationships” played a role in not initiating the conditions necessary to come together as a new and unified high school culture, and echoed these feelings at the end of the semester: “I still think we’re pretty segmented.” Whitney’s language during the interviews presented an undercurrent toward an attitude of “assimilation” of the GCHS culture by the MHS students and community.

Another element of the identity crisis related to this concept of “assimilation” was rooted in the adult mindset toward student learning. Although the physical appearance of most things at the high school had positively changed, the teacher’s attitudes toward the students from the “other” district were repeatedly described as negative or condescending during the initial interviews. Abbigail and Chase noted this attitude throughout individual interviews. Abbigail believed even though attitudes had improved, the perception remained: “In my [high school] building it’s a lot of frustration from our side, from the Metropolis side, that things didn’t change. It was how they’ve [GCHS] always done it.” This belief was shared in Abbigail’s final
interview, which occurred on the last day of the school year. Chase’s comments extended Abbigail’s belief by describing difficulty moving forward in the high school because “this is how we did it at Metropolis and this is how we did it at GCHS.” He classified most of these issues as “petty” and not related to student learning or education. However, Chase’s final interview supported this emergent cultural theme: “I actually am close with a lot of kids from both sides—specifically from the other (italics added) side of the district, the west end of the district.” In this statement, I found Chase’s use of language revealing as he was newly employed by the consolidation and had not been in either district prior to the consolidation.

In contrast, a small group of students’ learning was targeted for increased expectation and achievement. The high level of expectation was not placed on all students, but specifically on the students placed in the AP classes. This increased level of expectation was articulated for the AP group by all interviewees in the study. Initially, achievers were to get the “lion’s share of the resources” (time, teacher attention). It was not until Megan and Abbigail began developing the BLT that discussions began to emerge that a focus on low-achieving students became important to the group as a whole. Megan noted the issues with helping low-achieving students was additionally difficult as she chose not to use data comparing both schools prior to consolidation for fear of instigating more unrest with the on-going identity crisis. Megan commented that much of the feeling of how business had been initiated at the beginning of the consolidation focused on keeping adults happy, which meant accepting less, in term of expectations, from the students.

A final barrier discussed with regard to the high school forming a new identity involved perceived community resistance due to the loss of a sports identity. Although the resistance was not observed or noted to be unifying or debilitating, each of the participants spoke about the power of each school’s former identity within the community. Megan believed difficulty in
establishing a new identity was in part Gotham City’s belief that nothing “appeared broken” with the former athletic programs so why do we need to change the mascot, colors, or the way things have been done around here. The high school in Gotham City had enjoyed a long tradition of athletic excellence, backed up by a number of state level trophies. Megan specifically commented, “There is still this identity crisis in what was good and why we should pick different things?” Megan commented that the mascot was a big issue with some staff members but an even bigger issue among community members. She stated: “Not everybody has taken to the fact that we are the Lakeside Machines now, and a new entity, and moving forward, compared to you know if we were still the GCHS Bats or if we were still the Metropolis Metros.” Chase also experienced the identity crisis first hand:

One of the things that I found going to graduation parties this year was there is this heart-sick feeling for the GCHS Bats, and you don’t realize it until you see a kid taking their senior pictures in a football jersey from GCHS and a football jersey from Lakeside High School, and from Metropolis. There’s just a difference in it and it made me sad. But there is just-there is this feeling like they don’t want to let go.

Urban legend frequently has described the hardest thing to dismiss or “kill” in a school district is the school’s mascot.

Although the leaders interviewed for this study generally understood the issues and were in positions to influence the formation of a new identity, it appeared that all of them wrestled with the thought of taking sides as opposed to expending their effort on forging a new identity. Much of this revolved around the on-going culture clash, with the faculty attitudes toward the students of the opposite district and the community beliefs about previous academic and athletic traditions. Principal Wayne noted this division when she described the decision-making processes as “being fair, we are being fair in how we address things between the two common
faculty” (italics added) as they deal with issues of traditions and “the way things operate around here.”

Establishing new traditions. Traditions often are essential to help people know their place in the organization. Traditions or rituals were described in the interviews as deeply embedded in previous schools’ culture. Although the traditions present in the each of the former districts were described as similar, the interviewees’ descriptions were overall critical of each of the former cultures. Megan articulated that GCHS had been “very much known as the egotistical or elitist school district.” Megan believed that, “There are a lot of traditions that were a lot of things GHCS had done forever and a day that are still expected to be done.” These expectations had a notable influence on the design of many processes, procedures, and as such the culture of the new high school.

Megan cited two primary difficulties in establishing new traditions: how the valedictorian and salutatorian would be established or defined for the new district, and changing the established grading scale. Megan shared that students at MHS had significantly lower grade-point-averages (GPA) than students at GCHS. The decision had been made to share the honor where each of the former high schools would have a co-valedictorian and co-salutatorian. Megan felt this was extremely problematic from the position that former GCHS valedictorian was set and the MHS valedictorian would not correspond from a GPA perspective, “not even in the top few.” In addition, the MHS salutatorian for next year would place number 21 in a collaborative class ranking with a 3.58 GPA.” Megan was very concerned there was “a complete and total difference” in the former academic expectations. She was not sure how to remedy the discrepancy in a politically palatable way. However, she did comment in the last interview that “we have treated our ceremonies with a lot of dignity.”
The discussion about the tradition of valedictorian and salutatorian led to a discussion of the overall grading scale used at LHS. A culture clash had been evolving since the end of the first semester with the high school administrations suggestion as Chase commented to “lower the grading scale.” The current scale included a grade of A being 94-100%. The new scale would give an A grade at 90%, a B grade at 80%, and so on. One notable issue related to the grading scale was the effect of a “zero” on a student’s overall course grade. Megan gave examples of the effects on students and some research at her March 17, 2010 faculty meeting. Megan discussed a considerable amount of debate documented in three of the interview transcripts with Megan and one interview transcript with Chase. Chase did not share Megan’s belief that zeros were unfairly affecting student’s grades. Chase shared that was part of a high school student’s responsibility. He felt other factors had greater influence on these “attitudes of traditions.”

Chase believed traditions had more influence than the organizational procedures like GPA and the grading scale, which theoretically were in place to guide the process. “My experience this year has been the value systems and expectations for the school district, or for the high school at least, are very different between the communities depending on which district you were from.” He spoke about the affect of tradition on the identity crisis:

The teachers… its teachers and it’s funny because it’s almost like they fear pushing themselves into that unknown territory. There does seem to be a huge amount of fear. The barrier I believe is so much more entwined with attitudes of tradition. Because there has been so much this is how we did it but kids don’t care. They just want to see consistency and that the people that are in front of them love them, not like them, love them that may be (tradition) the greatest barrier.

Abbigail added the effect traditions had on creating some fear for her as well as the students: “Fear on both sides, on the kid’s side and on my side in not knowing what to expect for grading. Just in the few years I’ve been here it’s really been Metropolis versus the world.” These fears influenced the newly developing culture of the high school. In a major way this fear affected one
of the major decisions after first semester, the grading scale. Megan and Abbigail shared how the
decision to keep or change the grading scale was to be made strictly on the belief that so many
changes had already been determined by GCHS traditions and so few for Metropolis. Chase
added:

    I think a lot of people didn’t realize that it’s going to just be a way of life. I think some
    people in this building thought consolidation would fall through in a year and we would
    just go back to the GCHS and Metropolis.

The interviewees gave testimony that anxiety with regard to traditions influenced faculty
relationships with each other, with parents, and with their students. All of the interviewees
perceived most of the traditions as one sided in what was carried forward to the new district as
symbolic of the former cultures and important in building for the future. No process was
observed or discussed, which allowed things to develop out of a clarity around learning
expectations. The seclusion this created contributed further to cultural barriers affecting student
learning.

    Silos, seclusion, and independent contractors. Megan described how the teachers and
departments within Gotham High School began acting as “silos” or independent contractors as
the school year progressed. She did not feel the year began this way and discussed how the
Mathematics and English departments had worked in collaboration earlier in the year to address
curriculum, expectations, and class placement. Abbigail believed many of the faculty members
felt they could close their door and just do what they always had done. Megan believed that, “We
would have been head and shoulders above where we are now” if the teachers had continued to
work in collaboration with one another during the school year. Furthermore, Chase added:

    The majority of teachers in this building have not talked with the other teachers in their
department. You know those from the opposite school district that joined with us. So I
guess my intent was for them to start having conversations this year.
Chase extended Megan’s belief: “If these teachers aren’t talking with the former Metropolis teachers about their philosophies, their curriculum, their scope and sequence, and then I don’t see how we can make any progress.”

Megan discussed that this seclusion led to competitive adult relationships and not the collaborative engagement she had described as an intent for the faculty. Ironically, the Committee of Ten report cited the importance of the ability to collaborate and noted: “There is a lot of potential for improvement in the curriculum as they can all learn from one another” (p. 4). Megan commented, “There has also been some competition between teachers as to what is appropriate or acceptable level so departmentally in working on the school goals are a little more generic than what I would like to see in the future.” Again, the inferences drawn from the issues Megan chose to address and those she chose not to address would suggest that from the beginning of the consolidation, the effort was focused on keeping adults happy.

Chase believed much of this isolation had to do with trust. He stated: “Part of all of this is I don’t know that people really trust each other like they should in this building.” He believed that the biggest challenge was within the high school and that the faculty did not trust each other or the administration. Chase commented that the trust issue was elusive because of individual egos. He described it as, “our biggest problem right now is ego. I’ve done it this way and this works and I’m right,” and that looking forward was crucial in the process of developing trust, but expressed frustration that teachers did not want to let go of the past. Megan decided to forge ahead by requiring the building leaders to directly be involved across all departments to focus school improvement efforts around the high school initiative’s involving Response to Intervention and Professional Learning Communities.
Research Question 4: Does the Conceptual Framework Inform Principal Practice

Research question #4 examined the extent with which Leadership for Learning as a conceptual framework informed Principal Wayne’s practice. This question explored any influence or use of the framework at Lakeside High School during the first year of a school district consolidation. Although research suggests that a leadership for learning framework may be relevant and applicable for student learning in the context of consolidations, the findings indicated an initial absence of a strategic process or framework to focus on student learning or curriculum and instruction issues in this case study. Additionally, the findings did not directly confirm all of the key components in the Knapp, Copland, Ford et al. (2003) leadership for learning theoretical framework and only related two of them to this consolidation process. However, a stronger emphasis on student, professional, and systems learning began to emerge during the process of school consolidation when the principal began to utilize a structure for managing change through collaboration.

The data from the study suggested that indirectly the five action points were extremely relevant and applicable as a leadership framework for student, professional, and systems learning during the process of school consolidation. The relevance was deemed indirect as the principal in this case study did not formally, utilize, discuss, or read scholarly literature related to the leadership for learning framework. However, the subthemes suggesting the principal act strategically through distributive leadership, and engage the external environment were perceived to inform the principal’s practice given this context of consolidation. To allow for a distributive and engaging leadership environment was observed to require a great deal of trust on the part of the principal, the school board, and merged faculty.
Megan noted a substantial challenge in the consolidation process dealt with trust in the school board. She perceived the school board’s decision-making processes to be the primary reason for this lack of trust. She commented, “You can be excited and moving forward and having everything running the way you want and then you walk in and get smacked with something you weren’t even anticipating.” Although political and goal clarity could have been much improved, goals may have been a moot point, as there were notable problems with the governance structure present for this consolidation. Enhanced communication would have been required to address the difficulties of implementation and the perceived promises of the Committee of Ten.

Although not a focus of this study, the default structure the principal and BLT began to implement was the elements of the PLC model as defined by DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker (2008). The DuFour Model became the default model chosen based upon the principal’s growing familiarity with the elements of the model, which had been influenced by hearing of it from other practitioners. Additionally, the model’s focus on allowing educators time to collaborate. As the assistant principal shared, “As far as the school is concerned you get so caught up in the newness and the small things that we need to tweak here and there that we need to as a staff and as an administration.” The principal continued to reinforce the importance of structuring time around “instructional, educational, and student learning” objectives.

Ultimately, the findings did indicate that in practice the following subthemes of the Knapp et al. (2003) leadership for learning model: (a) building professional communities that value learning, and (b) acting strategically and sharing leadership, suggested the principal acting strategically through distributive leadership, and engaging the external environment were perceived to inform the principal’s practice given this context of consolidation.
Summary of Major Themes

The findings from this study culminated in three primary themes that were identified throughout the four research questions: school governance issues, strategic communication, and creating a positive school culture. These themes are summarized in this section.

School governance issues. The data provided key findings regarding the theme of governance and the effect of governance on the principal’s ability to maintain the school’s focus on student learning in a newly consolidated high school. The analysis of the emergent data on governance was rich in information. A significant portion of the barriers these respondents discussed were created by the political issues and turmoil by the Board of Education’s perceived “micro-management” of the building. The data represents the inability of the principal and the high school building’s “learning community” to use the autonomy of the learning leaders to guide the building’s decision-making processes. Instead the perceived guiding process was described by the principal as a complex interplay of factors occurring behind the scenes. Principal Megan Wayne believed surviving in the political arena in which the school board made decisions in absence of communication from the building administration jeopardized student learning. The loss of autonomy in the building’s decision-making ability was discussed at the beginning of the school year by the principal and subsequently recounted by two of the building team leaders at the end of the first semester. The school governance issues were repeatedly discussed by all participants throughout the school year.

Strategic communication. Organizational success in school consolidation requires carefully and clearly articulated communication to provide clarity around learning expectations, and by design this communication must be intentionally redundant. Overall, both the successful
and unsuccessful processes present in this study were significantly influenced by positive and negative examples of communication. The reactionary policy environment present in the Lakeside School District notably affected the work at Lakeside High School. The barriers and facilitating factors found in these school governance issues had begun to influence the culture by the end of the first year of school consolidation.

**Creating a positive school culture.** Megan expressed that working collaboratively was necessary to make the difference in creating and enhancing different forms of student learning and improving school performance at Lakeside High School. Although many factors were working against the high school, the most notable barriers appeared to emanate from the typical seclusion and isolation present as a part of a traditional high school culture. The importance of traditions and the perception of each building in how their former traditions were or were not used in developing the new traditions and ceremonies produced fertile ground for division. Perhaps the greatest barrier lay in the identity crisis taking place at the high school level. The data suggested that choosing a mascot and deciding on the school colors may prove to be the most painful step in consolidating a high school with regard to school culture.

**Summary of All Findings**

In this chapter I shared the findings related to the influence of school consolidation on a building principal’s ability to focus on student learning during the first year of school district consolidation. As much educational research demonstrates, and as most of us in the field are aware from experience, student learning is influenced by a myriad of factors. Perhaps the most significant findings from this research notes that three of the most dominant factors with regard to student learning in school consolidation are governance, communication, and culture. These
findings illustrate how these three primary themes of governance, communication, and culture, contributed to the success or acted as barriers to student learning during the school consolidation process.

Although the principal and building leaders were sympathetic to the district challenges related to transportation, the budget, and public opinion, they were primarily concerned with how the process of school consolidation affected the high school. Overall, the principal shared that the high school was adrift for most of the year. She viewed a strong building leadership team, data analysis, and time as the critical components to effectively turning things around. The building leaders viewed the ability to have a say, or a voice, in the processes and decisions taking place would facilitate individual ownership in the change. In the end, as Megan Began to provide information to her faculty and in some cases prepare them for the mandated changes of RtI, she garnered more support for a collaborative governance process found in the PLC framework as useful in the high school.

Clearly the findings of this study depict certain benefits and describe potential barriers to a principal’s ability to focus on student learning during the first year of school district consolidation. Obviously all educational research is influenced by the context. This was most certainly the case for school consolidation as well. The findings on governance in this context showed that a significant portion of the barriers the respondents expressed involved the political issues and turmoil surrounding the perceived “micro-management” of the building by the Board of Education. Additionally, the data represents the inability of the high school building’s “learning community” to use the autonomy of the learning leaders to guide the building’s decision making processes.
The findings on communication indicated both successful and unsuccessful processes in this study were greatly influenced by communication. As noted in the literature review for this study, the importance of clear, consistent, and continuous communication is explicitly noteworthy, but ironically overlooked in the empirical studies on educational administration and related literature on leadership for learning. The findings of this study indicated poor communication with constituents and stakeholders was present as the message the principal wanted to communicate was often not the message that was perceived by her audience. The reactionary policy environment present at the district level notably affected the work of the high school in this study. The previously mentioned barriers and facilitating factors in this section had already begun to influence the culture by the end of the first year of school consolidation.

My findings on culture introduced the dilemma faced by the high school. Although many factors were working against the high school, the main barriers appeared to emanate from the typical seclusion and independent contractor status present as a part of the traditional high school culture. Perhaps the greatest barrier lay in the identity crisis taking place at the high school level. As the faculty watched the students come, they began to follow the students’ lead and pull together to work for the common good. Eventually, the faculty began to focus less on an introverted “survival” philosophy and more on one based upon a collective efficacy and continuous improvement. Ironically, a school improvement meeting agenda from the October 19th high school goal setting specifically noted that one of the school’s three building-wide goals “may be a cultural goal.” The same agenda noted the ability to “improve communication within the school” and the intent to “improve administration and faculty/staff communication” as goal suggestions from the previous SIP days activities.
Chapter 5
Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations

Introduction

This chapter provides a summation of this research study and includes a brief review of the methodology and major findings. The discussion section expands upon the results of my findings and allows the reader insight into my inferences with which to view the potential implications. In this final chapter I articulate the implications of this study for practitioners, as well as state and local school district policy makers. In addition, the chapter addresses the limitations of the study to help the reader understand and better interpret the findings of the study. The chapter concludes with recommendations for practice, policy, and future research in the area of principal leadership for student learning.

Overview of Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the influence of school consolidation on the principal’s ability to maintain an overall focus on student learning in a newly-consolidated high school. This case study examined one Illinois high school’s efforts to navigate the breadth and depth of leadership in a complex, chaotic, and unpredictable environment that is present during a school consolidation. The conceptual framework for this study was based on the leadership for learning framework developed by Knapp, Copland, and Ford et al. (2003) and was used to examine whether or not the tenets of the framework offer value to the principal’s efforts to maintain a focus on student learning in the initial year of a high school consolidation. The following research questions were examined:
1. How does the high school principal maintain a focus on student learning in the first year of a school district consolidation?

2. What factors facilitate or support the principal’s ability to maintain a focus on student learning?

3. What factors inhibit or are barriers to the principal’s ability to maintain a focus on student learning?

4. Does leadership for learning as a conceptual framework inform the principal’s practice and focus on student learning in the first year of a school district consolidation?

The methodology for this study involved the use of a revelatory case study. Lakeside School District is located in a rural area of the state of Illinois and was formed upon a majority vote of the district’s residents in November 2008. The newly consolidated district is geographically one of the largest in the state. One of the district’s five schools, Lakeside High School (LHS) opened its doors on August 23, 2009 with approximately 400 students enrolled in the merged high school. The LHS students attend classes on a 35-acre campus located at the edge of Gotham City in what was previously the Gotham City High School site. The data collection methods primarily consisted of interviews of the high school principal, assistant principal and faculty members who were members of the building’s leadership team during the first year of consolidation. Additional data were collected and analyzed, including observations of the principal’s leadership activities during faculty meetings and activities conducted on school improvement days, Board of Education minutes, and other artifacts related to the school district consolidation, high school faculty meetings, and school improvement initiatives.

Findings

The findings emanating from this study are included in this section. The findings are reported within the four research questions.
Research question 1: How does the high school principal maintain a focus on student learning in the first year of a school district consolidation? The findings indicated the principal did not maintain a focus on leadership for learning and ultimately did not believe she was successful with this leadership responsibility. Initially, I observed a relative absence of a focus on student learning, because the initial demands mandated that the principal focus on the managerial/structural components of opening the merged high school. For example, the principal repeatedly expressed the importance of providing teachers sufficient time for collaboration so that they could develop relationships and learn how to work with one another, but she stated she did not have the time available to lead these activities. Although she mentioned the importance of “allowing” departments to collaborate for curriculum mapping purposes, the departmental teams lacked a specific instructional focus and instead concentrated on addressing managerial tasks. The English and mathematics departments were the only departments observed to be focusing on curriculum, instruction, and student learning during the first semester. Yet, strong rhetoric related to student learning was repeatedly articulated regarding building goals in the principal’s interview data, indicating her desire to focus on issues related to student learning. Building Leadership Team (BLT) members confirmed the principal’s rhetoric on student learning as well, yet noted that she was ineffective in putting this rhetoric into action. Findings indicated the managerial tasks of opening this newly consolidated high school, combined with the lack of a strategic theoretical or conceptual framework to guide practice, consistently placed student learning on the back burner as the principal dealt with the perpetual “immediate crisis.”

During interviews the principal discussed the importance of using a directive leadership style, which translated into a focus on managerial/structural elements of opening the newly merged high school. As a result, others perceived that the principal was resigned to delegating
curriculum and learning tasks to others. Although the principal frequently expressed her desire to use a distributed leadership style, when she attempted to delegate responsibilities to others, the faculty did not fully understand her explanation of these distributed processes. Ultimately, this misunderstanding manifested itself in decreased motivation on the part of the faculty, a general lack of trust, and dysfunctional periods of collaboration during much of the implementation year.

In the later stages of the third quarter, when the principal realized the growing urgency of her role as a learning leader, she became more involved with learning-focused leadership and more strategic with her actions. She assumed full responsibility for her role as a learning leader, adopting a coordinating approach and placing teacher leaders in charge. She initiated a focus on student learning by using Response to Intervention (RtI) mandates and her desire to develop a professional learning community (PLC) within the building. Upon RtI the implementation, the building’s direction and current status were revisited and evaluated during each BLT meeting in preparation for the upcoming school year. BLT members saw the relationship between these new leadership practices and their results in developing a building-wide focus and mission centered on student learning. The BLT felt re-engaged and re-energized around a vision for student learning that was planned, better organized, and improved in the areas of vision, mission, and goals. Yet, observational data did not indicate the same level of excitement from the other faculty, because the overall faculty was not involved in building-wide conversations about teaching and learning issues. Even as the principal began to focus on learning, she also began to embrace a singular mindset to “survive the year.”

**Research question 2: What factors facilitate or support a principal’s ability to maintain a focus on student learning?** Factors that facilitated a focus on student learning were found in the areas of effective leadership practices, acting strategically, and implementing
distributed leadership. One of the primary reasons for community support for the consolidation of the two districts was to enhance students’ learning opportunities in the merged district.

Ultimately, the desire of the faculty and principal to fulfill this community trust led them to effectively engage in activities designed to promote student learning in the high school.

The findings confirmed the principal’s change in leadership behaviors, through initiating shared leadership practices around the building’s needs, issues, and future direction with the BLT. Some leadership changes included involving the current BLT members in the selection of their replacements, a greater presence and attendance on the part of the principal at the BLT meetings, the assertion that BLT needed to meet on a regular basis, the importance of creating shared accountability among teacher leaders, the importance of training and building capacity within the BLT, and creating additional time for the BLT to focus on learning to shape how the faculty and administration collectively would be “leading the building.”

Although all participants used the terminology of “distributed leadership,” none described it according to various definitions in the literature. The findings indicated the importance of formal leadership roles in empowering the principal and BLT in establishing distributing leadership. The principal believed the creation of these roles was necessary to establish an atmosphere of collaboration in the building. As the study concluded, evidence of distributed practice was beginning to emerge.

The principal began to search for a framework, which she described as a structure allowing for “practical, pertinent, timely information that is applicable to the high school.” Eventually, she embraced the PLC concept (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008) as a mechanism to provide time for faculty collaboration. As the third quarter was concluding, the principal began engaging her veteran teachers so they could collaborate and see the potential for progress instead
of barriers. The principal then worked to provide these newly selected leaders with opportunities to engage in authentic and meaningful collaboration in leadership roles.

An unanticipated finding was the influence of the development of the school’s culture on the principal’s focus on student learning during the study. During interviews, the principal and some BLT members commented on continual effects of the formation of a new organizational culture, including how the students were working together and “melding” in new and positive ways. The principal used the formal ceremonies of Homecoming and Prom court elections as support for her perception of the development of a positive school culture. All secondary interviewees cited positive examples from the students, as well.

**Research question 3: What factors inhibit or are barriers to a principal’s ability to maintain a focus on student learning?** Problematic governance practices were identified as barriers to a focus on student learning, highlighted by consistent concerns about the school board’s involvement or “micro-management” of building affairs. This intrusion occurred primarily among the high school faculty, administration, and the board. However, some governance concern also existed between the high school teachers and the principal.

Ineffective communication also was identified as a barrier, including not only communication with community stakeholders but also among the administration, faculty, and staff. In spite of extensive communication efforts that went into the research, planning, organizing, development, and implementation of the consolidation process, there was a perception that insufficient communication was occurring among the faculty, administration, and external community once the two districts had formally merged.

Delayed, and perceived, lack of communication on the part of the school board and the high school administration, regarding a clear vision and instructional purpose was considered a
barrier by most participants. The findings indicated the Board of Education did not present a clear consistent vision for the school district. In addition, the findings indicated the principal did not focus on communicating with external constituents during this initial school year of consolidation; she missed several opportunities to share information on the high school’s progress with the community.

In addition, the influence of the development of the school’s culture on the principal’s focus on student learning during the study was perceived to have negative effects as well. The principal commented on the perceived negative changes to school culture resulting from consolidation when appointing the Valedictorian and Salutatorian, while considering how the calculations of senior grade point averages affected the overall educational expectations of the students and community. Additionally, the assistant principal also cited the student’s sitting on opposite sides of the room, based on what high school they had previously attended, during the first months of the school year as a negative effect.

Research question 4: Does leadership for learning as a conceptual framework inform a principal’s practice and focus on student learning in the first year of a school district consolidation? Although research suggests that a leadership for learning framework may be relevant and applicable for student learning in the context of consolidations, the findings indicated an initial absence of a strategic process or framework to focus on student learning or curriculum and instruction issues in this case study. However, a stronger emphasis on student, professional, and systems learning began to emerge during the process of school consolidation when the principal began to utilize a structure for managing change through collaboration. Although not a focus of this study, the default structure the principal and BLT began to implement was the elements of the PLC model as defined by DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker (2008).
The findings did indicate that in practice the subthemes of the Knapp et al. (2003) leadership for learning model: (a) building professional communities that value learning, and (b) acting strategically and sharing leadership, suggested the principal acting strategically through distributive leadership, and engaging the external environment were perceived to inform the principal’s practice given this context of consolidation.

Discussion

The findings from the study culminated in three primary themes: school governance issues, strategic communication, and creating a positive school culture. These themes are discussed in this section, while drawing comparisons of the findings from this study to the extant literature. One premise of this study was to consider the merit of the leadership for learning framework (Knapp, Copland, Ford et al., 2003) when leading in an environment dominated by the complexity and chaos present in school consolidation. This conceptual framework was based on five action points that learning-focused leaders address: (a) establishing a focus on learning; (b) building professional communities that take learning seriously; (c) engaging external environments that matter for learning; (d) acting strategically and collaboratively along pathways of activity aimed at different aspects of student, professional, and system learning; and (e) creating coherence (pp. 19-43).

The findings indicated that a leadership for learning framework may provide a useful structure to enhance student learning during school consolidation. However, the framework follows five action points through three learning contexts along 23 different pathways, in which “each comprises a stream of functionally related activities” (p. 75). Realistically, all of these
components may make the Knapp et al. (2003) framework somewhat cumbersome as a flexible and dynamic tool for high school principals during the initial year of school consolidation.

**School governance issues.** School governance issues were an overarching theme in this study with regard to the principal’s ability to maintain a focus on student learning while simultaneously managing the demands of opening a newly merged school. The governance process can create procedures that allow stakeholders to gather and influence information, process complex information, make good decisions with regard to that information, and then act on those decisions (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2010; Knapp, Copland, Ford et al., 2003). Stakeholders must have opportunities to fully participate in the governance process, and this engagement requires a great deal of trust on the part of the principal, faculty, central office administration, and school board. A notable challenge in this consolidation year was the high school faculty’s overall lack of trust in the school board. Participants perceived that the board regularly interfered with the tactical and operational functions of the high school, which resulted in the marginalization of some decision-making practices at the district and building levels. Louis et al. (2010) noted that “it matters a great deal whether participants in an organization trust the decision-making capacity of the organization’s leaders” (p. 41). The finding also supports research conducted by Gruenert and Valentine (2006) that noted the importance of trust in the form of strong interdependence among teachers as part of a school’s cultural typology.

In this study, all participants viewed the governance processes used by the school board as a barrier, with the principal providing several examples in which the Board of Education was reactionary to situations that were developing in the newly consolidated school. As a result, reactionary policies often were enacted by the Board of Education and the reasons for these decisions were not fully communicated to the high school administration or faculty. Furthermore,
the school board members often were actively and inappropriately engaged in implementing their policies. Policy implementation is a function of the school district and building administration rather than of the board (Danzberger & Usdan, 1994; Land, 2002; Resnick, 1999).

The findings disclosed some transition from the initial managerial/structural practices of the principal to distributed leadership practices in the final quarter of the school year. Leithwood et al. (2003) confirmed that leaders must influence the unique circumstances or problems present in their local context, and it was clear that the principal ultimately decided to adjust her leadership behaviors after assessing the building’s status and faculty needs. Variations in context obviously require different and varying leadership responses. These concepts, which Fullan (2001) termed “learning in context” (p. 125), may suggest that the principal determined that her most demanding initial focus was related to managerial/structural issues, as well as developing a positive shared culture for the faculty and students. Research conducted by Louis et al. (2010) indicated principals develop a shared culture by extending “significant decisional influence to others” (p. 35) and often do so by motivating teachers and aligning their teachers’ work setting with effective instructional practice. As a result, although the principal expressed a desire to immediately focus on student learning issues and to implement distributed leadership practices within her new school, these elements ultimately were placed on the “back burner” until she was able to successfully address the cultural and managerial demands inherent in starting up the new school. The findings suggested that she ultimately was not fully successful in her intent to serve as a learning leader.

Research suggests that principals often provide a vital initial catalyst necessary for change at the onset of the school’s reform efforts (Copland, 2003; Deal & Peterson, 1999; Spillane, 2003). The findings indicated that the principal participated alongside the faculty in
professional development activities, and eventually initiated and guided the conversations about student learning, which is indicated as an important process by a number of researchers (Datnow & Castellano, 2001; Elmore, 2000; Galluchi, 2007; Knapp, Copland, Ford et al., 2003; Murphy, 2005; Senge, 2000; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). Findings also noted the principal motivated teachers around effective instructional practice for RtI and by her efforts to improve their working conditions, using these practices to engage leadership where it is “exercised by those most directly responsible for student learning” (Louis et al., 2010, p. 17).

The emergent theme of governance indicated that the administration needed to focus on managerial/structural elements, but by doing so the building-level and central office administration possibly caused student learning issues to become sidetracked. This finding indicated the possibility of organizational drift, described by Lodahl and Mitchell (1980) as a movement away from earlier goals toward different goals with greater environmental support. Some faculty members perceived that the principal’s efforts had become fortified around management requirements and responsibilities and, therefore, the faculty began losing sight of the larger learning goals. The principal needed to allow teacher leadership to emerge. The ability to empower teachers around formal leadership roles has been found to have a significant association with improved professional learning in collaborative settings, individual teacher learning, and collective leadership (Leithwood & Mascall, 2008). This leadership practice also supports the conclusion of Marks and Printy (2003) that instructional leadership activities, when shared among teachers and the principal, have a significant influence on teacher practice. Faculty trust in the principal has been found to be important in preventing the implicit distrust present in bureaucratic orientations (Tschannen-Moran, 2009). Cosner (2009) also noted the importance of trust between faculty and principals when building faculty capacity.
Strategic communication. The second theme from this study, strategic communication, emerged from an examination of methods of communication among the faculty and administration. The principal used a number of strategies to engage in faculty communication. First, she worked to develop a shared understanding of important factors like the creation of the PLC. In addition, the principal established dialogue and open conversation specifically targeting her “dissenters.” She also highlighted the students’ successes in coming together as one student body as a positive example of developing a collaborative culture. In order to develop this strategic communication, the principal initially focused on individual conversations with her faculty and staff before moving the overall conversation to the entire faculty.

Arguably, one of the most essential tasks for leaders is to consistently communicate the centrality of student learning: “Leaders tell and show others repeatedly that learning and particular aspects or areas of student learning are the shared mission of students, teachers, administrators, and the community” (Knapp, Copland, Ford et al., 2003, p. 21). The degree to which a principal effectively communicates either can build and maintain trust or can create roadblocks and distrust for followers. Louis et al. (2010) noted communication as a core leadership practice for principals who are interested in improving student learning in their buildings. In spite of these communication efforts, however, they were not perceived by the faculty to be sufficient communication. The principal was charged with making the vision become a reality. However, the complexity of school consolidation in combination with an initial focus related to managerial/structural issues, as well as developing a shared culture for the faculty and students, made the alignment of the mission and vision for student learning much more difficult for everyone, including the principal.
Creating a positive school culture. Although the conception of culture is unique to each local context, culture generally has been defined as the beliefs, values, assumptions, and institutional norms that guide how people work in an organization (Deal & Peterson, 1999; Schein, 2004). Shaping the building’s culture must be an intentional process, as culture begins to be communicated by what people value. In educational institutions, these values may be influenced in part through the lens an individual uses to view the organization. A leader’s lens, most likely, will produce different variations of values and beliefs than a follower’s lens. Because this newly merged school system continued to operate under a traditional governance structure, the building principal certainly was positioned to directly influence the building culture. Findings indicated the principal did influence the initial building culture for students through such activities as elections for Homecoming and Prom royalty as well as student government officers. However, the findings indicated that the faculty culture began to emerge on its own without the principal actively becoming involved in its creation. McGuire, Palus, Pasmore, and Rhodes (2009) described the goal of culture change as work “to purposefully and actively build capability for new ways of working” (p. 6).

Mulford and Silins (2003) suggested that “reforms in schools, no matter how well conceptualized, powerfully sponsored, brilliantly structured, or closely audited are likely to fail in the face of cultural resistance” (p. 175). Consistent with the research of Mulford and Silins, findings indicated that the principal initially experienced resistance from teachers working within the school, as well as from stakeholders outside the building. For example, she noted that the school board displayed resistance to many recommendations that were generated from the high school faculty and administration. An interviewee perceived that the principal did not immediately respond to the voices of stakeholders, particularly voices that were critical or raised
concerns; this lack of response served to create some communication problems with community stakeholders. The findings in this study were supported by research conducted by Nitta et al. (2008) indicating adults and students experience the reality of school consolidation quite differently. In this case study, students adapted quickly and formed new social relationships with each other. However, the adults initially had difficulty in forming a new social identity and establishing-collaborative working relationships.

**Implications**

School district consolidation continues to be an area of policy interest to state legislators in the state of Illinois. This study provided several insights into the influence of school consolidation on the building principal’s focus on student learning in this Illinois high school. The findings from this study raise a number of implications with regard to how building principals and school districts may consider the influence of consolidation on their students’ learning. As a result of this study, several implications have been identified for Boards of Education, school personnel, and communities to consider when weighing the merits and hurdles present in school consolidation.

First, an initial implication in this study pertains to the role of the Board of Education. The newly elected school board plays a critical role in the development of the governance structure and philosophy for setting and enacting policy for the new district. Undoubtedly, each consolidation context will be unique and the implementation of the consolidation may require the school board to collectively define who they (the entire community) are as a new district. This definition will require members of the board to develop a vision for the new district based on the beliefs, or core values, of all internal and external stakeholders in the newly reconstituted
community. The findings in this study indicated that the board must remain focused on the most important areas of the vision and resist the temptation to invest their time and resources into items or issues that do not address what is most valued by the stakeholders (Collins, 2001).

A newly elected Board of Education, which will contain members from both previously existing school districts, will have to attend to the formation of its own culture and the development of positive working relationships, both within the board and throughout the newly combined school district. If the school board can attend to this focus and resist the micro-management of activities at the tactical or operational levels of the organization, it may aid in providing what one interviewee described as the “clear road map, including on- and off-ramps” for providing the structure in the way things must be done. Ensuring that the Board of Education understands its role is to enact policy and then step back, allowing leaders to navigate the difficult stages of implementing policy during the consolidation, is essential for avoiding problematic governance practices. In addition, it serves to value and validate the role and efforts of the formal and informal leaders in the organization.

A second implication from this study indicated communication is an element that must be diligently maintained in the school consolidation process. Communication was defined throughout this study by the absence or presence of feedback and dialogue, both within the school and throughout the school district. Principals must build collective capacity around feedback loops (Senge, 2000). The feedback must be balanced, looking for areas of strength and success as much as opportunities for change. This type of feedback must be sincere, transparent, open, and honest in order to contend with any negative perceptions on the part of internal members and external stakeholders. Dialogue has been defined by Knight (2007) as a belief in the importance of the conversations built around collaboration. Knight further described the
importance of dialogue in professional learning and reflection, along with the importance of “authentic listening” (p. 60) and “recognizing and overcoming interference” in the communication process (p. 69).

Third, as challenging as it may be, the principal must use effective leadership practices to focus on student learning from the onset of the school’s creation. In this era of accountability that requires a continued focus on student achievement, principals and teachers cannot afford to ignore curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices in their schools. Time for collaboration is necessary for the principal to provide sufficient opportunities for the faculty to form as a cohesive group and then begin to address the learning needs of the building. Principals will need to work with their faculty as they collaboratively address student learning issues.

The importance of developing leadership capacity within the school faculty cannot be overstated. Principals who are tasked with the responsibility of leading a high school through its initial year of consolidation should provide professional development that is focused on assisting teachers with developing the necessary skills to function under a distributed leadership model (Knapp et al., 2003; Louis et al., 2010). In this study, professional development came in the form of graduate coursework in educational leadership, educational service region training on formal leadership processes, and leadership training offered through various state educational groups. In addition, the principal included professional development through informal activities, including modeling leadership practices, pairing leaders together or “tag-teaming” with those already exemplified leadership skills, and providing teachers with published literature on effective leadership practices.

Fourth, this study confirmed that the challenging nature of continuous improvement requires the principal to act strategically when leading the building, carefully identifying and
selecting those issues that need to be addressed. Louis et al. (2010) found that leadership for student learning was elicited from teacher leaders when the principal initiated “goal- or initiative-specific” (p. 65) behaviors.

Fifth, this leadership for learning framework, or any conceptual framework used for school consolidation, must consider the complexity of consolidation and resulting affect the findings of this study indicated with regard to the influence of the governance process and communication procedures on student learning as depicted in Figure 3. In addition, these three themes were new to the assertions and hypotheses present in the existing literature on school consolidation.

Figure 3. Adapted framework from Knapp, Copland, Ford et al. (2003).
Lastly, principals cannot allow building leaders to hold “idiosyncratic interpretations of distributed leadership” (Aumiller, 2008, p. 178). Leadership should be distributed across all teacher leaders, and efforts need to be made relegated to volunteers including just a few high ranking veterans. Elmore (2002) noted the importance of this type of emergent leadership practice based on a shared responsibility for focused interaction and exploration of teacher practice. Additionally, principals need to include all stakeholders including “dissenters” in key leadership roles within the building. These efforts will serve to create accountability for teacher leaders.

Limitations

Three limitations were present in this study. The first limitation was that the principal specifically requested that I not attend school board meetings due to her perception of a tenuous relationship between herself and the Board of Education. Therefore, I was unable to observe the principal’s actual interactions with the school board. However, I was able to glean some perceptions from two participants about the board meetings, especially from one participant who attended all of the board meetings.

The second limitation recognizes the difficulty in the generalizability of the findings of this study. The focus of this study was on a single site and the limitations that a single case can present for generalizability. However, to develop the story of the principal, the study did focus on a revelatory case (Yin, 2009). The study was consistent with Yin’s (2009) vision that case studies may have a revelatory design in which the “selection of a single-case design grants the investigator access to a phenomenon previously inaccessible to scientific inquiry” (p. 49). In
using Yin’s (2009) description, this study has merit as the revelatory nature of this school consolidation likely will be regarded as a discovery.

The final limitation for this study involved my time constraints as the researcher. I was focused on the case site for a total of 15 months between the initial and final observations and spent nine months conducting targeted observations and interviewing participants. Although an extensive amount of time was spent at the site conducting this case study research, additional time spent at the research site could provide additional knowledge about this case and further enhance the research findings.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

This section contains recommendations for policymakers and for practitioners. Although these recommendations are valuable, they are not intended to be used mechanistically in order to get a correct response every time. Also, these recommendations are not to be used in the absence of the judgment and intuition necessary for the uniqueness of each individual context of school consolidation. They can, however, help principals, superintendents, and school boards guide and augment the process of leading for learning during a school consolidation.

Recommendations for policy. In many local communities, the influence of the state on school and district consolidation can be viewed in a negative light (Howley, et al., 2011). Any exception to this expressed reality occurs when consolidation resulted from a voluntary local decision and not a legislative mandate. This section provides five recommendations for state and local policy makers.

First, as noted in the findings and implications of this study, I observed problematic governance practices at the local level to be a significant issue with regard to student learning.
Still, a newly elected school board that is responsible for the consolidation of two or more school districts must collectively define the district’s mission, values, beliefs, educational vision, and subsequently focus the new district based upon their understanding of the internal and external stakeholders they represent. The board then must remain committed to focus only on the strategic areas of planning and policy while resisting the temptation to divert their time and attention to tactical or operational issues of the district that rightly are relegated to administrators and teachers.

Second, the board of a newly merged district must carefully reconcile the differing policies and procedures of the boards of the closed school districts when addressing needed policy changes that accompany school consolidation. The development of clear and consistent policies is essential to the effective implementation of the plethora of changes affecting a school district in the throes of school consolidation. Board members need the opportunity talk about policies and changes in a public forum, designed to foster critical debate regarding the creation of the new board policies. This setting will allow board members to collaborate in enacting policy, working for consensus around the needs of all learners in the community.

Third, the new board may need training to understand their role in the development of policy. Sometimes board members may lack sufficient formalized educational training and also lack knowledge of educational issues. Additionally, just as the newly merged high school must address the challenge of combining two faculties into one school, the superintendent is charged with the reality of orienting a newly reconstituted board that contains elected members from the two shuttered districts. In all likelihood, the previous districts functioned in totally distinct ways and potentially operated under conflicting policies and practices. Thus, the superintendent and board must work diligently to create one shared district culture and understanding of how the
board functions within this new culture. This reality often limits a true understanding of the roles of school personnel and the role of the board in educational organizations. Training opportunities are available for board members from groups such as the Illinois Association of School Boards (IASB), board member certification programs, and state and national school board member conferences. Board members must take advantage of these training opportunities to prepare themselves for the ongoing challenges and complexity that are present within school consolidation.

Fourth, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) should develop documents to assist school districts that are considering school consolidation or who have reached the decision to consolidate. Currently, these materials are limited to a handful of pamphlets that briefly describe school consolidation and fiscal incentives for those districts voluntarily entering into the merger. These materials address items before and up to the initial year of a consolidation, such as voting districts, tax rates, school board representation, and legal parameters of the consolidation petition, and they should be expanded to include information that would be helpful in preparing for the initial implementation year of school district consolidation. This information could include the following: how and where to conduct student orientation meetings for each of the new schools in a consolidation, why a district may need to pay careful attention to the transportation of students, and how to do this when including additional routes for after school discipline or activities, or how and when to develop and conduct community, student, and faculty surveys. In addition, information should include a focus on student learning and contain the following: the establishment of professional learning communities, effective teaching and learning practices, rigor and relevance in the curriculum, and professional development for teachers and administrators.
In addition, the Illinois State Board of Education should develop a consolidation guide for practitioner use as a form of policy-level global positioning system for districts considering school consolidation. One example has been provided in Appendix E of this dissertation. Several necessary items have been included in the checklist. These essential items have been designed to be categorized by month in order to help practitioners through the complex and chaotic experience of the initial year of a school consolidation. Some of the necessary elements include the following: addressing certified and non-certified personnel evaluations; training for the Board of Education; orientation programs that acclimate students to the new building; and addressing student, faculty, and community input on the initial progress and other variables of school consolidation.

Lastly, Illinois state legislators should maintain the existing financial support for voluntary school district consolidation. Fullan and Miles (1992) describe change as “resource hungry” (p. 750). The initial year of consolidation is a “resource hungry” year, which requires more resources in the following forms: personnel, professional development funds, time for collaboration, time for training, and time to engage with the community. In the state of Illinois, financial incentives are provided through school consolidation grants, which are intended to encourage voluntary mergers between reorganized school districts through the elimination of various fiscal disincentives (ISBE, 2008b). These incentives have created a financial impetus for school consolidations, and should be continued to allow districts greater resources with which to affect educational change.

Resources will be important as school district consolidation is the highlight of a current gubernatorial agenda. Illinois Governor Patrick Quinn has proposed legislation aimed at involuntary mergers (Associated Press, 2011; Hendren, 2011; IASB, 2011). As a part of this
agenda, Governor Quinn convened the Classrooms First Commission (Hendren, 2011) in order to mandate that Illinois schools consolidate to less than 300 in number (Associated Press, 2011). The proposed legislation requires the commission to consider a number of proposals including an examination of the number of school districts in the state and determining optimal enrollment for a school district (Hendren, 2011) for mandatory consolidation. Although research conducted by Howley et al. (2011) indicate findings support this notion that economic crises often provoke legislative calls for school consolidation, the governor needs to revisit using consolidation as a lever for what’s best for students as a means of enhancing government efficiency.

**Recommendations for practice.** This section contains recommendations for administrators and faculty members who are involved in school consolidation initiatives. Although the role of the superintendent was note examined in this study, the participants perceived the superintendent as an important figure in the governance process. As such, these findings indicated the importance in addressing the role of the superintendent as part of the recommendations for practice.

First, the hiring of the new superintendent to lead the merged district should be done with the utmost expediency. This hiring process must be conducted in a way as to match the leadership skills of the superintendent with those required for the position based on the priorities, vision, and implementation context of each consolidation. It is essential for school districts to immediately procure a quality candidate and correct match for the local context, so he/she can begin addressing the immediate needs of hiring new personnel, implementing transition activities, planning transportation routes and services, and addressing the facilities/building functions in the new school district. In addition, the new superintendent must provide an orientation for the new board and assist the board in the developing policies and procedures.
Second, one of the most important decisions for the superintendent and school board is to hire the school principals. Research indicates that, as the formal leaders, principals and central office administrators have the most influence on school-level decisions (Louis et al., 2010). Research supports the concept of the principal as actively involved in providing leadership for learning (Day & Leithwood, 2007; Fullan, 2001; Hallinger, 2010) and as an important formal figure in the learning process (Ehrich, 2000; Hallinger, 2010; Knapp, Copland, Ford et al., 2003; Leithwood et al., 2004, Murphy et al., 2009).

However, the principal has been completely overlooked in previous research about school consolidation, which may place student learning in this context in peril. Louis et al. (2010) found the building principal to have the strongest influence on student achievement through his/her influence on teacher motivation and working conditions. Both motivation and working conditions are significantly impacted by a new school consolidation, making the principal’s influence in that specific context even more critical for student achievement and learning.

It is vital for the superintendent to hire principals who have the leadership skills to simultaneously focus on management, culture, and leadership for learning. One notable challenge is that the principal must possess not only the necessary skill set and but also must have sufficient time to do engage in these professional responsibilities. Yet, Louis et al. (2010) and Grubb (2006) found that high school principals repeatedly have expressed a lack of time to complete all of their duties; consequently, instructional leadership typically gets placed “on the back burner” (Louis et al., 2010, p. 88). Time is a requisite element for principals to engage in the process of instructional leadership with teacher leaders and with their faculty. In this study, the principal found it was very difficult to maintain a focus on leadership for learning, and this
finding is an important consideration for individuals who are contemplating serving as principals of newly consolidated schools.

Third, administrators must recognize the complexities created when two or more high schools consolidate. These administrators may wish to view the organization through the four frames described by Bolman and Deal (2008) in order to effectively administer the managerial/structural, human resource, political, and symbolic/cultural realities of consolidation. Leaders must find an effective and efficient means to organize and address these managerial items. It is imperative that the building and district leaders utilize a sound theoretical framework from which they can collectively influence student learning.

Fourth, the importance of effective teaching and learning practices cannot be overstated. Principals tasked with developing teachers’ classroom practices through the initial year of consolidation should focus on building teacher capacity through professional development. In order to build this capacity, principals must create direction, or mission, around a clear instructional purpose. This purpose should be based on systematically collected evidence regarding school and classroom conditions that are focused on the improvement of student achievement (Louis et al., 2010). Porter et al. (2008) found that effective instructional leaders understand quality instruction and ensure that it is provided to all students in the school. Additionally, Louis et al. (2010) asserted that high school department heads operate as a central source of improving instruction when principals “extend significant decisional influence to others” (p. 35). Principals need to process building data with these departmental leaders to avoid the perception they “are more concerned with the appearance than the substance of change” (p. 32).
Lastly, leaders engaged in implementing a school consolidation may find it informative to review recent empirical studies on continuous improvement. Analyzing this research has value in learning through the use of practical ideas that revolve around conceptualizing the improvement of communication strategies (Colvin, 2006; Copland & Boatright, 2006; Knapp et al., 2006; Leithwood et al., 2004; Mezzacappa et al., 2008; Wallace Foundation, 2009a, 2009b). Murphy (2005) discussed the importance of confronting barriers in school contexts through a “chain of analysis” (p. 98), which he suggested could describe the multiple difficulties and obstacles present in current forms of teacher leadership. Leadership roles must become embedded within the school culture and be sustained in order to overcome these obstacles.

**Recommendations for Additional Research**

The following recommendations for further research are presented:

First, additional research on high school consolidation could be conducted analyzing existing learning frameworks to determine the merit of these frameworks for successfully guiding the instructional efforts of school reorganization. This research could assist in the development of a conceptual framework based on a series of unique factors, which then could be paired with the contextual needs of each consolidation. Research could examine the extent to which student learning gains are documented when aligned with these clearly articulated learning frameworks.

Second, a quantitative study of principal perceptions of the school consolidation experience could be conducted through the use of survey research methods. Principals throughout the nation who have been involved in high school consolidations could be surveyed regarding what issues they identify as essential when leading for learning during school
consolidation (i.e. cultural issues, instructional practice, collective leadership effects). Although many issues may be contextual, this research could identify elements that principals perceive are uniformly important for high schools that are involved in a consolidation.

Third, a study could be conducted to examine the influence of school culture on the elements of principal practice in the context of school consolidation. In a newly consolidated school, the principal is faced with a unique challenge of developing a new school culture while simultaneously working through existing norms, values, and beliefs of teachers and students from two or more schools that no longer exist. This responsibility may be an easy one, when the prevailing norms are already in close alignment, or it can be exceptionally difficult when the norms are in direct conflict.

Lastly, future research could examine the specific effects of the development of school culture within a newly merged high school. This research should explore the formation of new cultures at the school board, district, building, student, and community levels.

Conclusion

It is merely a matter of time until the 868 public school districts in Illinois are dramatically reduced in number. Along with those lawmakers in other rural regions of the United States, legislators in the Midwest long have held the belief that school consolidation is a panacea for many of the ills facing rural education including, and have pointed to the possibility of improved efficiency, the necessity of fiscal restraint, and the hope of eradicating inequities among districts (Alsbury & Thomas, 2008; Duncombe & Yinger, 2007; Fleming & Hutton, 1997; Heinz, 2005; St. Cyr Davis, 2005). “School consolidation has been a long-term trend in Illinois,” (IASB, 2010, p. 1), and although this trend has slowed over the past few decades it is
poised to quickly accelerate if Illinois Governor Quinn’s desire to reduce the number of Illinois school districts is acted upon by the Illinois legislature. Howley et al. (2011) noted that economic crises such as the one currently being experienced in the U.S. and globally often invoke legislative calls for school consolidation as a means of enhancing government efficiency.

The findings of this revelatory case study expand the understanding of the potential influence of school consolidation on a high school principal’s focus on student learning while exploring the utility of the Knapp et al. (2003) leadership for learning framework toward this end. The study highlighted the barriers and facilitating factors of this influence during the initial year of a school consolidation. The findings support the idea that future research around a learning framework from which principals can operationalize the learning tasks during the initial year of consolidation may hold importance as seminal research in the area of school consolidation.

The study confirmed the critical role of the principal on student learning in public educational organizations. Although the inherent complexity present in this merged high school affected the principal’s ability to focus on leading for learning until late in the third quarter of the year, the principal made some tentative gains in the use of distributed leadership practice to influence the development of new prevailing norms for the high school. However, the findings from this case study indicated the principal experienced numerous challenges that affected her ability to sustain a focus on leadership for learning and ultimately did not believe she was fully successful in serving as a learning leader. Interviews with other participants and document analysis confirmed several deficiencies in her learning leader role.

This research also indicated that school culture may be a significant mitigating factor in the process of school consolidation and should capture future research attention in this area.
Anthony Muhammad, a writer and speaker for Solution Tree, offers a pithy quote concluding that “culture eats structure for breakfast” (2010), which carries significant weight for consideration as the findings of this study reinforce the importance of the managerial/structural human resource, political, and symbolic frames outlined for organizations by Bolman and Deal (2008).

Ultimately, in order to be fully effective and embraced within the community, consolidation must be a voluntary local decision and not a state-directed mandate. Principals must have the courage to lead others (students, faculty, community, and even boards) in order for successful student learning to take place. The implementation of consolidation may provide a new basis to develop trust through the myriad of opportunities present for enhanced networking, negotiating, and coalition building that is present in the formation of a new school district or building. Policymakers argue that the state of Illinois stands to realize significant cost savings if the number of school districts decrease, through consolidation. Who will win? Will it be the Governor, state legislators, the local community, or student learning? Only time will tell.
References


doi:10.1177/0013161X03261742


doi:10.1177/00131610121969307


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Appendix A

Interview Protocol #1

Interview Questions for Research Study, Interview #1
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

A Principal Interest: Leading for Learning in School Consolidation
Contextual, Initial Principal Interview

Thank you for your participation in this study. I am sure you have experienced a very busy summer preparing for the upcoming year in this newly consolidated school and district.

Warm-Up:

1. How are things developing with regard to forming your new school?

General:
1. What factors led to the decision to consolidate?
2. Were you in favor of the consolidation? Why or why not?
3. Do you currently live in the district?
4. What has happened to the property taxes in the district as a result of consolidation?
5. What benefits have occurred as a result of the consolidation?
6. What barriers or obstacles are still present from the consolidation process?

Focus on Learning:
1. How do you feel the high school is meeting students’ needs for an adequate education?
2. What is your high school’s stated goals for this year?
3. How do you define student learning? What data would you and your faculty review, to examine evidence of student learning in your building?
4. Describe any and all measures your high school uses to assess how well students are learning.
5. What factors facilitate a focus on learning?
6. What obstacles exist making it difficult to focus on learning?

Collaborative Engagement:
1. Describe any and all measures your high school uses to assess how well the faculty and staff are learning?
2. What has happened to school spirit in the district as a result of consolidation?
3. What relationships, structures, schedules, or other factors facilitate collaborative engagement?
4. What relationships, structures, schedules, or other factors are obstacles to collaborative engagement?
5. Please describe which of the items in the two previous questions you have put into place at this school?

Engaging External Environments:
1. Please share with me a brief historical overview of the consolidation, so I have a good understanding of how this high school came to be created.
   a. Describe what determining factors your district uses to assess how well the community is engaged in supporting a focus on learning.
   b. Did the two previous districts contemplate alternatives to consolidation?
   c. Describe the political environment in the district.
   d. Who were the key players in the consolidation process?
   e. What factors contribute in engaging external environments?
   f. What obstacles exist in engaging external environments?

Specific Leadership Influence:
6. What avenues do you use to influence the interactions of students, teachers, and content?
7. Describe your process of curriculum alignment.
   a. Do you have a formalized process in place?
   b. What framework have you aligned your curriculum to?
8. Describe how your teachers come to a shared understanding of effective teaching and learning practices.
   a. Describe how you use formative/summative assessments.
9. Describe how you allocate resources or guide activities in order to make things happen.
10. How do you encourage and recruit others to assume and exercise leadership?
11. How do you work to build the critical mass necessary to implement programs or processes?
12. How do you influence the way your learning agenda is shared between the school and the district?
13. What challenges have you faced thus far, as you lead this consolidated high school?

Creating Coherence:
1. What values are shared by the entire school community?
2. What process exists to align activities and resources with the school’s vision of learning and teaching?
3. What methods exist to determine how the organization supports student and teacher learning?
4. What factors contribute to creating coherence?
5. What barriers exist to creating coherence?
Appendix B

Interview Protocol #2

Interview Questions for Research Study, Interview #2
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

A Principal Interest: Leading for Learning in School Consolidation
Follow-up Principal Interview

Thank you for your continued participation in this study. I am sure you remain busy managing issues and leading in this newly consolidated school and district.

Warm-Up:

1. What activities take place around here during the holiday season?
2. What successes have taken place since we last met?
3. What obstacles have been present since we last met?

Focus on Learning:
4. What are your academic or school improvement goals for this year?
5. What progress have you made with regard to your goals?
6. Discuss where you are in the teacher evaluation process. How do you, or will you, use this process to engage teachers in thoughtful discourse about student learning?
7. Describe how you encourage teachers to critically reflect on their learning and professional practice?
8. How do you build consensus around the need to improve student learning given the competing interests and difficult questions present from school consolidation?

Collaborative Engagement:
9. You noted PLCs often in our first interview. Why that model?
10. How are you working to encourage collaborative engagement in common work rather than the typical isolation?
11. Where is your support coming from?
12. Where is your resistance coming from?

Engaging External Environments:
13. Describe the current political trouble you see in the district.
14. How are you building relationships with external individuals or groups?
15. What do you anticipate to be resistances as the year progresses?
16. How do you work to keep your improvement agendas alive in the community?
17. What values are shared by the entire school community?

Specific Leadership Influence:
18. Describe how you address aspects of students and teachers work that need improvement. OR - Describe how you confront poor practice?
19. How are you building a school culture of individual and shared examination of student learning?
20. SL – Who are the individuals you are relying on to take on leadership responsibility?
21. Describe how you are relying on staff expertise in developing improvement initiatives.

Creating Coherence:
22. How are you finding ways to develop a sense of clarity and coherent support for the improvement of instruction?
23. How do you forge connections between the learning that happens at multiple levels? (Student, Teacher, System)

24. Describe your academic alignment?
25. How do you project and reinforce a consistent set of messages and support for student learning?
26. How much autonomy and discretion do you allow?

Closing:
27. Are there any questions you wish I would have asked today?
## Appendix C

### Interview Log

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Individual Pseudonym</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19-Oct-09</td>
<td>Megan Wayne</td>
<td>Lakeside High School, office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14-Dec-09</td>
<td>Megan Wayne</td>
<td>Lakeside High School, office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-Feb-10</td>
<td>Abbigail Pennyworth</td>
<td>Lakeside High School, classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-Feb-10</td>
<td>Megan Wayne</td>
<td>Lakeside High School, office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-Feb-10</td>
<td>Whitney Dent</td>
<td>Lakeside High School, classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-Feb-10</td>
<td>Chase Grayson</td>
<td>Lakeside High School, office</td>
</tr>
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<td>15-Feb-10</td>
<td>Megan Wayne</td>
<td>Lakeside High School, office</td>
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<td>9-Mar-10</td>
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<td>17-Mar-10</td>
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<td>21-Apr-10</td>
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<td>17-May-10</td>
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<td>3-Jun-10</td>
<td>Abbigail Pennyworth</td>
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<td>Chase Grayson</td>
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<tr>
<td>10-Jun-10</td>
<td>Megan Wayne</td>
<td>Lakeside High School, office</td>
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## Appendix D

### Observation Log

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<th>Date</th>
<th>Individual/Group Activity</th>
<th>Location</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>27-Mar-09</td>
<td>Initial District Institute</td>
<td>Lakeside High School, auditorium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27-Mar-09</td>
<td>Initial High School Meeting-discussing the curriculum and course offerings</td>
<td>Lakeside High School, auditorium</td>
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<tr>
<td>19-Oct-09</td>
<td>School Improvement Activities</td>
<td>Lakeside High School, cafeteria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19-Oct-09</td>
<td>High school Faculty Meeting</td>
<td>Lakeside High School, cafeteria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-Nov-09</td>
<td>School Improvement Activities</td>
<td>Lakeside High School, cafeteria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14-Dec-09</td>
<td>High school Faculty Meeting</td>
<td>Lakeside High School, library</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22-Jan-10</td>
<td>District Institute</td>
<td>District Administrative Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-Feb-10</td>
<td>School Improvement Activities</td>
<td>Lakeside High School, cafeteria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-Feb-10</td>
<td>Department Meetings</td>
<td>Lakeside High School, various classrooms</td>
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<td>15-Feb-10</td>
<td>High school Faculty Meeting</td>
<td>Lakeside High School, library</td>
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<tr>
<td>9-Mar-10</td>
<td>Building Leadership Team Meeting</td>
<td>Lakeside High School, various classrooms</td>
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<tr>
<td>15-Mar-10</td>
<td>School Improvement Activities</td>
<td>Lakeside High School, cafeteria</td>
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<tr>
<td>17-Mar-10</td>
<td>High school Faculty Meeting</td>
<td>Lakeside High School, library</td>
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<tr>
<td>21-Apr-10</td>
<td>Building Leadership Team Meeting</td>
<td>Lakeside High School, various classrooms</td>
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<tr>
<td>17-May-10</td>
<td>High school Faculty Meeting</td>
<td>Lakeside High School, library</td>
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<tr>
<td>3-Jun-10</td>
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Appendix E
Consolidation Checklist

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<th>Months Preceding Initial Year of Implementation</th>
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<tr>
<td>(After successful vote)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>New board works with Regional Superintendent to complete many duties</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establish Board of Education meeting dates (recommend bi-monthly meetings)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conduct search for the new superintendent and building principals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Establish the placement of existing faculty and staff (determine if any new staff is needed)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Board Training: utilize superintendent and Illinois Association of School Boards resources</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Conduct student orientation meetings (preferably at new high school site)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete any necessary maintenance/facilities projects</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop a guiding School Improvement Plan for the initial year-no collective state or ACT/SAT/AP data will be available for this first year</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-employment/tenure issues; staffing (retirement) note connection to needs from master schedule</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop a building budget for this initial year</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public relations/community issues</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establish the evaluation process and procedures</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Establish the instructional focus of the high school</td>
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<td>Pay careful attention to the transportation of students; including shuttle routes for after school discipline or activities</td>
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<td>Teacher recognition</td>
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<td>Develop building budget for upcoming year</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employment of non-certified staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exit survey for seniors-consolidation specific, academic specific, extracurricular participation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Finalize master schedule-any issues that developed over the year? Classroom space concerns?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deal with the unique needs of your human resources functions consider Illinois tenure laws carefully and the seniority parameters set up here for faculty and staff assignments</td>
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<tr>
<td>Work for closure as soon as possible on collective bargaining agreement</td>
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<td>Finalize curriculum and instruction planning for the upcoming year</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inventory classroom materials for repurposing from the previous districts</td>
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<td>Order any remaining items for textbooks, supplies, etc.</td>
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<td>It is recommended to attempt to use colors from both of the existing schools to save money on uniforms, repainting, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>It is recommended to come up with a new and unique school name and mascot; then incorporate as many “required” traditions as is prudent while developing new ones as well</td>
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<tr>
<td>Months During Initial Year</td>
<td>Tasks</td>
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<td><strong>July/August</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>• Hire superintendent</td>
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<td>• Hire building principals</td>
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<td>• Hire any additional faculty and staff</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Complete any necessary maintenance/facilities projects</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• School Board Training: utilize superintendent and Illinois Association of School Boards resources</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Freshman orientation (incoming freshmen)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Finalize materials selection policy</td>
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<td>• Finalize the structure and delivery processes for the lunch system</td>
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<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>• Develop and conduct community, student, and faculty surveys (for ideas as to content think of hot-button items; use Bolman and Deal’s four frames)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Finalize building budget-current year</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Collaboratively address public relations/community issues from the survey to enhance communication and improve “voice”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Hold training around the evaluation instrument (note the importance of the Charlotte Danielson Model in Illinois); conducting personnel evaluations</td>
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<td>• Begin to address student attendance concerns</td>
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<td>October</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Look for and begin to strategize how to deal with any financial concerns</td>
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<td>• Develop ways to recognize faculty and staff</td>
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<td>November</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Develop a structure for handling first semester final exams</td>
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<td>• Continue conducting evaluation of certified and non-certified staff</td>
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<td>December</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Revisit School Improvement Plan and building mission, vision, values, goals</td>
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<td>• Begin preparation with building leaders for upcoming year’s master schedule</td>
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<td>January</td>
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<td>• Audit technology and address technology issues</td>
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<td>• Audit facilities and address facilities issues</td>
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<td>• Find an unforgettable way to celebrate the first semester</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Complete any necessary maintenance/facilities projects from fall term</td>
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<td>• Course offerings for the following year</td>
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<td>• Freshman orientation (incoming freshmen)</td>
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<td>• Finalize materials selection policy</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• SIP items: progress and next-year planning</td>
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<td>February</td>
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<td>• Re-employment/tenure issues; staffing (retirement) influence on master scheduling</td>
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<td>• Finalize building budget-current year</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Address any public relations/community issues</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Continue personnel evaluations</td>
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<td>• Master scheduling completed</td>
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<td>March</td>
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<td>• Conduct teacher and student recognition programs</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Develop building budget for upcoming year</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Employment of non-certified staff</td>
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<td>April</td>
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<td>• Senior exit survey: consolidation, academic, and extracurricular participation</td>
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<td>• Finalize master schedule-any issues developed during the year? Space concerns?</td>
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<td>May</td>
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<td>• Audit technology and address technology issues</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Audit facilities and address facilities issues</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Finalize curriculum and instruction planning for the upcoming year</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Find an unforgettable way to celebrate second semester of school consolidation</td>
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</tbody>
</table>