12-2010

An Examination of the Leadership Practices of Effective Rural Superintendents: A Multiple Case Study

Mark Forner
Western Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/dissertations

Part of the Educational Leadership Commons, and the Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/dissertations/557

This Dissertation-Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate College at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.
AN EXAMINATION OF THE LEADERSHIP PRACTICES
OF EFFECTIVE RURAL SUPERINTENDENTS:
A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY

by

Mark Forner

A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Educational Leadership, Research, and Technology
Advisor: Patricia Reeves, Ed.D.

Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan
December 2010
This research examined the leadership practices of rural superintendents who have led their districts to significant improvement in student academic achievement. The overall research goal was to examine how Waters’ and Marzano’s six correlates of effective superintendent leadership practice have been applied by school leaders who have successfully pursued academic reform in their rural school districts. A multiple case study approach was used to examine the work practices of seven superintendents leading rural school districts in Michigan where student academic performance was on the rise.

A criterion-based selection methodology was used to identify the superintendent subjects and their districts. A total of twenty-seven interviews were conducted with the seven school leaders and with board trustees, teachers and principals from each district. Qualitative coding techniques were used to develop common leadership priorities, practices and philosophies for the purposes of cross-case analysis. This cross-case analysis produced three common leadership priorities, six common leadership philosophies and a total of 57 commonly-cited leadership practices.

The three common leadership priorities were: (a) All students can and will achieve academic success, (b) A high quality teacher in each classroom, and (c) Creating
resources. The six common leadership philosophies were: (a) Transparency, (b) Proximity, (c) Autonomy, (d) Constructive Confrontation, (e) Making Hard Choices, and (f) Celebration.

The findings of this study were consistent with Waters’ and Marzano’s six correlates of effective leadership practice. The leadership practices exhibited by rural superintendents and cited in this study closely mirrored five of the six correlates. Additionally seven new findings from this study extend beyond Waters and Marzano and add to the literature base.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to thank Dr. Patricia Reeves for her patience, guidance and counsel during this entire dissertation process. I thank you and my family thanks you. Also, a thank you is in order to Dr. Dennis McCrumb, Dr. Louann Bierlein Palmer and Dr. Stephanie Burrage for taking the time from their busy schedules to help me by serving in both official and unofficial capacities. Your time and efforts on my behalf are greatly appreciated.

Second, I would like to thank my wife Elisabet Forner and sons Jackson Forner and Lars Forner. The three of you have sacrificed a great deal for me over the past couple of years. And I love each of you very, very much.

Finally, I want to thank my mom Lois Forner and my dad Gayle Forner who, according to their telling, raised the three smartest kids in the world. Of course, this means I must also thank my brother Tracy Forner and my late sister Angela Forner, who shared my burden of having to set out each morning to prove to the world that our parents were not completely delusional...

Mark Forner
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................................................... ii
LIST OF TABLES ................................................................................................................... ix
LIST OF FIGURES .................................................................................................................. x

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................. 1
   The Problem ......................................................................................................................... 1
   Problem Background ......................................................................................................... 3
   School Leadership Effectiveness ..................................................................................... 3
   The Issue of Context and School Leadership ................................................................. 6
   Conceptual Framework ..................................................................................................... 10
   Problem Statement .......................................................................................................... 11
   Purpose of the Study ......................................................................................................... 13
   Importance of the Study .................................................................................................. 13
   Research Questions ......................................................................................................... 14
   Methodology .................................................................................................................... 14
   Chapter Summary ........................................................................................................... 15

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE ................................................................. 18
   Introduction ....................................................................................................................... 18
   School Leadership Effectiveness ................................................................................... 19
   Leadership and the Pursuit of Meaningful Reform ....................................................... 19
# Table of Contents — Continued

## CHAPTER

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Heroic Leader Myth</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Qualities of Effective School Leaders</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective Leadership Practice</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waters' and Marzano's Correlates of Effective Superintendent Practice</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big Schools, Little Schools and the Importance of Context</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Research and Big School Bias</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Critical Review of Waters' and Marzano's Correlates</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The State of Rural Educational Research</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural School Leadership</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Brief History of Rural Schools</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Contextual Challenges of Rural School Leadership</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Profile of the Rural School Leader</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Rural Midwest: An Economic Restructuring</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Summary</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## III. METHODOLOGY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Terms</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Method</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Study Approach</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection of Participants</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table of Contents — Continued

CHAPTER

Data Collection ........................................................................................................... 57
Ethical Considerations .............................................................................................. 58
Data Verification and Analysis .................................................................................. 59
Order of Analysis ....................................................................................................... 61
Limitations .................................................................................................................. 62
Chapter Summary ...................................................................................................... 63

IV. CASE DESCRIPTIONS ......................................................................................... 65

Introduction .............................................................................................................. 65
Subject Participation .................................................................................................. 66
Case Descriptions ....................................................................................................... 67

Case One: Superintendent Charles Bronson,
Cooper Beach, Michigan. ......................................................................................... 68

Case Two: Superintendent Yul Brynner,
Carpenter, Michigan. ............................................................................................... 72

Case Three: Superintendent James Coburn,
Glenn Lake, Michigan. ............................................................................................. 76

Case Four: Superintendent Brad Dexter,
Grissom, Michigan. .................................................................................................. 80

Case Five: Superintendent Steve McQueen,
Schirra, Michigan..................................................................................................... 83

Case Six: Dr. Robert Vaughn,
Shepard Bay, Michigan............................................................................................ 89

Case Seven: Superintendent Eli Wallach,
Slayton Falls, Michigan ............................................................................................ 92
Table of Contents — Continued

CHAPTER
Within-Case Analysis ......................................................... 96
Common Themes ................................................................. 96
Leadership Priorities ......................................................... 97
Chapter Summary ............................................................ 98

V. CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS .................................................... 100
Introduction ........................................................................ 100
Participants ........................................................................ 101
Leadership Priorities ......................................................... 102

  Leadership Priority #1: All Students Can and Will Achieve
  Academic Success ............................................................ 103

  Leadership Priority #2: A High Quality Teacher in Each
  Classroom ........................................................................ 104

  Leadership Priority #3: Creating Resources ....................... 105

Leadership Practices .......................................................... 106
Leadership Philosophies ...................................................... 112

  Leadership Philosophy #1: Transparency .......................... 112

  Leadership Philosophy #2: Proximity ................................. 113

  Leadership Philosophy #3: Autonomy ............................... 114

  Leadership Philosophy #4: Constructive Confrontation ....... 116

  Leadership Philosophy #5: Making Hard Choices ............... 119

  Leadership Philosophy #6: Celebration ............................. 121
Table of Contents — Continued

APPENDICES

A. HSIRB Approval Letter ................................................................. 170
B. Requesting Participation Letter ..................................................... 172
C. Superintendent Consent Document ............................................... 174
D. Participant Consent Document ..................................................... 177
E. Interview Protocol ....................................................................... 180
F. Transcriptionist Confidentiality Form ........................................... 187
G. Superintendent Subject Profiles .................................................... 189
H. Coded Practice Citations from Interview Transcripts ................... 191
I. Distribution of Coded Practice Citations by Philosophy ................ 215
LIST OF TABLES


2. Superintendent Leadership Practices by Priority and Philosophy .............................. 125
LIST OF FIGURES

1. New Findings .................................................................................................................. 154
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Problem

Nobody much cares to talk about the challenge of educating poor rural children. Maybe it is because stories involving urban children, with their graphic depiction of gang violence and other social pathologies, are more compelling. For some reason, tales of rural school deprivation have never captured the nation’s imagination (Arnold, 2000; DeYoung, 1987). This may explain why so little scholarly research exists on rural public schools in general and rural school leadership in particular (Arnold, 2000; Arnold, 2004; Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005; DeYoung, 1987; Khattri, Riley & Kane, 1997). In reality poverty’s effect as a cultural condition does not discriminate based on geography; it matters little whether a child lives in a single-wide trailer or in a three-story walkup. What does matter is this: the challenge of educating our nation’s poor rural children has not received the attention it deserves (Arnold, 2000; Arnold, et al., 2005; Barley & Beesley, 2007; DeYoung 1987; Garn, 2003; Khattri et al., 1997; Lamkin, 2006).

Most of what we know about effective leadership practice, the type of practice that leads to meaningful academic reform, has been gleaned from studying urban and suburban school leaders (Arnold, 2004; Arnold et al., 2005). Conversely, the leadership practices of rural superintendents have generated little academic interest and even less
In 2006, Waters and Marzano published their meta-analysis of effective superintendent leadership practice. In this authoritative work, Waters and Marzano reviewed hundreds of previous research studies on school leadership in order to identify those certain leadership practices that could be directly linked with improving student achievement. In the end, their research identified six specific leadership responsibilities or correlates that were linked, in a statistically-significant way, to improved levels of student achievement.

Waters’ and Marzano’s six correlates now represent the current standard for effective superintendent leadership practice. These correlates will provide the conceptual framework for this study. The purpose of this study is to examine how Waters’ and Marzano’s correlates have been applied by certain rural superintendents who have successfully improved student academic performance in their districts. More particularly,
the goal of this study is to gain a better understanding of how these correlates might translate into effective leadership practice within a rural school context.

Problem Background

School Leadership Effectiveness

The matter of what constitutes an effective school and school leader does not lend itself to easy definition. Despite the attention given to athletics and the arts, student academic achievement remains the best and only true measure of school leadership effectiveness (Leithwood, 1995). The task of improving student achievement falls to a school district’s chief executive, the superintendent. Thus, by extension, superintendent effectiveness should be judged in terms of a given leader’s ability to positively influence student academic performance. With the advent of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002 and its academic accountability provisions, raising student performance is now viewed by most superintendent leaders as their most daunting task (Bryd, Drews, & Johnson, 2006). Improving student academic performance requires the successful implementation of meaningful school reform. The catalyst for that meaningful reform is the superintendent leader (Fullan, 2002, 2003).

There are no short cuts when it comes to the successful pursuit of meaningful reform and the closing of the student achievement gap. A common myth exists that the leaders of our public schools must arrive in the form of dynamic or charismatic leaders (Collins, 2001; Fullan, 2002; Hargreaves & Fink, 2004; Hess, 1999; Leithwood, 1995; Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton, & Kleiner, 2000; Tyack & Hansot, 1982). However, such thinking is hazardous to a school organization’s health. This cult of
personality emphasis in the quest for the charismatic school leader is misplaced. The success factors that support effective school leadership are in fact practice-based, not personality-based (Reeves, 2006, Waters & Marzano, 2006).

The task of implementing meaningful reform is difficult. The school leader often encounters significant road blocks in their efforts (Fullan, 2003, 2004; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Peterson & Short, 2001; Schmoker, 2006). By nature, school leadership is a collective enterprise (Fullan, 2003). As a result, good leaders are generally less concerned about providing right answers and more concerned about finding ways to motivate the school organization to confront its most significant problems (Fullan, 2003; Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000; Schmoker, 2006). Fullan (2001) refers to this process as collective mobilization, the ability to commit people and their collective energies towards the attainment of a worthy goal. Orchestrating support for meaningful reform, to focus the organization's collective energy towards improving student academic achievement, is a singular requirement of effective school leadership (Fullan, 2001; Purkey & Smith, 1982).

A school system is a living organism; reforming it takes time (Datnow, 2005; Fullan, 2003). Effective school leaders know that opposition to reform is both natural and predictable. A complex set of issues and priorities has created a public school culture that is difficult to change (Seal & Harmon, 1995). A variety of institutional forces, most with a deep investment in established relationships and traditions, will generally oppose reform and seek to maintain the status quo (Fullan, 2004; Peterson & Short, 2001; Schmoker, 2006).
Effective school leaders persevere, finding ways to outlast these forces in order to assure that initiated reform sustains. Such perseverance is made possible when two factors are present. First, the school leader must remain on the job for a healthy period of time in order to see that long-term organizational commitment takes hold and is maintained (Fullan, 2004, Waters & Marzano, 2006). Second, the school leader must plan for the future, by building and distributing leadership capacity to those who would lead the organization beyond the near term (Fullan, 2004; Hargreaves & Fink, 2004; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001).

Overcoming resistance to reform takes time. It generally takes five years for a superintendent leader to make a difference, and 8 to 10 years to make a significant impact (Fullan, 2003; Littleford, 1999). Thus it is essential that the school leader remain on the job long enough to see that initiated reform is sustained (Fullan, 2002; Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000; Hess, 1999). School leaders who remain in their leadership positions longer have a better chance at seeing their reforms gain traction and persist. Longer leadership tenures are directly linked to improved student academic success. Research has established a clear and positive correlation between length of superintendent tenure and advances in student achievement (Waters & Marzano, 2006, 2007).

In terms of building and distributing leadership, effective leaders understand the importance of developing future leaders (Hargreaves & Fink, 2004). The work of reform provides the opportunity to distribute leadership responsibility and expand the capacities of individuals within the school organization. Expanding the leadership capacity of individuals translates into expanding the leadership capacity of the entire organization. Enlightened leaders make developing leadership talent a priority (Fullan, 2003, 2004).
They understand that their legacy and the school's future are inextricably linked – and that the best bet for enhancing both lay in increasing the quality of successive leadership.

The Issue of Context and School Leadership

Most research on effective superintendent practice has focused on the school reform challenges faced by the leaders of urban and suburban schools (DeYoung, 1987). Unfortunately, very little scholarship exists on the challenges of rural school leadership (Arnold, 2000, 2004; Arnold et al., 2005; DeYoung, 1987; Khattri et al., 1997; Lamkin, 2006). While urban and suburban school leaders struggle with various reform issues that tend to be similar in scope, rural school leaders face challenges in their reform efforts that are contextually unique.

Historically, rural school reform has had a singular aim: to make little schools look like big schools (Fuller, 1982). Critics contend that the consolidation movement of the past 100 years has been based upon the myth that rural schools could be improved if made to look more like urban schools, with their emphasis on economy, efficiency and equality (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). Unfortunately, the implementation of a one-size-fits-all solution for rural schools has proven to be overly simplistic. Rural school districts are distinct, not only from their urban and suburban counterparts, but also from one another in terms of their individual needs, resources and capacities (Arnold, 2000). Some rural education experts have argued that generic policy prescriptions are misguided given the diverse student populations and contextual challenges of rural America (Arnold). A growing body of literature suggests the problems of rural minority and special-needs students have not been adequately met by urban-based models of service delivery (DeYoung, 1987).
There are four challenges that distinguish rural school leadership. These challenges are: (a) a rural community defined by poverty, (b) a rural school administrator overburdened with a wide range of responsibilities, (c) a rural school leader forced to serve a uniquely public role, and (d) a rural culture steeped in tradition and deeply resistant to change.

As a first major challenge, the issue of rural poverty best defines the rural school context. According to the National Center of Educational Statistics (2010) some 7.2 million students attend school in a rural community, defined as a non-metropolitan locality with a population of less than 2,500 people. This means that roughly one out of every six children in this country attends a rural school (Arnold, 2004). Twenty percent of these children live in poverty, a rate higher than the 16.0% of children who attend metropolitan-area schools (United States Department of Agriculture, 2004). For those rural children who live with a female head of household, the poverty rate doubles to 37% (NCES, 2010).

This gap between rural and urban poor is not an anomaly. Since the federal government began tracking such statistics in the 1960s, the percentage of people living in poverty in rural counties has exceeded that of metropolitan counties every single year (USDA, 2004). More importantly, the issue of rural poverty has emerged as a matter of degree. As a county becomes more progressively rural, the level of poverty within that county increases (USDA, 2004). In other words, our nation’s most rural areas are in fact our nation’s poorest areas. The hard truth is this: our nation’s most rural public schools are responsible for educating a large number of our nation’s poorest children (DeYoung, 1987; Khattri et al., 1997).
As a second major challenge, the rural school leader operates within a community and school organization characterized by resource scarcity and economic decline (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Peshkin, 1978; Seal & Harmon, 1995). Absent middle management to share the administrative load, rural school leaders are involved in virtually every operational decision that takes place within their districts. In the smallest districts, the superintendent may serve as the curriculum director, school principal, transportation director and athletic director. Because of staffing limitations, the superintendent is often required to lead the standards-setting process for academics (Arnold, 2000). For these superintendents, responsibility for student academic achievement cannot be delegated to another administrator. For many rural school leaders, no administrative or hierarchical buffer exists to shield them from being the school official primarily responsible for student academic achievement (Lamkin, 2006).

As a third major challenge, the rural superintendent tends to lead a uniquely public life. In most rural communities, the position of superintendent is a high profile job. As a result, rural school leaders generally enjoy little privacy, carrying out their work as public figures within a rural community where personal and working relationships are intimate, complex and multi-dimensional (Arnold, 2004, Arnold et al., 2005, Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Lamkin, 2006). Typically the highest paid and most visible member of their community, a rural superintendent’s every success and failure, both personal and professional, tends to be on full public display.

The communities that rural superintendents serve are characterized by close-knit relationships among life-long residents (Lamkin, 2006). Rural communities and their people are characterized by a distinguishing feature: a lack of privacy, of knowing and
being known (Peshkin, 1978). Rural residents tend to harbor a healthy distrust for outsiders. This can prove to be a particularly difficult challenge for those school leaders who are not locals or natives of the communities where they work (Seal & Harmon, 1995).

As a fourth and final major challenge, the superintendent must work within a rural culture deeply resistant to change, particularly in matters involving the local school (Peshkin, 1978). As the major link between the community and outside world, rural residents believe that the school belongs to them and that the well-being of their community is tied to the school (Seal & Harmon, 1995). In terms of reform, rural parents would prefer that the school of their youth be improved upon or added to, but not dramatically changed (Seal & Harmon, 1995). Often, rural adults with special enduring feelings for their school will rise up dramatically to oppose any perceived threat that proposes to change the school in a substantial way (Peshkin, 1978).

These four factors combine to create a leadership work context that is difficult. These contextual challenges are formidable and have persisted over time (Lamkin, 2006). These same forces often work to create tensions between the school leader and the local community in terms of the leader’s efforts at implementing meaningful reform. This may explain why the rural superintendency has historically experienced a higher than average rate of turnover (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000; Glass & Franceschini, 2007). Increasingly, the job of the rural school leader has become so difficult that fewer and fewer individuals are willing to accept the challenge (Arnold, 2004; Arnold et al., 2005; Lamkin, 2006).
Conceptual Framework

In 2006, Waters and Marzano completed a comprehensive study on the influence of school district leadership on student academic performance. This meta-analysis, involving 27 referred studies, some 2,817 school districts and the achievement scores of 3.4 million students, is believed to be the largest-ever quantitative examination of superintendent leadership. The researchers’ goal: to establish whether or not an empirical relationship exists between superintendent leadership and student academic achievement. Additionally, the researchers sought the answers to two research questions: (a) what specific district-level leadership responsibilities are correlated with increases in student achievement, and (b) what specific leadership practices are used to fulfill those responsibilities?

Their conclusions: Waters and Marzano found that a statistically significant relationship exists between the quality of superintendent leadership and average student achievement. In particular, their findings indicated that six specific leadership responsibilities were correlated with having a profoundly positive impact on average student achievement. These six responsibilities, or correlates, represent a model for effective superintendent leadership practice.

The six leadership correlates are: (a) collaborative goal-setting that includes all the district’s relevant stakeholders, (b) establishing non-negotiable goals for student achievement and classroom instruction, (c) aligning board support for the district’s non-negotiable goals, (d) continuous monitoring of the district’s progress in attaining its non-negotiable goals, (e) effectively utilizing resources to support the accomplishment of district goals and (f) superintendents providing defined autonomy to principals to lead
their building’s efforts to attain district goals within clearly defined operational boundaries.

Waters’ and Marzano’s research has established that a statistically significant relationship exists between certain, specific leadership responsibilities and improved levels of student achievement. These six responsibilities or correlates will serve as the conceptual framework for this study.

Problem Statement

While available research on the challenges of educating rural children is limited, academic research on effective rural leadership practice is even more limited (Arnold, 2004, Lamkin, 2006). A review of the current state of rural education literature points to a shortage of information about the professional development of rural administrators (Arnold, 2004). There are few foundational or referential studies on the topic of rural educational leadership. As a result, there exists a significant gap in the knowledge base about the professional growth and work of rural school administrators (Arnold et al., 2005; DeYoung, 1987).

Water’s and Marzano’s work provides important insights into the correlates of effective leadership practice that lead to meaningful reform and improved student academic achievement. And while their work has received well-deserved acclaim, some of their correlates, in this researcher’s opinion, are based on an operational context more consistent with that of urban and suburban schools. As Lamkin (2006) points out, service in rural communities is distinct from that of urban or suburban districts. In urban and suburban districts the superintendent is supported by many layers of administrative assistance and is generally separated from academic or daily classroom concerns.
The correlate providing defined autonomy to principals to lead their schools within defined boundaries provides one example of a Waters and Marzano finding that does not translate well to a rural school context. Often, rural school superintendents are required to serve a dual role as both superintendent and building principal. As such, they represent the district’s sole administrator. For these leaders, delegating authority to another administrator is simply not an option (Arnold, 2000; Lamkin, 2006).

Waters’ and Marzano’s study is a meta-analysis, an aggregated summary of 27 previous academic studies on effective leadership practice. As such, their research conclusions are driven by the findings, methods and sampling techniques of previously established scholarship. Of the 27 studies included in the meta-analysis, 21 were available for this researcher’s review. Of those 21 studies, 11 either underrepresented or excluded rural districts from being part of the research sample population.

The implication is clear—many of the studies that served as the basis for Waters’ and Marzano’s work do not reflect the realities and work contexts of rural schools. In one of the studies, an effort that explored the visionary leadership of superintendents, Endemann (1990, p. 50) noted: “Smaller districts were not studied because these superintendents usually serve several roles as teacher and superintendent...as a result they are closer to the technical core of the organization.” It is this closeness to the technical core that makes the rural superintendency so unique. And it is a better understanding of this uniqueness that has been missing from previously established research.
Purpose of the Study

This analysis is not intended to be a criticism of Waters’ and Marzano’s work. Indeed, their scholarship is important and relevant for urban and suburban school leaders. Rather, the purpose of this research study is to question how Waters’ and Marzano’s correlates might be applied in a rural school setting. More particularly, how might these correlates translate to effective leadership practice within a rural school context? How are non-negotiable goals for student achievement and classroom instruction successfully established in a rural district? What does building and distributing leadership capacity look like in a successful rural school district? How does an effective rural school leader utilize defined autonomy to pursue the district’s goals for reform? And how are resources aligned and allocated by effective rural school leaders in a way that supports the district’s goals for improving student achievement?

Importance of the Study

Within a rural community often starved for leadership (Peshkin, 1978), rural superintendents enjoy a rare opportunity to make a meaningful difference both in their communities and in the lives of rural children. A select number of rural school leaders have done just that. These leaders have been successful in their efforts to pursue meaningful reform that has lead to significant gains in student academic achievement. It is this researcher’s belief that there is much to be learned from these rural school leaders and their example. A better understanding of the practices of these effective rural leaders would enhance the ability of others to make a similar, life-altering impact in the academic lives of rural children.
Research Questions

Question #1): How does an effective rural superintendent go about making the task of improving student academic achievement the primary focus of the district’s collective efforts?

Question #2): How does an effective rural superintendent go about building and distributing leadership capacity in a manner that supports the district’s collective efforts to improve student achievement?

Question #3): How does an effective rural superintendent go about articulating and allocating defined autonomy in a manner that supports the district’s collective effort to improve student achievement?

Question #4): How does an effective rural superintendent go about aligning resources in a manner that supports the district’s collective effort to improve student achievement?

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research approach with a multiple case study design. According to Marshall and Rossman (2006), qualitative research is most appropriate when the aim is to better explore, better explain or better describe a phenomenon. In this study, the phenomenon studied is the leadership practices of rural school superintendents in Michigan who have led their districts to significant improvement in student academic achievement.

According to Patton (1990) case study design is most applicable when the researcher needs to understand some specific people, particular problem or unique situation in great depth from a few examples of the phenomenon in question. Stake
(2003) insists that the most unique aspect of case study research lies in the selection of the case or cases to be studied. For this study, purposeful sampling was used to identify eight rural Michigan school districts that met the following criteria: (a) student achievement had significantly improved over the five-year period from 2004-05 to 2008-09 as measured by the Michigan School Report Card (Michigan Department of Education, 2010), (b) a single superintendent leader had been the district’s chief administrator during that time period, and (c) the district’s percentage of economically-disadvantaged students was 40 percent or higher. The third criterion was added in order to mitigate the influence socio-economic status might have on student academic achievement and to ensure the selected research sample reflected a student demographic profile typical of most rural school districts in Michigan.

These eight rural superintendents and their districts were identified as the subjects for this multiple case study. A multiple case study design was used because of its appropriateness in analyzing and comparing the similarity of results among these eight cases (Yin, 1994). In-depth interviews with each of the eight superintendents were conducted in an attempt to identify, analyze and evaluate those leadership practices and actions that have contributed to their district’s academic success. Additionally, data collection included interviews with principals, teachers and board trustees in each district. Interviewing individuals familiar with the practices of each of these eight superintendent subjects was designed to increase the validity of the research data being collected.

Chapter Summary

Improving student academic achievement requires the successful implementation of meaningful school reform. The catalyst for that meaningful reform is the school leader.
Most of what we know about effective leadership practice has been gleaned from the study of leaders of urban and suburban schools. Unfortunately, very little scholarship exists on the practice of rural school leadership.

While urban and suburban school leaders struggle with various reform issues that tend to be similar in scope, rural school leaders face challenges in their reform efforts that are contextually unique. These challenges are: (a) a rural community defined by poverty and economic decline, (b) a rural school administrator overburdened with a wide range of responsibilities, (c) a rural school leader forced to serve a uniquely public role, and (d) a rural culture steeped in tradition and deeply resistant to change.

Waters and Marzano (2006) have identified six responsibilities of effective superintendent practice that are correlated with increased levels of student achievement. These six responsibilities or correlates are: (a) collaborative goal-setting that includes all the district’s relevant stakeholders, (b) establishing non-negotiable goals for student achievement and classroom instruction, (c) aligning board support for the district’s non-negotiable goals, (d) continuous monitoring of the district’s progress in attaining their non-negotiable goals, and (e) effectively utilizing resources to support the accomplishment of district goals.

While Waters’ and Marzano’s work has received well-deserved acclaim, their correlates are largely based upon an operational context more consistent with that of urban and suburban school districts. Many of the foundational studies that served as the basis of Waters and Marzano meta-analysis systematically excluded rural districts from being a part of their research samples. The purpose of this research study is to gain a
better understanding of how Water’s and Marzano’s correlates are being practiced and successfully applied by effective rural school leaders.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

A strong public education system has long been the cornerstone of a civil, prosperous and democratic society (Fullan, 2003). Today, our public school leaders face a difficult task in their efforts to reform and improve the quality of our public schools. While schools have long been battlegrounds of contending social and political forces (Tyack & Hansot, 1982), over the past two decades the stakes have been raised. The era of standards-based accountability, first ushered in with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 (Hess, 1999) and later solidified with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002, succeeded in making and winning the argument that our country’s economic future is dependent upon the quality of our nation’s public schools. In both economic and educational policy terms, it has become clear that large-scale reform of our nation’s public schools is needed (Fullan, 2003). As the cries to improve the quality of our public schools have grown louder, the matter of leadership quality has come under increased scrutiny (Glass & Bjork, 2003).

The call for quality or enlightened leadership in our public institutions is not a new one. In 1787, James Madison wrote in Federalist No. 10: “A factious spirit has tainted our public administrations…It is vain to say that enlightened statesman will be able to adjust clashing interests, and render them subservient to the public good.
Enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm.” Madison’s words ring true today. An increasingly complex set of issues and priorities has created a public school culture that has proved difficult to reform for even the most enlightened of our public school leaders (Seal & Harmon, 1995).

**School Leadership Effectiveness**

**Leadership and the Pursuit of Meaningful Reform**

The matter of what constitutes an effective school does not lend itself to easy definition. Despite the central role that the arts and athletics play in the cultural life of most schools, student achievement is and remains the best indicator of school effectiveness (Leithwood, 1995). The task of improving student achievement falls to the school’s chief executive, the superintendent. Thus by extension, according to Leithwood, the true measure of the superintendent’s effectiveness should be judged in terms of the leader’s ability to improve student academic performance. With the advent of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002 and its accountability provisions, raising student academic performance is now viewed by most superintendents as their most daunting task (Bryd, Drews & Johnson, 2006). Improving student academic performance requires the successful implementation of meaningful school reform. The catalyst for that meaningful reform is the superintendent leader (Fullan, 2002).

Quality leadership is of critical importance. School leadership explains 25% of the total schooling effect on learning, second only to classroom instruction (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004). Using superintendent compensation levels as a surrogate for quality, Meier’s and O’Toole’s (2002) study of superintendent
compensation levels in Texas revealed that a positive correlation exists between higher salary levels and higher levels of student achievement. Waters' and Marzano's (2006) analysis of effective superintendent practice uncovered a direct relationship between certain, effective leadership practices and increases in student achievement.

Quality leadership is of critical importance. Meaningful reform does not spontaneously occur. There are no documented instances of a troubled school district being successfully reformed absent strong, purposeful leadership (Leithwood, et al., 2004).

Meaningful reform requires the school leader be confrontational. Reeves (2006) insists there is never an opportune time to reform a school system; change is never convenient, universally popular or risk free. Pursuing reform means confronting the most brutal facts of the organization’s present situation (Collins, 2001; Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000; Schmoker, 2006). Fullan (2003) observed that effective school leadership is a collective enterprise, requiring individuals both inside and outside the organization to address problems previous leaders had been unwilling to face (Fullan, 2002; Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000). Good leaders are generally less concerned about providing right answers and more concerned about finding ways to motivate the school organization to confront its most significant problems (Fullan 2002; Goodman & Zimmerman; Schmoker, 2006).

Fullan (2001) refers to this process as collective mobilization, the ability to commit people and their energies towards the attainment of a worthy goal. Orchestrating support for meaningful reform, to focus the organization’s collective energy towards
improving student academic achievement, is a singular requirement of effective school leadership (Fullan 2001; Purkey & Smith, 1982).

The Heroic Leader Myth

The national media has depicted the superintendency as a profession in turmoil, citing high turnover rates and a shrinking applicant pool (Bjork, Keedy & Gurley, 2003; Glass & Bjork, 2003). Many boards of education, under increased competitive pressure from schools of choice districts and charter schools, anxiously seek the superhero leader to ride in and save the day (Fullan, 2002; Hargreaves & Fink, 2004; Hess, 1999; Leithwood, 1995; Senge et al., 2000; Tyack & Hansot, 1982).

Unfortunately the quest for the dynamic or charismatic leader, with its cult of personality emphasis, is misplaced (Collins, 2001; Fullan, 2002; Hargreaves & Fink, 2004; Hess, 1999, Leithwood, 1995; Senge et al., 2000; Tyack & Hansot, 1982). Collins’ study of exceptionally successful business executives found that charismatic business leaders were negatively correlated with a company’s ability to sustain long-term business success. In fact, Collins observed that the most successful business leaders tended to be reserved and low-key in nature – personality traits very different from those of the charismatic leader stereotype.

The search for the charismatic leader by districts and boards reflects a societal penchant for quick fixes. Fullan (2001) insists quality leadership is about building and supporting strong institutions, not charismatic leaders.

According to Fullan, districts that are led by charismatic leaders place themselves at risk; often the school organization’s entire reform effort collapses when the leader exits the district.
In fact, Reeves (2006) writes that effective school leadership is practice-based, not personality-based. He insists that effective leadership is founded in a skill set that can be defined, assessed and improved upon in a systematic way. Reeves asserts that there are particular leadership actions that are demonstrably linked to improved student achievement (Reeves; Waters, & Marzano, 2007).

The Qualities of Effective School Leaders

A review of the research literature on educational leadership reveals three distinguishing qualities of effective superintendent leaders: (a) the ability to make improving student academic achievement the school organization’s primary focus, (b) the ability to initiate and sustain reform, and (c) the ability to build and distribute leadership capacity.

Focus: Student Achievement as a Singular Priority

Effective school leaders are able to focus the school organization on improving its bottom line: student academic performance (Leithwood, 1995). Such leaders know that enhancing student achievement is the organization’s first priority (Reeves, 2006).

Effective leaders must first convince the school organization that improving student academic performance is an achievable goal. As Fullan (2001) notes effective leaders are infectiously effective, making people feel that even the most difficult problems can be tackled productively. Building consensus around the goal of improving student academic achievement becomes the focus of the leader’s school improvement strategy (Purkey & Smith, 1982). This requires building collective efficacy, the shared belief that the organization can dramatically enhance its academic effectiveness (Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005).
Besides fostering a culture of optimism, effective leaders must also instill a
culture of discipline (Collins, 2001). This is how Collins characterized the workplace
cultures of good-to-great business leaders. In his research, such leaders are distinguished
by their ability to establish a work culture that values the relentless pursuit of a limited
number of organizational priorities. Of equal importance for school leaders, a highly-
disciplined work culture aids the leader in overcoming resistance, the inevitable by-
product of large-scale reform (Reeves, 2006; Schmoker, 2006).

Perseverance: Initiating and Sustaining Meaningful Reform

Effective school leaders know opposition to reform is both natural and
predictable. A complex set of issues and priorities has created a public school culture that
is difficult to change (Seal & Harmon, 1995). A variety of institutional forces, most with
a deep investment in established relationships and traditions, will generally oppose
reform and seek to maintain the status quo (Fullan, 2004; Peterson & Short, 2001;
Schmoker, 2006).

As Fullan (2004) observed, reform is complex, producing many questions and
much disagreement. This can result in the school leader raising people’s ire, particularly
when it involves questioning colleagues’ values and behaviors (Fullan, 2003). Effective
leaders are often collaborative, but not always congenial and consensual.

Effective school leaders persevere, finding ways to outlast opposition in order to
assure that initiated reform sustains. Such perseverance is made possible when two
factors are present. First, the school leader must remain on the job for a healthy period of
time in order to see that long-term organizational commitment takes hold and is
maintained (Fullan, 2004; Waters & Marzano, 2006). Second, the school leader must plan
for the future, by building and distributing leadership capacity to those who would lead the organization beyond the near term (Fullan, 2004; Hargreaves & Fink, 2004; Spillane, et al., 2001).

Overcoming resistance to reform takes time. According to Fullan (2004) it takes ten years of cumulative development before a superintendent becomes an effective school leader. In general terms, it takes five years for a leader to make a difference, and eight to ten years to make a significant impact (Fullan, 2003; Littleford, 1999). Thus, it is essential that the school leader remain on the job long enough to see that initiated reform is sustained (Fullan, 2002; Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000; Hess, 1999). School leaders who remain in their leadership positions longer have a better chance at seeing their reforms gain traction and persist. Longer leadership tenures are directly linked to improved student academic success. Waters and Marzano (2006) have established a clear and positive correlation between length of superintendent tenure and advances in student achievement.

Growth: Building and Distributing Leadership Capacity

Burns (1978, p. 454) wrote: “An institution, it is said, is but the lengthened shadow of a man, but it takes many men and women to establish lasting institutions.” Effective leaders understand the importance of capacity building, of developing leadership for the future (Fullan, 2004; Hargreaves & Fink, 2004). Growing the leadership capacity of individuals translates into expanding the leadership capacity of the entire organization. Capacity building involves developing the organization’s collective ability to act together to bring about positive change (Fullan, 2004).
Enlightened leaders make developing leadership talent a priority (Fullan, 2003, 2004). Districts where reform sustains are those that generate a constant pipeline of leadership talent that can push the organization further and deeper. Fullan states emphatically that large-scale reform never happens unless capacity building is a central component of the school improvement strategy.

Capacity building requires sharing leadership, the allocating of responsibility in proportion to each individual’s choice-making capacity (Fullan, 2003). In many ways, school leadership is a distributed practice that stretches over the school’s social and situational contexts (Hargreaves & Fink, 2004; Reeves, 2006; Spillane et al., 2001). According to Reeves, *distributed leadership* assumes the group is smarter than the individual, that the institution is best served when leadership is distributed and supported by an entire team.

According to Fullan (2004) and Reeves (2006), distributed leadership is based upon trust. More particularly, Fullan characterized distributed leadership as demanding trust. Demanding trust implies that leaders have a responsibility to invest in others, to take a chance on creating an environment where people will take risks and be supported in their efforts. Collins (2001) refers to this approach, the practice of providing freedom and responsibility within a clearly-defined framework, as *defined autonomy*. Defined autonomy provides people with the freedom and responsibility to solve the organization’s problems within a clearly-defined framework. Effective leaders understand that people perform best when they are trusted and provided broad authority to perform their jobs in the manner in which they best deem fit (Collins, 2001; Fullan, 2003).
Effective Leadership Practice

Waters' and Marzano's Correlates of Effective Superintendent Practice

In 2006, Waters and Marzano completed a comprehensive study on the influence school district leadership has on student academic performance. Previously, few studies specifically addressed the meaning of effective leadership practice in the superintendency (Leithwood, 1995). Their meta-analysis involving 27 referred studies, some 2,817 school districts and the achievement scores of 3.4 million students, is believed to be the largest-ever quantitative examination of superintendent leadership. The researchers' goal: to establish whether or not an empirical relationship exists between superintendent leadership and student academic achievement. Additionally, the researchers sought the answers to two research questions: (a) what specific district-level leadership responsibilities are correlated with increases in student achievement, and (b) what specific leadership practices are used to fulfill those responsibilities?

Their conclusions: Waters and Marzano found that a statistically significant relationship exists between the quality of superintendent leadership and average student achievement. In particular, their findings indicated six specific leadership responsibilities were correlated with having a profoundly positive impact on average student achievement. These six responsibilities, or correlates, represent a model for effective superintendent leadership practice.

The six leadership correlates are: (a) collaborative goal-setting that includes all the district's relevant stakeholders, (b) establishing non-negotiable goals for student achievement and classroom instruction, (c) aligning board support for the district's non-
negotiable goals, (d) continuous monitoring of the district’s progress in attaining its non-negotiable goals, (e) effectively utilizing resources to support the accomplishment of district goals and (f) superintendents providing defined autonomy to principals to lead their building’s efforts to attain district goals within clearly defined operational boundaries.

Big Schools, Little Schools and the Importance of Context

Most research on effective superintendent practice has focused on the school reform challenges faced by the leaders of urban and suburban schools (DeYoung, 1987). Unfortunately, very little scholarship exists on the challenges of rural school leadership (Arnold, 2000, 2004; Arnold et al., 2005; DeYoung, 1987; Khattri et al., 1997; Lamkin, 2006). While urban and suburban school leaders struggle with various reform issues that tend to be similar in scope, rural school leaders face challenges in their reform efforts that are contextually unique (Arnold, 2000; DeYoung, 1987; Khattri et al., 1997; Lamkin).

Fullan (2004) describes context as the school and community cultures within which the school leader works. According to Fullan, the challenge of reform is to identify strategies that will change these contexts in a desirable direction.

For rural schools, reform has historically focused on one goal: to make little schools look like big schools (Fuller, 1982). Critics contend that the school consolidation movement of the past 100 years has been based upon the myth that rural schools could be improved if made to look more like urban schools, with their emphasis on economy, efficiency and equality (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). According to Arnold (2000), this one-size-fits-all approach to rural school reform has proven to be overly simplistic. He insists rural school districts are distinct, not only from their urban and suburban
counterparts, but also from one another in terms of their individual needs, resources and capacities. He argues that generic policy prescriptions are misguided given the diverse student populations and contextual challenges of rural America.

Educational Research and Big School Bias

Although rural schools constitute a significant portion of public elementary and secondary education in the United States, little high-quality research has been conducted on rural education issues (Arnold, 2000, 2004; Arnold et al., 2005; DeYoung, 1987, Lamkin, 2006; Khattri et al., 1997). According to Arnold, the knowledge base regarding important rural education issues is virtually nonexistent.

DeYoung (1987) insists this dearth of rural education scholarship reflects an urban bias to most educational research in the United States, referring to rural education as a stepchild to other aims and interests of professional educators and researchers. Arnold (2000) observes that relatively few scholars are studying rural education issues because almost no funding is available to conduct education research in specifically rural contexts.

Rural school leaders face challenges in their efforts to pursue meaningful reform that are contextually unique. Unfortunately, a growing body of literature suggests that the problems of rural minority and special-needs students have not been adequately met by urban-based models of service delivery (DeYoung, 1987).

A Critical Review of Waters’ and Marzano’s Correlates

Water’s and Marzano’s work provides important insights into the correlates of effective leadership practice that lead to meaningful reform and improved student academic achievement. And while their work has received well-deserved acclaim, their
correlates are based on an operational context more consistent with that of urban and suburban schools. As Lamkin (2006) points out, service in rural communities is distinct from that of urban or suburban districts. In urban and suburban districts, the superintendent is supported by many layers of administrative assistance and is generally separated from academic or daily classroom concerns.

The correlate providing defined autonomy to principals to lead their schools within defined boundaries provides one example of a Waters and Marzano finding that does not translate well to a rural school context. In some rural districts, the school leader serves a dual role as both superintendent and building principal. In these districts where the superintendent is the sole administrator, delegating authority to a building principal is simply not an option (Arnold, 2000; Lamkin, 2006).

Water’s and Marzano’s study is a meta-analysis, an aggregated summary of 27 previous academic studies on effective leadership practice. As such, their research conclusions are driven by the findings, methods and sampling techniques of previously established scholarship. Of the 27 studies included in the meta-analysis, 21 were available for this researcher’s review. Of those 21 studies, 11 either underrepresented or excluded rural districts from being part of the research sample population.

The implication is clear – many of the studies that served as the basis for Water’s and Marzano’s work do not reflect the realities and work contexts of rural schools. In one of the studies, an effort that explored the visionary leadership of superintendents, Endemann (1990, p. 50) noted: “Smaller districts were not studied because these superintendents usually serve several roles as teacher and superintendent…as a result they are closer to the technical core of the organization.” It is this closeness to the
technical core that makes the rural superintendency so unique. And it is a better understanding of this uniqueness that has been missing from previously established research.

The State of Rural Educational Research

Although rural schools constitute a significant portion of public elementary and secondary education in the United States, little high-quality research has been conducted on rural education issues (Arnold, 2000, 2004; Arnold et al., 2005; DeYoung, 1987; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Khattri et al., 1997; Lamkin, 2006). According to Arnold the knowledge base regarding important rural education issues is virtually nonexistent. This places rural schools at a distinct disadvantage. In particular, this dearth of research has provided little insight into what constitutes effective leadership practice for rural school administrators (Arnold, 2000, 2004; Arnold et al., 2005).

Rural School Leadership

A Brief History of Rural Schools

The area commonly referred to as the Midwest, bordered by the Ohio River to the east, the Missouri River to the west, the top of North Dakota and Minnesota to the north, and the bottom of Missouri to the south, contained 50,000 inhabitants in the year 1800 (Fuller, 1982). By 1870, that same area, consisting of the states we now know as Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin, contained some 13 million inhabitants. European immigrants with unpronounceable names, odd customs and strange languages migrated to the region.
Despite their differences, these immigrants came to the Midwest for one reason – to farm (Fuller, 1982).

Observers at the time could discern in the outlook of the people a common Midwestern mindset. The U.S. Commissioner of Education recognized enough similarity in the people and institutions to group them into what thereafter has been called the North Central Division. The Ordinance of 1787 established government in the region and read: “Religion, morality and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind” (Fuller). These were the defining values of the Midwestern farmers and it would be these values that would come to shape the education of their children.

In the 1820s and 1830s, legislators in each of the ten states enacted public education laws to support previous pledges made in each state constitution to educate the region’s children. These laws authorized the creation of school districts, permitted the building of schoolhouses and allowed the levying of taxes for school upkeep. Despite these enactments, schooling in the Midwest during the period from 1820 to 1850 was largely fee-based and non-compulsory (Fuller).

In the period from 1850 to 1870, farmers and educators argued over the merits of establishing free public education for all children (Fuller). Subscription schools, organized and paid for by associations of parents, had been established in nearly all of the region’s towns and villages. In such a subscription school in Pigeon Creek, Indiana Abraham Lincoln received the total sum of his formal education – a period of less than one year. This amounted to more schooling, on average, than most pioneer children received at that time (Fuller).
The arguments over free public education centered not on philosophy, but on finance. How to pay for the schools? The farmers with their strong individualistic streaks favored the rate bill method, a tax on only those families whose children attended school. The educators and politicians favored a levy of tax on all property as the preferred method (Fuller). Farmers bristled at the logic: why should property owners without children be forced to pay a tax from which they would receive no benefit? Thus, the debate over public school finance was born - a source of controversy and consternation for Midwest farmers to the present day. By 1870, all ten states had adopted laws providing for the levying of property taxes for the financing of public schools (Fuller). And with their enactment, free public education in the Midwest was born.

During this time, rural America would develop a remarkably uniform and iconic style of educational architecture: the one-room schoolhouse (Zimmerman, 2009). The one-room schoolhouse would become synonymous with rural education; by 1913, fully one-half of the nation’s schoolchildren attended public school in a one-room school (Zimmerman).

Along with the one-room schoolhouse, rural schooling was also uniquely characterized by the annual public meeting (Fuller, 1982). The annual meeting exemplified the extent to which farmers controlled the most important aspects of their children’s education. The meeting’s purpose: to establish which months school was to be held and to make allowances for the winter fuel supply. Typically school began after fall harvest, lasted four months, recessed for spring planting and started up again for three months in the summer.
At the annual meeting, the local farmers exhibited the one skill they proved more adept at than farming – arguing (Fuller). Farmers were by vocation and temperament rugged individualists. They displayed an ability to form strong convictions and a propensity to share those strong convictions with others. They argued about everything. Attendance at the annual school meeting was largely driven by the topics of discussion. Any proposal for spending money, such as to dig a new well or to purchase new text books, would normally generate a large turnout (Fuller).

The rural schools of the late 1800s reflected the values and beliefs of the Midwestern people. Farm life was difficult. Farmers believed in the importance of discipline and hard work and expected their schools to reflect those values (Fuller). Farm parents expected their children to work hard on the farm and at school. They believed that education was the path to a better life (Fuller).

Rural life in the Midwest in the late 1800s was isolated. People from outside the close-knit rural communities were viewed with great suspicion. Outsiders represented change and rural people viewed change darkly (Seal & Harmon, 1995). This attitude posed a particular problem for school leaders who came from outside the local community. One publication at the time observed: “The trials of local politics, local pride and religious prejudice have made the superintendent an anxious servant of a fickle public” (Tyack & Hansot, 1982, p. 178). Along with a natural suspicion of office-holders, the local farmers often resented the superintendent’s high salary (Fuller, 1982).

A sense of anti-intellectualism ran strong and deep among the farmers. Those that worked with their backs placed great store in the value of experience, having little patience for the learned theories of professional educators (Fuller). The rural school
board's three main priorities at the time reflected the values of its people: (a) to provide a
good basic education, (b) to keep property taxes low, and (c) to preserve the existing
social order (Tyack & Hansot, 1982). One could assert that these priorities have changed
little over the past 125 years.

By 1900, Indiana had 42,000 one-room schoolhouses that each schooled fewer
than 20 students (Fuller, 1982). That would soon change. The great urban migration at
the end of the nineteenth century would begin to drain the rural community and the rural
school of its most valuable resource: people. The United States had always been a land of
farms and farm people, but the great exodus to the city began to exact a toll on rural
communities. Politicians blamed the rural schools for this migratory phenomenon,
claiming they were responsible for "ineffective farming, a lack of ideals and the general
drift to town" (p. 220).

Soon, critics began to call for the modernization of rural schools, insisting that
management authority be placed in the hands of professional educators. In 1896, the
Committee of Twelve released what would prove to be an infamous report on the state of
rural education. The report's findings were definitive and unassailable: big, centralized
schools were clearly superior to little, rural schools (Fuller). The release of the
Committee's report would prove to be the tipping point (Gladwell, 2000) for the rural
school consolidation movement. Supporters of consolidation hailed the report's findings,
characterizing opponents as backward yokels who did not know what was good for
children (Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Tyack & Hansot, 1982).

From 1900 to 1920 the sweep of professionalism and consolidation stripped local
school boards of much of their authority (Danzberger & Usdan, 1994). As a result,
control of content, curriculum, and day-to-day operations of the local school were increasingly placed in the hands of professional educators.

Farmers rued the loss of local control (Seal & Harmon, 1995). From their perspective, while the loss of control of their children's education was the injury, being forced to pay for the new, larger schools was the insult (Fuller, 1982). In their view, the farmers were now being taxed to build newer and larger schools to educate the children of strangers who lived outside their local community.

As the rural consolidation movement grew, the era of the one-room schoolhouse came to a close. As late as 1936, the state of Illinois still had some 9,925 one-room schools in operation. By the 1950s, the one-room schoolhouse had largely disappeared. In spite of strong local opposition, large centralized schools became the standard throughout the Midwest. The combined forces of declining enrollments, improved modes of transportation and escalating state financial incentives worked to make consolidated rural school districts the norm (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). In 1950, the United States counted some 83,718 public school districts. By 1970, that number had declined to 17,995 (Kannapel & DeYoung).

The urban migration of the early 20th century foreshadowed what would continue to be the rural community's greatest challenge: the threat of decline (Peshkin, 1978). The population losses of the previous century translated into economic loss for rural communities. After World War II, this migratory trend from the country to the city would continue as rural people sought work in the newly available manufacturing jobs located in the industrial cities of the Midwest (Peshkin).
The Contextual Challenges of Rural School Leadership

There are four contextual challenges that distinguish rural school leadership. These challenges are: (a) a rural community defined by poverty and economic decline, (b) a rural school administrator overburdened with a wide range of responsibilities, (c) a rural school leader forced to serve a uniquely public role, and (d) a rural culture steeped in tradition and deeply resistant to change.

The Rural Community: Poverty and Economic Decline

The issue of rural poverty best defines the rural school context. According to the National Center of Educational Statistics (2010), some 7.2 million students attend school in a rural community, defined as a non-metropolitan locality with a population of less than 2,500 people. This means that roughly one out of every six children in this country attends a rural school (Arnold, 2004). Twenty percent of these children live in poverty, a rate higher than the 16.0% of children who attend metropolitan-area schools (USDA, 2004). For those rural children who live with a female head of household, the poverty rate doubles to 37% (NCES, 2010).

This gap between rural and urban poor is not an anomaly. Since the federal government began tracking such statistics in the 1960s, the percentage of people living in poverty in rural counties has exceeded that of metropolitan counties every single year (USDA, 2004). More importantly, the issue of rural poverty has emerged as a matter of degree. As a county becomes more progressively rural, the level of poverty within that county increases (USDA). In other words, our nation’s most rural areas are in fact our nation’s poorest areas. The hard truth is this: our nation’s most rural public schools are
responsible for educating a large number of our nation’s poorest children (DeYoung, 1987; Khattri et al., 1997).

Seal and Harmon (1995) characterized the realities of the rural school environment in this way:

The rural school operates within the context of scarcity. The hope for economic renewal is faint, rooted in the lack of concrete economic rewards for academic achievement. In some communities, the lack of a clear and compelling link between education and economic opportunity erodes the motivation of students and challenges the schools as they attempt to improve student performance and reduce dropout rates. (p. 123)

Resources in rural schools, both human and financial, are limited (Peshkin, 1978; Seal & Harmon, 1995). An air of economic fragility and decline permeates rural communities. Population loss due to limited economic opportunity has worked to drain resources from rural schools in the form of lower per pupil reimbursements and property tax revenues (Seal & Harmon). The context of rural poverty can be characterized in terms of two constricting, concentric circles: a school organization with shrinking resources forced to operate inside a community with diminishing economic prospects.

The Rural Administrator: Wearing Multiple Hats

In human terms, resource scarcity in rural districts results in a smaller administrative leadership base. Compared with their urban and suburban counterparts, rural superintendents must assume a broader range of responsibilities because there are fewer administrators in their districts (Arnold, 2000, 2004; Arnold et al., 2005; Lamkin, 2006; Leithwood, 1995).
Absent middle management to share the work load, rural school leaders are involved in virtually every operational decision that takes place within their organizations. In the smallest districts, the superintendent may serve as the curriculum director, school principal, transportation director and athletic director (Arnold, 2000, 2004; Lamkin, 2006). Because of staffing limitations, the superintendent is often required to lead the standards-setting process for academics (Arnold, 2000, 2004). For these leaders, responsibility for student academic achievement cannot be delegated to another administrator. For many rural superintendents, no administrative or hierarchical buffer exists to shield them from being the school official primarily responsible for student academic achievement (Lamkin, 2006).

The Rural Community Leader: A Uniquely Public Figure

In rural communities, a general lack of privacy is an essential element of rural life (Peshkin, 1978). As a public figure, the rural superintendent tends to lead a uniquely public life. In most rural communities, the position of superintendent is a high profile job (Arnold, 2004; Arnold et al., 2005, Lamkin, 2006). Rural superintendents often lead personal and professional lives that are lived under constant scrutiny (Lamkin, 2006). Unlike their suburban and urban colleagues, rural school leaders enjoy little privacy carrying out their work in communities where personal and working relationships are intimate, complex and multi-dimensional (Arnold, 2000; Arnold et al., 2005.; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Lamkin, 2006).

The Rural Culture: a Resistance to Change

The communities that rural superintendents serve are characterized by close-knit relationships among life-long residents (Lamkin, 2006). Rural communities and their
people share a distinguishing feature: a lack of privacy, of knowing and being known (Peshkin, 1978). As a result, rural residents tend to harbor a healthy distrust for outsiders. This can prove to be a particularly difficult challenge for those school leaders who are not locals or natives of the communities where they work (Seal & Harmon, 1995).

Adult attachment to rural schools runs deep. With a culture steeped in longstanding relationships and traditions, rural adults loathe change, particularly in matters involving their school (Peshkin, 1978). Seal and Harmon (1995) insist that there exists a mythology among rural adults in which schools are better remembered than when actually experienced. In terms of reform, rural parents want the school of their youth to be improved upon or added to, but not changed in any dramatic way (Seal & Harmon). For many of these parents, the issue of increasing student achievement would not rank as a high priority. A winning football team or a shorter bus ride would prove to be of far greater local interest (Seal & Harmon).

This resistance to change can be a source of great frustration for any leader intent on pursuing reform. Peshkin (1978) described a rural community as being both sociological as well as geographical in nature. He insists many rural adults believe: (a) the school belongs to them, and (b) their community’s well-being is directly tied to the school. Peshkin characterized some rural adults as having “needs to be fulfilled and purposes to be served” (p. 203). Often these same adults, with special enduring feelings for their school, will rise up dramatically to oppose any reform or initiative that threatens to change the school in a substantial way.
A Profile of the Rural School Leader

In their research and examination of effective superintendent leadership practice, Waters and Marzano (2007) concluded that a positive correlation exists between the length of superintendent tenure and higher levels of student achievement. This relationship bears repeating: the longer a superintendent’s tenure, the greater the likelihood that student achievement will improve. As Waters and Marzano observed: “The positive correlation that appears between the length of superintendent service and student achievement confirms the value of leadership stability” (p. 20).

Despite widely-publicized claims of high and increasing rates of turnover, the average superintendent tenure of 6.5 years has remained relatively unchanged since the 1970s (Bjork, et al., 2003; Glass & Bjork, 2003). However, certain school district factors have been associated with higher rates of superintendent turnover. Natkin, Cooper, Aborano and Ghosh’s (2002) study identified four factors that influence superintendent tenure. The factors of superintendent educational level and community support for bond issues are positively correlated with longer superintendent tenures. The factors of district poverty level and board micro-management are negatively correlated with longer tenures. All four of these factors have especially troubling implications for rural school districts.

First, rural superintendents attain terminal degrees with lower frequency when compared with non-rural superintendents (Garn, 2003). Second, rural communities suffer from higher levels of poverty compared with non-metropolitan areas (USDA, 2004). Third, poorer communities in general are less-inclined to support school-related bond issues that result in higher property taxes.
Finally, because rural communities are characterized by close-knit relationships (Lamkin, 2006), rural board members are often able to immerse themselves in daily administrative matters (Danzberger, 1994; Feuerstein & Opfer, 1998). Micro-managing boards are a problem that detracts the school leader, in terms of time and energy expended, from the important work of implementing reform (Bryd, Drews & Johnson, 2006; Caruso, 2001; Danzberger, 1994; Feuerstein & Opfer, 1998; Grady & Bryant, 1989; Grady & Bryant, 1991; Hess, 1999; Norton, 2005; Peterson & Short, 2002; Waters & Marzano, 2007).

All of these forces combine to work against lengthier tenures in the rural superintendency. This may explain why small school districts have the highest rate (34%) of superintendent leaders who have been on the job for a period of less than two years (Glass & Franceschini, 2007).

The Rural Midwest: An Economic Restructuring

Following World War II, the rural Midwest would endure two distinct periods of economic change. In the first period, from 1949 to 1979, agriculture would fade as the Midwest’s dominant industry. Improvements in farm equipment and agricultural practices worked to greatly expand the scale of farm production. By the 1950s, the family farm began to be replaced by the large corporate farm as the region transitioned towards a new source of economic growth - manufacturing (Bernat, 1997).

During the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, industrial manufacturing would replace agriculture as the dominant industry in the rural Midwest (Bernat, 1997). After World War II, the United States had become a nation of consumers. Manufacturing technology would provide the methods and the Midwestern worker would provide the means for
satisfying the nation’s growing demand for consumer goods. Companies began to locate their factories in the Midwest in order to capitalize on the region’s labor supply. These new factory jobs offered high wages and did not require a college degree (Fisher, 2004). Factory work provided an attractive alternative for those who wanted to go to work directly out of high school, instead of going on to pursue a college education.

The second period of economic change, the years from 1979 to 2009, would prove to be a difficult time for the industrial Midwest. Just as technology’s influence worked to change the family farm, so too would technology work to change the factory. Productivity gains spurred by advances in technology allowed manufacturing plants to operate with fewer workers. Pressure from foreign competitors forced old plants to close and new plants to be built in regions or countries where labor costs were less expensive (Dervin & Anderlik, 2009).

In the three-year period from 1979 to 1982, the United States lost 2.2 million factory jobs, an overall reduction in total manufacturing employment of about 10 percent. Because of its heavy dependence on manufacturing, the Midwest suffered the largest share of those losses, with some 800,000 workers losing their jobs (Bernat, 1997).

During the 1960s and 1970s, manufacturing employment tended to be cyclical in nature, tracking closely with the U.S. economy. As the economy contracted, factory orders would decline and the number of workers and work shifts would be reduced. Furloughed workers would collect unemployment benefits until such time as the economy would improve, factory orders would increase and workers could be called back to work.
After the recession in 1979, the familiar layoff-and-recall cycle of factory employment began to change. While other sectors of the economy rebounded after 1979, the number of manufacturing jobs continued to decline. According to the Congressional Budget Office (Brauer, 2008) during the eight-year period between 2000 and 2008, the U.S. shed an additional 3.7 million manufacturing jobs. Because of the Midwest’s high proportion of factory jobs, compared with other parts of the country, these job losses had a disproportionately negative effect on the region’s economy (Dervin & Anderlik, 2009).

During this time, the phrase restructuring entered the nation’s lexicon, becoming synonymous with Midwestern job losses and overall economic plight. The term would come to define the region’s new economic context in both quantitative and qualitative terms (Green, 2001). As a quantitative term, restructuring meant an increasing number of low-paying, service sector jobs and a decreasing number of high-paying, manufacturing jobs. In qualitative terms, restructuring would mean a shift away from the need for unskilled labor and a shift towards employees with specialized skills who could work as professionals in a service-oriented economy (Bernat, 1997; Green, 2001).

For the rural school leader, the Midwest’s economic restructuring has created a new educational reality: academic success and a college degree are the only pathways to prosperity in a service-based economy. A high-paying factory job is no longer a vocational option for rural students. Thus, one of the key challenges of rural school leadership is to convince rural parents and students to accept this new reality. It is incumbent that school leaders draw a clear and compelling line between a college education and economic opportunity (Seal & Harmon, 1995). Unfortunately, the region’s history of jobs entailing manual labor, which seldom rewarded academic achievement,
has worked as a cultural cross-current that has undermined the importance of acquiring post-secondary skills (Seal & Harmon). The rural school leader must convince a skeptical rural public that the best and surest path to economic success is through academic achievement and a college degree.

Chapter Summary

Student academic performance provides the best measure of school leadership effectiveness (Leithwood, 1995). Improving student achievement requires the successful implementation of meaningful reform; the catalyst for that meaningful reform is the superintendent leader (Fullan, 2002). Quality leadership is of critical importance. Despite the search for the charismatic school leader by many boards of education, quality leadership is practice-based, not personality-based. Effective leadership is founded in a skill set that can be defined and improved upon in a systematic way (Reeves, 2006).

Effective school leaders are generally distinguished by three qualities: (a) the ability to make improving student academic achievement the school organization’s primary focus (Leithwood, 1995; Reeves, 2006), (b) the ability to initiate and sustain meaningful reform (Fullan, 2002, 2003, 2004; Waters & Marzano, 2006), and (c) the ability to build and distribute leadership capacity (Fullan, 2002, 2003, 2004; Hargreaves & Fink, 2004; Reeves, 2006).

Waters’ and Marzano’s (2006) study of effective superintendent practice has uncovered six specific leadership responsibilities that are positively correlated with improved student achievement. And while their meta-analysis has received well-deserved acclaim, their findings are more applicable to the leadership contexts faced by urban and
suburban school leaders. These same findings are not as easily applied to the leadership contexts faced by rural school leaders.

An analysis of the studies included in Water’s and Marzano’s meta-analysis provides an important insight: many of the studies used sampling methodologies that excluded rural districts from being part of their research samples. The implication is clear – many of the studies that served as the basis for Water’s and Marzano’s work do not reflect the realities and work contexts of rural schools.

Rural superintendents face leadership challenges that are contextually unique (Lamkin, 2006). These challenges are: (a) a rural community defined by poverty and economic decline (Peshkin, 1978; Seal & Harmon, 1995), (b) a rural school administrator overburdened with a wide range of responsibilities (Arnold, 2000, 2004; Arnold et al, 2005; Lamkin, 2006; Leithwood, 1995), (c) a rural school leader forced to serve a uniquely public role (Arnold, 2000, 2004; Arnold et. al., 2005; Lamkin, 2006), and (d) a rural culture steeped in tradition and deeply resistant to change (Peshkin, 1978; Seal & Harmon, 1995).

Although rural schools constitute a significant portion of public elementary and secondary education in the United States, little high-quality research has been conducted on rural education issues (Arnold, 2000, 2004; Arnold et al, 2005; DeYoung, 1987; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Khattri et al., 1997; Lamkin, 2006). In particular, there exists little insight into what constitutes effective leadership practice for rural school administrators (Arnold, 2000; Arnold et al., 2005).

Thus, it begs the question, how might Waters’ and Marzano’s correlates of effective superintendent leadership be successfully applied in a rural school setting? As
rural district leaders work with their school staffs, their boards of education (district trustees), and their communities to bring their districts into compliance with state and federal curriculum requirements and student performance expectations, how are Waters’ and Marzano’s correlates reflected in the district superintendent’s work? Understanding the nuances of leadership that responds to contemporary demands on public education at the district level in rural school districts could enrich or extend Waters’ and Marzano’s findings. Additionally, a contextual look at rural district leadership in a state characterized by small public education jurisdictions could present a meaningful profile of rural district leadership that could be useful to rural school district leaders across the country who are contemplating the ways and means of adaptive leadership.

While rural public schools do not serve the majority of U.S. school age children and their share of the total school population continues to decline, rural education will most likely continue well into this century in various forms. While performance demands for all schools have increased dramatically, many rural districts continue to function much as they did in the 1950s and 1960s. In this new context, rural district superintendents will have little choice but to serve as change agents and to seek new leadership practices that will lead to improved student academic performance. Clearly, local school district leadership will play a significant role in the evolution and adaptation of rural education in the 21st century.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine how Water’s and Marzano’s correlates of effective superintendent leadership practice have been applied by rural superintendents who have successfully improved student academic performance in their districts. More particularly, the goal of this study is to gain a better understanding of how these correlates might translate into effective leadership practice within a rural school context.

This study uses a qualitative research approach with a multiple case study design. According to Marshall and Rossman (2006), qualitative research is most appropriate when the aim is to better explore, better explain or better describe a phenomenon. In this study, the phenomenon studied was the leadership practices of rural school superintendents in Michigan who have led their districts to significant improvement in student academic achievement. Eight Michigan superintendents and their rural public school districts are the units of analysis for this study.

Definition of Terms

For the sake of this study it is important to operationally define several key terms. These key terms include: (a) correlates of effective superintendent leadership practice, (b) Michigan School Report Card, (c) economically-disadvantaged students, (d) effective superintendent, and (e) rural school district.
Water's and Marzano's study of effective superintendent leadership practice found six specific leadership responsibilities or correlates were statistically linked with having a positive impact on average student achievement. These six correlates of effective superintendent leadership practice are: (a) collaborative goal-setting that includes all the district's relevant stakeholders, (b) establishing non-negotiable goals for student achievement and classroom instruction, (c) aligning board support for the district's non-negotiable goals, (d) continuous monitoring of the district's progress in attaining its non-negotiable goals, (e) effectively utilizing resources to support the accomplishment of district goals and (f) superintendents providing defined autonomy to principals to lead their building's efforts to attain district goals within clearly defined operational boundaries.

The *Michigan School Report Card* (Michigan Department of Education [MDE], 2010) is the state school accreditation system that assigns letter grades to individual school buildings and districts based upon academic achievement. This accountability system is designed to assist the public by providing an easily recognizable method of gauging school performance. Each school building and district receives a letter grade that reflects both improvement on the state's standardized assessment test, the Michigan Educational Assessment Program, and overall student academic performance.

*Economically-disadvantaged students* are students who are eligible for free or reduced price school lunches based upon family income (MDE, 2010).

The term *effective superintendent* will be used to define a school leader that meets the following criteria: (a) has been superintendent at the same rural school district in Michigan for the previous five years, (b) the superintendent’s district features an
economically-disadvantaged student population of 40% or higher, (c) the district’s high school has achieved a letter grade of “A” on the Michigan School Report Card in at least one of the past two years, and (d) that Michigan School Report Card grade letter grade is higher than the grade received by that same high school for the 2004-05 academic year.

The lack of a consensus definition for the term *rural* has been a cause of consternation among academics and policymakers (Arnold, Biscoe, Farmer, Robertson & Shapley, 2007; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). Prior to 2006, the U.S. Census Bureau and National Center for Educational Statistics each used a different system to classify the rural status of school districts. The U.S. Census Bureau’s system, referred to as *core-based statistical areas* or CBSA, defined rural status in terms of a district’s proximity to a major metropolitan area (Arnold et al., 2007). The system used by NCES, *locale codes*, classified school systems based largely on population (Arnold et al.). The eight locale codes classifications ranged from the most populous *large city* (urban populations of 250,000 or more) to the least populous *rural* (unincorporated areas with populations of 2,500 or less).

In 2006, NCES worked with the Census Bureau to create a new locale classification system that relied less on population size and more on a district’s proximity to an urbanized area (NCES, 2010). This new urban-centric classification system has four major locale categories (city, suburban, town and rural). Additionally three subcategories (fringe, distant and remote) have been added to in order to provide a geographic continuum within each major category.

The Town/Remote sub-classification is defined as a small town that is located more than 35 miles from an urbanized area. According to NCES (2010), school districts
in the Town/Remote sub-classification have an economically-disadvantaged student population rate that is very similar to that of school districts in the Rural locale category. For the purposes of this study, a rural school district will be operationally-defined as any school district with a Rural/Fringe, Rural/Distant, Rural/Remote or Town/Remote locale classification.

Research Method

This research study uses a qualitative research approach. Patton (1990) described the contrast between the two main approaches to inquiry: (a) logical-positivism, which uses quantitative and experimental methods to test hypothetical-deductive generalizations, and (b) phenomenological inquiry, which uses qualitative and naturalistic approaches to inductively and holistically understand human experience in context-specific settings. For the qualitative researcher, the goal is to seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). This study of effective rural superintendents lends itself to the qualitative method precisely because gaining a better understanding of what constitutes effective leadership practice is by nature a subjective, value-laden pursuit.

Marshall and Rossman (2006) describe qualitative research as a broad approach to the study of a social phenomenon. They described the characteristics of qualitative research as: (a) taking place in the natural world, (b) using multiple methods that are interactive and humanistic, (c) focusing on context, (d) being emergent rather than tightly prefigured, and (e) being fundamentally interpretive.

This study of effective rural superintendent leaders reflects many of these same characteristics. First, superintendent leadership takes place in the natural or real-world
and not in a scientific laboratory. Thus it would be appropriate to approach the study of district leadership within that same natural setting. Second, a qualitative approach is justified because of this study’s unique, contextual focus on rural districts and rural district leaders. The study of superintendent leadership practices within certain Michigan rural school districts where student academic achievement has improved over the past five years provides a unique contextual focus. And third, this study is emergent and interpretive because it will be based upon the leadership experiences of rural superintendents, and how those school leaders have interpreted or given meaning to those experiences.

According to Rudestam and Newton (2007), qualitative research methods are grounded in a constructivist theory of knowledge. In constructivist theory, knowledge or truth are formed as a result of individual perspective. As such, both constructivist theory and qualitative research place great store in the centrality of lived experiences (Rudestam & Newton). When combined with a phenomenological lens for viewing lived experience, the focus can be placed on those experiences that create individual understanding and meaning of a given phenomenon (Rudestam & Newton). This study’s intent is to gain special insight through first-person accounts of the ways in which individuals experience superintendent leadership in K-12 school districts where student achievement is on the rise. In this fashion, this study views the question of effective leadership practice through the experiences of both district leaders and the people who observe their work. By studying the phenomenon of rural superintendents who lead districts through a process of raising student achievement and asking them to share their leadership experiences, a case
study approach with a phenomenological lens best uncovers useful, pragmatic insights into the practices of these successful leaders.

Case Study Approach

This study uses a multiple case study design. Patton (1990) wrote that the art of evaluation includes creating a research design that is appropriate for a specific situation and decision-making context. The qualitative researcher chooses from among five primary design approaches (Creswell, 2003). For researchers intent on studying individuals, narrative or phenomenological designs are used. For those researchers interested in examining the culture-sharing behavior of individuals or groups, ethnographic design is used. And for researchers who wish to explore processes, activities or events, case study or grounded theory approaches are used.

Case study design is most applicable when the researcher needs to understand some specific people, particular problem or unique situation by studying a few examples of the phenomenon in great depth (Patton, 1990). Case study design is appropriate for this study given its focus: examining the leadership behaviors and practices (particular problem) of Michigan public school superintendents (specific people) who have led their rural school districts to improved levels of academic achievement (unique situation). Since this study seeks to understand the work of district leaders through their own experience and the experience of those who observe their work, this case study is best conducted through a phenomenological frame (Rudestam & Newton, 2007).

Stake (2003) draws a distinction between three types of case studies. An intrinsic case study is undertaken because of its unique interest to the researcher and not for its potential to illuminate a particular problem. An instrumental case study is examined
because a particular case holds the potential for contributing, beyond the details of the case itself, to a greater understanding of some broad issue or problem. Finally, a **collective or multiple case study** is a study that is extended to several cases that share some common characteristics.

The logic that underlies the use of multiple case studies is much the same as that of multiple case experiments. With both, the goal is replication (Yin, 1994). In multiple case study design, each case is carefully selected so that it either: (a) predicts or contributes similar results, referred to as **literal replication**, or (b) produces contrasting results but for predictable reasons, called **theoretical replication**. Because the evidence collected is more compelling and substantive, multiple case studies are often regarded as being more robust when compared with single case study design (Yin). For this reason, a multiple case study design was selected for this study.

Yin describes case study design as being preferable when how or why questions are being posed, and the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context. According to Yin, case study research design has five essential components: (a) the study’s questions, (b) its propositions, (c) its unit or units of analysis, (d) the logic linking the data to the propositions, and (e) the criteria for interpreting the findings.

This multiple case study has four research questions. First, how does an effective rural superintendent go about making the task of improving student academic achievement the primary focus of the district’s collective efforts? Second, how does an effective rural superintendent go about building and distributing leadership capacity in a manner that supports the district’s collective efforts to improve student achievement? Third, how does an effective rural superintendent go about articulating and allocating
defined autonomy in a manner that supports the district’s collective effort to improve student achievement? And fourth, how does an effective rural superintendent go about aligning resources in a manner that supports the district’s collective effort to improve student achievement?

This study’s basic propositions are: (a) the superintendent leader is the catalyst that drives meaningful academic reform, (b) the implementation of academic reform is the key to improved student achievement, and (c) superintendents in rural school districts face challenges in their attempts at implementing meaningful academic reform that are contextually unique.

Stake (2003) describes a case study as being a bounded system, requiring the researcher to clearly delineate elements that exist either inside or outside the study’s scope. The process of bounding the research study requires the researcher to define the study’s unit of analysis. For this study, the units of analysis are eight rural Michigan superintendents whose districts have shown significant academic improvement. More particularly, in terms of time and space, the units of analysis for this study are the eight selected superintendent leaders and their school districts during the five-year period from 2004-05 to 2008-09.

In terms of linking the data to the study’s propositions, the academic improvement displayed by these eight rural Michigan school districts, when compared with other rural Michigan school districts, is significant and exceptional. In this researcher’s estimation, it is logical to assert that the leadership practices of these rural superintendents had contributed in some degree to their district’s academic success. This
study’s intent is to collect data on those specific leadership practices that were utilized by these superintendents and helped contribute to their district’s academic success.

Finally, as to the criteria for interpreting this study’s findings, Water’s and Marzano’s six correlates of effective leadership practice provide the conceptual framework for this study.

Selection of Participants

According to Stake (2003), the most unique aspect of case study research lies in the selection of the particular cases to be studied. Because the goal is to select those cases that provide the best opportunity to learn, qualitative researchers often use purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2007). With purposeful sampling, the researcher purposefully selects those individuals and sites for study that hold the greatest potential for providing a better understanding of a study’s research problem and central phenomenon.

In qualitative studies, criterion-based sampling is used and designed to ensure all the study’s selected participants have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Criterion sampling works well when all the study’s subjects have experienced the central phenomenon and can potentially contribute to the study in a meaningful way.

For this study, the following criterion-based methodology was used. The subject sample pool consisted of all 678 public school districts in the state of Michigan (MDE, 2010). The first sampling criterion narrowed the sample to include only rural districts in the state of Michigan. According to the Michigan Education Performance Report (2010), and based upon this study’s operational definition of a rural school district, this lowered the subject sample pool to 304 districts.
The second criterion called for further narrowing the sample to include only those rural school districts that: (a) had an economically-disadvantaged student population of 40% or higher, and (b) had successfully met the U.S. Department of Education’s Adequately Yearly Progress performance requirements for the 2008-09 academic school year (MDE, 2010). This 40% figure reflects the national average among rural school districts in the United States (NCES, 2010). This criterion was included in order to ensure a sample district’s student population reflected a typical or representative rural demographic profile. This criterion narrowed the sample pool to 85 rural school districts.

The third criterion further filtered the sample pool to include only those rural districts whose high schools received a letter grade of A on the Michigan School Report card in either the 2007-08 or 2008-09 academic years (MDE, 2010). This third criterion narrowed the sample pool to 16 rural school districts.

The fourth criterion called for identifying those rural districts whose high schools received a letter grade of B or lower on the Michigan School Report card for the 2004-05 academic year. This criterion was added in order to identify districts where academic performance had improved, based upon the high school’s Michigan School Report card scores, over a five-year time period. This fourth criterion narrowed the sampling pool to 12 rural school districts.

The fifth and final criterion called for identifying those superintendent leaders who: (a) had been hired by their districts in or before 2005, and b) had maintained their employment with that same district over the next five years. This longevity-based criterion was added to mitigate the effect a previous superintendent’s reforms might have had on the district’s academic performance. Based upon telephone conversations with
each of the 12 sample districts, this final criterion narrowed the research sample to eight superintendents.

According to Stake (2003), the criteria for case selection should lean toward those cases that seem to offer the best opportunity to learn. Based upon this study’s rigid selection methodology, this criterion-based sample represents just 2% of all rural superintendents in the state of Michigan. It is this researcher’s belief that this merit-based methodology has identified a select group of superintendent leaders whose leadership practices are worthy of additional study.

Data Collection

The case study approach to qualitative analysis is a specific way of collecting, organizing and analyzing data (Patton, 1990). The data for qualitative analysis typically comes from fieldwork. This involves the researcher talking to people about their experiences and perceptions. The findings, understandings and insights that emerge are the fruit of qualitative fieldwork.

In case study design, data collection involves four primary sources of evidence: (a) documentation, such as memoranda, minutes, agendas and proposals, (b) archival records, (c) interviews and (d) direct observations (Yin, 1994). The primary responsibilities of the case study researcher during the data collection phase involve gathering multiple sources of evidence (called triangulation), creating a case study data base and maintaining a chain of evidence in order to increase reliability.

Standardized, open-ended interviews were the primary source of data collection for this research study. Interviews were conducted on each of the eight rural Michigan school sites with each superintendent. Additionally, interviews were conducted with at
least one principal, teacher and board trustee from each school district. In all interviews, the emphasis was to solicit rich descriptions of the superintendent’s work through the descriptions of participants’ experiences and observations. Each interview was approximately 60 minutes in length, audio-taped and transcribed for analytical purposes. Additionally, each participant was provided with interview questions in advance, in order to allow for depth and reflection of responses. A transcript of each interview was provided to each participant for verification purposes and to provide an opportunity to correct any errors.

In order to enhance the reliability and integrity of case study research, the researcher adopts a case study protocol to guide the investigation. This protocol includes: (a) field visit procedures, (b) procedures for selecting the individuals to be interviewed, (c) interview questions and format, (d) data recording, (e) data analysis, and (f) the production of the case study report (Yin, 1994). Generally, the researcher will write a case record that indicates all of the major information that will be used in the final case analysis and case study. According to Patton (1990) the goal of the case record is to take the reader into the case situation, in this instance the working lives of each of the eight superintendent subjects.

Ethical Considerations

This study was compliant with all HSIRB guidelines put forth by Western Michigan University (WMU). Several steps were undertaken to assure the privacy and confidentiality of each study participant. A protocol of informed consent was followed in order to see that each participant’s privacy is protected. This included gaining permission from HSIRB prior to beginning the data collection process. Additionally, study
participants were extended a formal, written invitation to participate in the study. This invitation included a brief description of the study, its goals, data collection, analysis and storage methods to be used in the study. Prior to interview, each participant signed a voluntary consent form signifying their desire to participate in the study. Each participant was provided with the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants will be provided information regarding the process of data collection, security and storage. Interview recordings and transcripts were secured by the researcher under lock and key and later transferred to Western Michigan University upon the study’s completion. These materials will be stored by WMU for a three-year period, and will be made available for review with the university’s authorization.

**Data Verification and Analysis**

The direct involvement of the researcher in data collection and analysis is a key challenge of qualitative research (Creswell, 2003). As the primary source for data collection, the case study researcher is concerned about the clarity of their own communications during the data collection process. In order to reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation, researchers use a process that records multiple perceptions in order to verify an interpretation of an observation. This process, called triangulation, serves to clarify the meaning of the data collected for the researcher by identifying different ways the phenomenon is being seen (Creswell, 2003; Stake, 2003; Yin, 1994). In that regard, this study collected data through multiple sources (superintendent, building principal, teacher, board trustee) and multiple data types (interview, observation and written communication) instead of relying strictly on interviews with the eight superintendent subjects.
Yin (1994) describes two general strategies for analyzing case studies: (a) relying on theoretical propositions, or (b) developing a case description. Among academics the theoretical propositions approach is preferred because of its ability to link the research data and apply it to previously established theory. Although leaning more heavily towards the theoretical propositions approach, this study will employ both strategies. Water’s and Marzano’s six correlates of effective superintendent practice provided the theoretical framework through which the study’s data will be analyzed.

The case descriptions focused on the study’s units of analysis: the seven superintendent subjects and their school districts. Each case description contained the following information: (a) a brief biographical description of each superintendent, (b) a brief economic, demographic and geographic description of the local community, (c) a brief characterization of the relationship between the school and community as perceived by the superintendent, (d) a brief description as to the general quality of the superintendent’s tenure as perceived by the superintendent, and (e) a brief description regarding the district’s key challenges and future prospects.

Data analysis in qualitative research follows a familiar pattern. Data is collected, analyzed, coded and sorted into themes. These themes are then presented in table or figure form and published for discussion (Creswell, 2007). Creswell describes a four-step data analysis process: (a) category aggregation, with the researcher coding data into broad categories, (b) pattern-making, with the researcher looking for similarities and differences among cases and categories, (c) naturalistic generalizations, where the researcher develops explanations about what is to be learned from the cases and categories, and (d) case description, a detailed view of the aspects of each case.
For this study, participant interviews served as the primary source of data. Each participant interview was transcribed and analyzed for citations related to specific leadership practices. Each specific citation was highlighted and coded by district and participant source for reference purposes. Additionally, for data verification and authentication purposes, each leadership practice must be cited by at least two interview participants in order to be recognized for this study. Data analysis focused on examining thematic similarities and differences in leadership practice among the study’s eight superintendent subjects.

Order of Analysis

In a multiple case study, a typical analytical approach is to first provide a detailed description of each case, called a within-case analysis, to be followed by a thematic analysis across the cases, called a cross-case analysis (Creswell, 2007). With this format the case descriptions, sometimes referred to as narratives and the thematic or cross-case analysis are presented as separate chapters in the study (Yin, 1994). Presenting the case descriptions first allows the reader to gain an appreciation for the smaller, contextual differences among the study’s subjects. These seemingly small contextual differences that emerge through the case descriptions often portend cross-case linkages that later prove to be of great significance in terms of the study’s larger, thematic findings (Yin). For this study, that thematic focus is on identifying those superintendent practices and habits that have helped a select group of rural school leaders improve student academic performance in their districts.

This study featured two separate analytical sections. The first analytical section is comprised of case descriptions of each of the study subjects. The second section contains
the theoretical propositions or cross-case analysis. This second analytical section examines the study’s findings through the analytical framework provided by Water’s and Marzano’s six correlates of effective superintendent practice.

Limitations

As Marshall and Rossman (2006) observed, all proposed research projects have limitations; none is perfectly designed. Delimitations are limitations deliberately imposed upon the study by the researcher. For this study, these delimitations include: (a) restricting the study to rural districts in Michigan, (b) applying a minimum requirement for each district’s economically-disadvantaged student population, (c) requiring superintendents to be employed for five years with the same district, and (d) using the Michigan School Report card scores of the district’s high school as a surrogate for the overall academic performance of each district. A change in any one of these sampling criterions would work to alter the study’s selected subjects, its data and, ultimately its findings.

Limitations are potential weaknesses or problems with the study as identified by the researcher (Creswell, 2007). This study has a number of such weaknesses. First, student demographic patterns tend to vary greatly among communities and school districts. Differences in student demography and socioeconomic status may contribute to differences in academic performance. Second, unlike the direct influence of the classroom teacher, superintendent leadership has an indirect or tangential affect on student academic performance. In districts where student academic performance has improved, it is a difficult to gauge where effective instruction’s influence ends and effective leadership’s influence begins. Moreover, it is difficult to make direct links
between effective classroom practices and effective leadership practices. Finally, geography may also play a role in this study. Each of the eight subject districts are situated on or near the coastal edges of Michigan’s Upper and Lower Peninsulas. This “coastal effect” represents an anomaly, an unintended pattern produced by the study’s sample selection methodology. These localities may represent uniquely attractive communities because of their close proximately to one of Michigan’s Great Lakes. As a result, these communities may possess quality-of-life attributes that make them highly desirable places to live. This coastal effect may have some influence in terms of attracting higher-quality superintendents or higher-performing students to these rural Michigan communities.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this study is to examine how Water’s and Marzano’s correlates of effective superintendent leadership practice have been applied by rural superintendents who have successfully improved student academic performance in their districts. A qualitative approach was used because of its orientation towards seeking answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). This study lends itself to the qualitative method because gaining a better understanding of what constitutes effective leadership practice is by nature a subjective, value-laden pursuit. Case study research designs are appropriate when the researcher needs to understand some specific people or unique situation by studying a few examples of the phenomenon in great depth (Patton, 1990).

In this study, a multiple case study design was used in order to understand how the leadership practices of eight rural Michigan superintendents have helped lead their
districts to improved student academic performance. Purposeful sampling has been used to identify those rural districts where student academic performance has improved over a five-year period. A rigid, merit-based selection methodology has yielded eight rural superintendents and districts that will be the focus of this study. This study’s subject sample represents just 2% of all rural superintendents in the state of Michigan. Additionally, this researcher has made note of the study’s potential limitations, as well as acknowledging and responding to ethical considerations in the sample selection, data collection and data analysis process.
CHAPTER IV

CASE DESCRIPTIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine how Waters’ and Marzano’s (2006) correlates of effective superintendent leadership practice have been applied by rural superintendents who have successfully improved student academic performance in their districts. More particularly, the goal of this study is to gain a better understanding of how these correlates might translate into effective leadership practice within a rural school context.

According to Patton (1990), the first task in qualitative research analysis is description. An effective qualitative research study requires the presentation of solid descriptive data. Solid descriptive data allows the researcher to provide the reader with a thorough understanding of the meaning of the experience under study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). In this study, that experience involves the processes and methods used by effective rural superintendents who have successfully pursued academic reform in their districts.

A typical analytical approach in a multiple case study is to provide a detailed description of each case, a within-case analysis, followed by a thematic analysis across the cases, or cross-case analysis (Creswell, 2007). A within-case analysis is also commonly referred to as a case description. Additionally, a cross-case analysis is often referred to as the theoretical propositions approach to data analysis (Yin, 1994). With the
In a multiple case study format, the case descriptions typically precede the cross-case analysis and each are presented in separate sections (Yin, 1994). Presenting the case descriptions first allows the reader to gain an appreciation for the smaller, contextual differences among the study’s subjects. In qualitative studies, thick description leads to thick interpretation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Often the small, contextual differences that appear in the case descriptions foreshadow more significant, thematic findings that later emerge in the study’s cross-case analysis (Yin, 1994).

In this study, Chapter Four will feature the case descriptions of each superintendent subject and district; Chapter Five will provide the cross-case analysis based upon the theoretical propositions contained in Water’s and Marzano’s superintendent leadership framework.

Subject Participation

Each of the eight superintendent subjects were contacted by the researcher and extended a formal invitation to participate in the study. Seven agreed to participate and their formal, written consent was secured. One superintendent subject declined the invitation to participate. He cited his status as a half-time superintendent over the previous three years as the reason for his decision. He further stated that the district’s high school principal was the individual who should be credited with the district’s
academic success and that his responsibilities as superintendent were strictly limited to financial matters.

Case Descriptions

According to Patton (1990), it is appropriate to begin with individual case studies where variations in the individuals being studied are the primary focus of the research. This strategy requires writing a case description for each unit of study before doing a cross-case analysis. In this study, the case descriptions will focus on the study’s units of analysis: the seven superintendent subjects and their school districts.

Each case description will contain the following information: (a) a brief biographical description of each superintendent, (b) a brief economic, demographic and geographic description of the local community, (c) a brief characterization of the relationship between the school and community as perceived by the superintendent, (d) a brief description and assessment as to the overall success of their tenure, and (e) a brief description regarding the district’s key challenges and future prospects.

Pseudonyms have been assigned to subjects and school districts in order to assure the privacy of each superintendent participating in the study. Fictitious names have also been assigned to various regional lakes, landmarks and towns referenced in the study. Each school district will be represented by the name of one of the Mercury Seven astronauts (Carpenter, Cooper, Glenn, Grissom, Schirra, Shepard and Slayton). Each superintendent subject will be named for one of the actors in the 1960s film The Magnificent Seven (Charles Bronson, Yul Brynner, James Coburn, Brad Dexter, Steve McQueen, Robert Vaughn and Eli Wallach).
The selection of the film *The Magnificent Seven* is not without irony. The movie is a western remake of Akira Kurosawa’s 1954 film *Seven Samurai*. The movie tells the story of seven professional gunfighters who are hired to protect a Mexican farm village from a group of bandits who annually plunder the village of its winter stores. At first the band of hired guns are amused by the peasant farmers and their uncomplicated ways. But in time, the gunmen grow to admire and respect the peasants and the virtues that frame their lives: integrity, hard work, love of family and commitment to protecting their cultural existence.

The parallels between the hired guns depicted in the film and the work lives of many rural school administrators are not subtle. For many educators, the position of rural superintendent is typically viewed as a stepping stone in a career path that eventually leads to a bigger paycheck in a larger and more glamorous setting. But for some educators like the superintendent subjects in this study, who do not aspire to bigger paychecks or more glamorous surroundings, the work is the thing. For these educators, the challenge and opportunity to perform meaningful work on behalf of rural children stands as its own unique reward.

Case One: Superintendent Charles Bronson, Cooper Beach, Michigan

Not often do you see cows pasturing in full view of Lake Huron (the town’s welcome sign reads: “Home of the World’s Largest Man-Made Harbor”) but then again Cooper Beach is not a typical rural community. It is a hybrid, equal parts farm, resort and port community. Cooper Beach (population 1,837 according to the U.S. Census Bureau) sits on the western shore of Lake Huron in an area referred to by natives as the *Thumb*, the northeastern region of Michigan’s Lower Peninsula. Large murals painted on the
sides of the Cooper Beach Community Theater, built in 1926, describe in pictorial form much of the area's history and many of its more prominent citizens. One such citizen Dr. Pierre O. Wagener, a graduate of the University of Bonne, France who lived in the area from 1851 to 1921, is described in this way: "For forty years no night was too dark, no road to rough, no blizzard to severe and no person to poor but Dr. Wagoner would call his horse and buggy to attend the sick and the dying."

The first white settlers came to Cooper Beach like many areas throughout Michigan in the 1800s to log the area's forests. According to another Community Theater mural, Jeremiah Ludington Jr. was born to Maria Trescott Ludington in 1829, making him the first white child born in the area. Ludington would later grow up to become the area's largest and most successful lumberman. But the Great Fire of 1881, which the Theater characterized as "the worst tragedy in the history of the thumb," ended the lumbering era with devastating swiftness. The fire engulfed the entire region and its toll was indeed tragic: 1,520 homes destroyed, 3,230 families burned out and 14,000 people forced to seek relief at the Cooper Beach Relief Center. Natural disaster would soon spur economic opportunity; the Great Fire's effect was to clear the region of all of its timber, leaving behind thousands of acres of rich and fertile land suitable for farming. Agriculture quickly became and still remains the region's dominant industry.

Cooper Beach is not an affluent community. The last U.S. census lists the average per capita income at $14,917, fully one-third less than Michigan's statewide average. Of the district's 630 students, 47% qualify for free or reduced hot lunch. Free or reduced hot lunch is the guideline used by the U.S. Department of Education to define and measure the number of public school children who live in poverty (USDA, 2004). The community
seems to have weathered Michigan’s economic downturn well; there are few “For Sale”
signs in the village and the downtown business district has few vacant storefronts.

Superintendent Charles Bronson has been a larger than life presence, literally as
well as figuratively, in his thirteen years as superintendent of Cooper Beach Schools. His
background (undergraduate and graduate degrees from Central Michigan University) and
career path (special education teacher, principal, and superintendent) would seem to cast
him as a traditional administrator. But based upon the observations and interviews of this
researcher, he is very much nontraditional in both approach and practice.

On the day of this researcher’s site visit Superintendent Bronson is sitting on a
bench and holding court in the main hallway of the high school. The previous year the
district merged the positions of superintendent and high school principal and Bronson
currently serves both roles. On this day students are signing up for classes for the
following fall and, as the superintendent explains: “It is much easier to collar kids as they
pass in the hallway.” So for this week his desk is a table in the main hallway and a variety
of teachers, students and support staff stop by to speak with him in order to conduct the
school’s business. Later that evening, the Cooper Beach Board of Education will hold its
bi-monthly meeting and, per board custom, Superintendent Bronson will ask everyone in
attendance to bow their heads. He then begins the meeting, just as he does every board
meeting, with the traditional opening prayer.

When asked to describe the school and community, Bronson related that the
school district covers roughly 120 square miles and consists primarily of resort
businesses and large farm operations. He also shared that the community has two K-8
parochial schools, one Catholic and one Lutheran, which feed students to the high school
which he described as "a melting pot." He expressed some frustration with the fact that
the parochial schools still enjoyed reputations in the community as being the preferred
schools of choice – despite the fact that the public school's test scores had far outpaced
both parochial schools' scores in recent years.

When asked to characterize the relationship between the school and the
community, Bronson insisted:

The community as a whole has been very supportive regarding our efforts to build
new facilities and to raise student achievement. But there does exist a certain
amount of jealousy between the private and public schools. The public school is
still considered the step-sister or step-brother. Unfortunately, their popularity is
totally based on perception and not on achievement. We have had pretty solid
support even though we have undertaken massive and radical change over the past
twelve years, some of which certain egos and special interests agendas have found
tough to swallow.

When asked to evaluate his effectiveness during his term, Bronson said: “A
veteran superintendent once told me it takes five years to learn how to be a
superintendent and I found that to be true. When you make a lot of changes they are not
always well received.” When asked to describe his relationship with his board he
commented:

When I first got here the board and I did not have the same focus. My focus was
simple: Achievement for all. That led to some interesting discussions about how
the district was doing business, a lot of it in subcommittees and behind closed
doors. So we changed to a committee of the whole approach, which was a
difficult transition, but that has had a huge, tremendous impact on our whole organization.

When asked to describe the district’s future challenges and prospects, Bronson’s mood and tone noticeably darkened. He listed financial and enrollment stability as being the two greatest challenges facing his and other small rural districts in Michigan. According to Bronson, the district’s enrollment has declined by one-third during his tenure as superintendent. He predicted:

Because of the decline in state funding and increases in health costs, retirements costs and state mandates districts, our size will eventually become isolated and extinct; you can survive but if your focus is on student achievement you are not going to thrive. Where is the extra money going to come from to support tutorials and for the kids to get extra help?

Case Two: Superintendent Yul Brynner, Carpenter, Michigan

An attack helicopter and two tanks, one large and one small, fortify the neatly manicured grounds of VFW Post 4054. Post 4054 is obviously more than just a large brick building to the people of Carpenter, Michigan (population 1,162). The building, with its freshly sealed parking lot and meticulous landscaping, stands in stark contrast to the deferred maintenance exhibited by many of the older homes and singlewide trailers that make up the majority of the residences in the village. The community’s sense of patriotism and respect for the military is obvious; the researcher passed three “Home of a Soldier” signs in the front lawns of houses as he drove through town and made his way to the school grounds.
An active railroad line runs through the center of this small farm town located thirty minutes southeast of Kalamazoo. The railroad bisects the town but does not act as a dividing line; there is no discernible right side or wrong side of town where residents might typically aspire to live. The houses in the village are similar in age and condition. There are no fast food chains in town and the three-block downtown area consists mostly of closed businesses and vacant commercial buildings.

This is a farming community. The village is surrounded on all four sides by expansive cornfields equipped with huge irrigation systems. These irrigation systems spray great arcs of water to such an extent that the average lawn sprinkler would be embarrassed by the comparison. Most of the adults who live in Carpenter either work in agriculture or make the thirty-minute drive to Kalamazoo to work for one of the large pharmaceutical or manufacturing companies.

According to Wikipedia, John Bair is credited with being the first settler in the area in 1832. By 1836 ten other families had joined Bair and together they created a settlement. Originally the settlers wanted to name the area Cambria, but that name had already been adopted by another township. Judge Littlejohn of Allegan suggested naming the area after the Roman Emperor Flavius Carpenter. And so in 1843 they did. In 1870 the Peninsular Railroad arrived bringing people and spurring much commercial growth. New businesses included two harness shops, two stave factories, two millinery stores, two hotels and a newspaper. With the exception of the newspaper, today a rare and precious commodity in a small rural community, all of the businesses are gone. The citizens who remain in Carpenter are mostly white (97%) and mostly poor (per capita income of $16,296 per the U.S. Census Bureau, some 27% below the statewide average).
In the conference room at Carpenter Community Schools the sign reads: “We don’t care how they do it in New York City.” If you can understand and appreciate the tenor of that poster, then you can begin to gain a sense of why Yul Brynner’s presence as superintendent of Carpenter Community Schools is unique and compelling. Prior to his employment with Carpenter, Brynner graduated from college with a business degree and worked as a technology business analyst and consultant in the pharmaceutical and software industries. When asked to describe his career path he explained:

I came here as a part-time business manager and was hired to be trained and then take over when the full-time business manager retired. My interview was the first time I had ever been in front of a board of education. I am a person of color in an area where there are not many persons of color. The board was made up mostly of farmers. I grew up on a farm in this area so I could relate to the farming community - but I was still floored when the superintendent called and they agreed to hire me.

That is a pretty good story, but as Superintendent Brynner relates it, it gets even better:

But then it gets more interesting. First, the superintendent who hired me retires and a new superintendent replaces him. Then, the business manager retires and at the end of September I am made full-time business manager. In November, the board fired the new superintendent. Then, I was asked by the board to hold down the business end of the school while they started their search for a new one. So the board brought in a legal team to help them with the search and I started to work with them and the board and we started to develop a relationship. Then the
lawyers asked the board “How do you like the new guy?” The board answered: “We like him fine.” Then the lawyers asked “Can you trust him?” And the board replied “Yes we can.” So the lawyers asked “Why don’t you give him a shot?” And so they hired me.

So, in three short months part-time business manager Brynner became the full-time superintendent of Carpenter Community Schools, an African-American school leader in a community where 97% of the inhabitants are white. As Brynner related laughing: “When I went home and told my wife what had happened, she fell down laughing. She’s been a teacher for 22 years at another school district and she told me that I had no idea of what I was getting myself into.” Despite the vote of no confidence from his wife, Brynner has worked hard to settle into Carpenter, a community he described as close-knit and largely defines itself along religious lines. The community is poor. According to Brynner 57% of the district’s 951 students qualify for free or reduced hot lunch. He believes that number is low and actually under represents the level of poverty in the district. Brynner shared that many high school students refuse to sign up for free lunch in order to avoid the social stigma.

When asked to characterize the relationship between the school and community, Brynner insisted that the school has been a conduit to bring people from different religious denominations together. He insisted the relationship between the school and community is a good one now – the district recently passed a sinking fund millage. He said he has worked hard to be transparent and that his relationship with the community is still developing: “There is still some lack of trust in terms of how we spend money and I think mostly that stems from a lack of understanding.” When asked to evaluate the
success of his tenure, Brynner says: “I would give myself a ‘B’, but then again I am a hard grader.”

In terms of future challenges the district will face and its overall prospects, Brynner asserted: “I think our biggest challenge, like all schools in Michigan, is the financial threat. You have to be financially sound before you can be academically sound.” Additionally, Brynner talked about the importance of protecting what he calls “a winning attitude” for the students and community:

I am a sports guy from a sports background. When teams are winning the little things that are not going quite right do not seem to matter. But with losing teams those little things soon become issues – and pretty soon everybody has an issue. With our current financial situation we are taking things away – so I am working hard to protect that winning attitude.

Case Three: Superintendent James Coburn, Glenn Lake, Michigan

There are a few places on earth where you can still enjoy bacon and eggs, a cup of coffee and pick up a carton of night crawlers on your way out the door. Fortunately for northern Michigan fishermen, Hodge’s Lakeside Restaurant and Bait Shop located in the community of Glenn Lake (population 318) is one such place. The community literally takes its shape from Glenn Lake, a 2000-acre inland lake located in the northwest region of Michigan’s Lower Peninsula. The village is only three blocks wide but almost a mile long as it stretches along US-31, the highway that leads to the summer resort destinations of Traverse City and Mackinac Island.

Like many small, northern Michigan communities Glenn Lake’s economy is heavily dependent on tourism and the summer residents who own and rent cottages on
Glenn Lake. A "Welcome Fishermen" Budweiser banner is draped along the front of the Saddle Up convenience store and gas station. Inside mounted deer trophies, past winners of the store’s annual Big Buck contest, line the wall above the cash register keeping a vigilant gaze over the tourists as they struggle to decide which of the 50 varieties of locally-made beef jerky to purchase. There are no red lights, yellow lights or even a stop sign in Glenn Lake to slow down tourists as they pass through town on their way to other destinations. And while many cottages that rim Glenn Lake are spacious and modern, a high percentage are of the 1950s cabin-style variety. You get a sense that Glenn Lake is a place where black and white home movies of family camping trips have been filmed, filled with images of station wagons, picnic tables, camp fires and mosquito bites.

According to Wikipedia, the history of the area can be traced back to President Lincoln’s signing of the Homestead Act in 1862, which offered 160 acres of undeveloped federal land to anyone who filled out an application and applied. Almost immediately settlers began looking for prime farmland in the area between what is now Manistee and Traverse City. In 1864 Russell Smith and D.E. Sibley brought their families to settle among the white pines and hardwoods in the heavily forested region. The only passage at that time was a single walking trail. Sibley homesteaded the north side of the lake and Smith the south side, the area that is now Glenn Lake village. Smith then made a public offer of land to anyone who would build a sawmill. Brothers George and David Hopkins, brick manufacturers in Manistee, agreed. In 1873, the Hopkins purchased 88 acres from Smith. A sawmill was built along with the Glenn Lake Tram Railway, a rail system that transported cut lumber from Glenn Lake to Lake Michigan where the lumber could be transported by ship to Milwaukee and Chicago.
By 1902, all of the trees in the area had been cut. The Hopkins families then purchased hundreds of thousands of acres in Florida (near what is now Cape Canaveral) and moved their lumbering business there. And just that quickly, the lumbering era was over. Today the two largest employers in the area are the local casino and the public school system. Most of the area’s residents are white (93%) and impoverished (with an average per capita income of $15,170, some 32% below the Michigan average).

On the morning of our interview Superintendent James Coburn and his staff are huddled around the television set in his office watching Good Morning America. This is not a part of their daily routine; the senior class has taken their annual trip to New York City and the staff has been able to catch glimpses of their students and their handmade signs during the show’s street segments. Coburn is a dual superintendent, serving as the superintendent of both Glenn Lake Schools (385 students with 55% of students receiving free or reduced lunches) and Sturgeon North Schools (enrollment 700 with 75% of students receiving free or reduced lunches).

Because of this dual role, Superintendent Coburn is a busy man. He spends 40% of his time in Glenn Lake (Tuesdays and Fridays) and 60% of his time at Sturgeon North (Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays). Each district pays a pro rata share of his salary based on student enrollment. His secretary also travels with him each day and her salary too is split proportionately between the two districts.

When asked to describe his background Coburn confessed that, as a native and college graduate from Ohio, the smallest community he had ever lived in prior to Glenn Lake housed over 100,000 inhabitants. He related that when he and his best friend graduated from college there were no teaching jobs available in Ohio. Because they both
loved the water, the two friends decided to pursue teaching jobs in states with recreational lake areas. Coburn wanted to go to Florida and his friend to Michigan. They flipped a coin; Coburn lost. The two friends started making calls to districts up the west coast of Michigan and both were hired over the phone at Glenn Lake. Coburn stated that when the two friends arrived in the community the day before school was to start in the fall of 1969, they could not get over how small the school was. Coburn has remained with Glenn Lake ever since, working his way up the teaching ladder (5th grade, middle school math, high school math, principal and superintendent).

Coburn described how the dual superintendency came about:

Our district has always been very aggressive in terms of new things, like technology. Our superintendent retired and the superintendent from a neighboring district was a visionary and was offered an opportunity to be the first dual superintendent in Michigan. Our board just felt it would be better to bring in someone local rather than someone from the outside. There were some legal issues to work through at first, but both schools have been able to save a substantial amount of money. Now the dual superintendency is becoming a trend with a lot of small schools in Michigan. But we were the first.

Coburn described the community as rural and poor with a high percentage of single parent households. However he characterized the relationship between the community and the school as extremely supportive: “Academically we have always set a high bar. In terms of schools of choice, we have used that and are considered an attractive school.” When asked to gauge his own effectiveness as superintendent, Coburn demurred: “I don’t think you know your legacy until you have left, so that is a little hard
to tell while you are still working." He mentioned the district's math scores as an area targeted for improvement and cited his district's small size as being an advantage when curriculum changes need to be made. Recently, district staff had discovered that pre-Algebra had become a significant part of the math portion of the ACT exam. According to Coburn, the problem for their district was that students take their pre-Algebra classes in 7th grade. With the ACT exam taking place in 11th grade it was difficult for students to retain their pre-Algebra skills for that four-year period. As Coburn shared: "After we discovered that, we moved pre-Algebra to 9th grade. At a large school, a change like that would have taken three years – we did it in four months."

When asked to list the district's challenges and future prospects, Coburn frowned and answered quickly:

No question, budget, budget, budget. We will be open next year. Beyond that it is really year to year. We are fortunate we have a band teacher who has both a music degree and a math degree so we can hang on to our band program. You have to be very careful in your hiring. We try to hire people who can teach more than one subject.

Case Four: Superintendent Brad Dexter, Grissom, Michigan

As you drive on Highway 41, past the small cabins and cottages scattered on the south shore of Chippewa Lake and enter the village of Grissom (population 1,822) you will encounter a sign that reads: "Turn right one block to the Greenlight Bar and Grill." This is an inside joke, a source of amusement for local residents who identify themselves as much with their region, Michigan's Upper Peninsula, as they do their local community. They refer to themselves as UPers (U.P. being an acronym for Upper
Peninsula) or Yoopers (as it is pronounced phonetically) and it is every bit as much an outlook, an attitude, a way of life as it is a geographic land mass. The joke in Grissom is this: there is no green light in town, only a flashing yellow.

As a region, Michigan's Upper Peninsula exudes the best kind of parochialism. Representing over one-third of Michigan's total land mass but housing only 3% of its population, the Upper Peninsula is a region of small, isolated communities connected by two-lane highways and a love of family, ethnic heritage and the challenge of enduring brutally long winters. It is the kind of place where, as one interview subject described it “you come home at the end of the day and your driveway’s plowed and you don’t know who did it.” Another subject described the Upper Peninsula winters in this way: “We’re no different than you guys downstate. We get up at 5:30 A.M., shovel our driveways, go to work, come home, shovel our driveways, eat dinner and go to bed.”

One of the distinguishing characteristics of the people in the Land of Secret Snowplowers is their deep and abiding affection for their local public school. As one subject put it, recalling a particularly difficult financial decision he was forced to make: “I had to take a hard line in order to make those cuts and save the school; without this school this community would cease to exist.”

The day of our interview is a bittersweet one for Superintendent Brad Dexter at Grissom Township Schools. It is graduation day and that evening he will be handing out diplomas to Grissom’s graduating seniors for the last time. He is “retiring” at the age of 48 so the Grissom board can promote the current high school principal to serve a joint role next year as both superintendent and building principal. After reading between the lines and wading through the various explanations that include retirement (Dexter is still
actively seeking a position with another district), school finance (moving from two
administrators to one administrator) or board pressure ("Brad has handled this thing
really well" is how one board member characterized it) it becomes clear that the involved
parties have opted to put their best spin on the matter and to move forward.

Superintendent Dexter acquired his undergraduate degree from Central Michigan
University, his masters from North Michigan University, his specialist degree from
Central and is currently working to complete his PhD from Western Michigan University.
Dexter's background includes teaching stints at Shepard Bay (ten years) and
principalships in Gaylord (two years) and Ann Arbor (five years). He became
superintendent in Menominee, Wisconsin before taking the job at Grissom in order to be
closer to his wife's family. Dexter described Grissom as a "mixed community"
containing both highly affluent people and very poor people: "We have CEO's,
university professors as well as loggers, farmers and unemployed people – it is a total
melting pot."

According to Dexter, the school district has 266 enrolled students with 54%
qualifying for free and reduced hot lunch. The township school encompasses 36 square
miles which he commented is very small by Upper Peninsula standards. He characterized
the relationship between the school and community as "supportive and extremely
connected." In 1992, the community passed a millage to build a new school and the old
school is now used as a community center. He credited the district's Service Learning
requirement for graduating seniors as keeping the school and community "unbelievably
connected".
When asked to characterize the effectiveness of his tenure Dexter handled the question deftly in light of his present circumstance:

I have become more effective as I have gone along. It is really easy to come into a small district thinking “I know everything”; it becomes humbling very quickly. I have learned a ton about shared leadership. When the pupil is ready, the teacher will appear.

Regarding Grissom’s future challenges and prospects Dexter’s response was notably upbeat:

The district’s prospects are great. We have gone from a district that was hemorrhaging money to the tune of $400,000 per year to a balanced budget. We were overstaffed before, but now our future prospects are very bright. Despite all the chaos going on in the educational community our enrollment has stabilized and we are in good shape. We will actually run a budget surplus next year which is something that we have not been able to say for ten years.

Case Five: Superintendent Steve McQueen, Schirra, Michigan

As you drive through the red brick streets of downtown Schirra (population 879) you get a feeling that you are on top of the world because, from a visual sense, the horizon appears to fall off in every direction. Of course, you are not on top of the world but you are on top of Michigan, in the Keweenaw Peninsula which juts straight north into Lake Superior. Remove the parking meters from in front of the century-old, red brick buildings and you are transported back in time to the 1920s. There is a nostalgic feel to downtown Schirra that is undeniable. On a bright June morning, the researcher watches
as the owner of the hardware store opens her business for the day, first unlocking her
door and then lowering her shop’s awning with a hand crank.

The town is red brick. The buildings are red brick, the downtown streets are red
brick and the huge, magnificent churches are red brick. Schirra is located in Copper
County Michigan and the building materials take their color from the rich copper deposits
found in the native soil. The history of Copper County is described in this way by a
Michigan Historical marker located at a Highway 26 rest area just south of Schirra:

Long before Columbus reached America, Indians extracted native copper in the
Lake Superior region and worked it into articles which were used by tribes
throughout the continent. French explorers learned of the vast copper deposits but
were not able to mine the mineral. In 1841 Douglas Houghton’s survey of copper
resources was printed. Prospectors by the hundreds soon flocked here. Boom
towns sprang up. Soon miners were tapping the rich deposits all along the
Keweenaw Peninsula’s backbone. Until 1887 this was the country’s leading
center of copper production.

But 1887 was a long time ago. All but one of the copper mines in the area have
long since closed, yet the small towns and descendents of Finnish immigrants still
remain. Today, reminders of the region’s mining history are everywhere. The Keweenaw
National Historical Park was established by federal law in 1992, making downtown
Schirra and large portions of the Keweenaw Peninsula a national park. St. Anne’s church
built in 1900 was donated by the Catholic church and is now the Keweenaw Heritage
Center.
Even Schirra’s red brick school buildings are reminders of the mining era. The school sits on Red Jacket Road, a reference to how the copper dust would color each miner’s jacket as they came home at the end of their work shifts. Huge mining sheds sit next to student classrooms on the school grounds, a symbol of how the community, the mining companies and the schools were intertwined. Later, this researcher would discover just how closely connected the mining company was to the school: the Schirra Mining Company actually built the school buildings and owned the school property. Ownership of the property was not transferred to the school district until 1997.

Any visitor who enters the recently remodeled entrance foyer of the high school is immediately struck by two things. First, a large black and white photograph of a helmetless, old-fashioned football player hangs in the entrance. The caption under the photo reads simply: “George Gipp.” And yes, it is that George Gipp. The George Gipp who played football at the University of Notre Dame. The George Gipp who became Notre Dame’s first All-American football player in 1920. The George Gipp who died tragically of strep throat a few short days after leading Notre Dame to victory over Northwestern and two weeks after receiving his first-team All-American honor. The George Gipp portrayed by Ronald Reagan in the 1940 motion picture Knute Rockne, All-American. And the George Gipp forever immortalized by the movie’s most famous scene, that of an emotional Knute Rockne and his legendary halftime speech imploring his players to “win one for the Gipper.” Before all of that, the honors, the movie, the legend and the immortality, George Gipp was two things: he was a football player for the Schirra Copper Kings and he was a graduate of the Public Schools of Schirra.
The second thing that strikes visitors to the Public Schools of Schirra is that the community’s public library is located inside the school. This idea is as elegant as it is uncommon – the school and community share the same library. Thus, a steady flow of library users enters and exits the school building each day, exhibiting a connection between school and community that is to be envied. According to a number of U.P. natives interviewed for this study, this sharing of resources between school and community is not uncommon. They insisted that there tends to be very little distinction in the Upper Peninsula between what other regions might view as exclusively community or exclusively school resources.

Steve McQueen is the superintendent of the Public Schools of Schirra, the largest district in this study in terms of both enrollment (1,542 students) and geographic size (418 square miles). It is also the poorest of the seven districts included in this study. According to the last completed U.S. Census (2000), the average per capita income in Schirra was $12,111, just about one-half of the Michigan average. According to Superintendent McQueen 61% of his students qualify for free and reduced hot lunch, a rate similar to that of many inner-city school districts. The school and community are both predominantly Caucasian. The main employers in the area are Chippewa Hospital and the two universities, Michigan Tech and Finlandia.

McQueen is a nontraditional superintendent, a public accountant by vocation and training. Having graduated from Michigan Tech with an accounting degree, he worked for several years in corporate accounting in the banking industry before becoming a public accountant. He was hired by Schirra in the mid 1980s to be the school’s chief financial officer and described his path to the superintendency in this way: “I got
interested in the philosophy of education. I have a real passion for kids. I coached and thought I could make more of an impact as superintendent, more of a difference for kids.”

The school's CFO McQueen acquired both a Masters degree and Specialists degree in Educational Leadership and is currently working towards his doctorate, all from Central Michigan University.

When asked to describe the history of the school, McQueen related that the school was started in 1867 by the local mining company and ownership of the school buildings was finally transferred in 1997. McQueen explained:

We are a consolidated school district. Over the years the district began annexing small, little schools, which is why our district is so geographically large. There are little pockets of people living throughout our district. Our transportation budget alone runs about $500,000 per year.

McQueen characterized the relationship between the school and community in this way:

I think there is a tremendous amount of trust between the community and what we are doing here in the school. Our recent bond issue for a technology upgrade passed 618 to 130. But that trust may not be all a good thing because we do not get a lot of parental involvement.

When asked about the public library being housed inside the school McQueen shared his thoughts:

We do offer and open our doors to the public through the library. We charge next to nothing to use it but we feel it is a part of us, an important part of our community and it is good public relations. We do take a little money out of
general fund to support the public library, but again it’s important. Without the
library, maybe our millage would not have passed so overwhelmingly. You have
got to open your doors and have community involvement in your schools because
strong communities make strong schools.

When asked to characterize the effectiveness of his tenure, McQueen answered
directly:

We have been through some tough economic times and I have had to make some
big reductions. Four years ago I had to cut one million dollars out of a $13 million
budget. And I have to cut another million next year. That causes a lot of anxiety
with staff.

McQueen described his management philosophy in this way:

I am very open to staff, very visible in the buildings and community. The teachers
see me in their classrooms because I feel it is important. I need to know what is
going on inside the classroom so I can make good decisions outside the
classroom. I am very honest and I think people know that. When I was hired my
comment to the board was “I just adopted 1530 students” because that is how
many students our district had at that time.

In terms of describing the future challenges for his district McQueen cited time
and money:

Economics are a concern no question but another challenge is time, just trying to
get everything done in the school day and school year in terms of both instruction
and professional development. We need to create more time for kids, to create
time during the day so that if they are having problems they can have time to go
to a teacher.

When asked to gauge his district's future prospects McQueen becomes visibly excited:

We are going to be the leader in information technology in the state of Michigan.
We just passed a bond issue and one of our initiatives is technology, one-to-one computing so that every student gets their own device because we feel we have to expand the classroom. We are exploring putting all textbooks on the student's laptop. We are also exploring putting wireless devices in our school buses because some of our kids ride the bus for an hour or more each day. Also we hope the devices may help our parents get more involved in their student's education.

It's exciting for us and will attract more students to our district.

Case Six: Dr. Robert Vaughn, Shepard Bay, Michigan

Copper County Moose Lodge 2571 has Bingo on Monday nights, at least according to the sign in the front window. At first glance, that would appear to be no big deal but to the casual observer there does not appear to be much in the way of diversions in Shepard Bay (population 1,908). Shepard Bay sits on the northern shore of Chippewa Lake in the Keweenaw Peninsula. The village of Grissom sits on the south shore of Chippewa Lake and the distance between the two villages is roughly five miles by boat and 12 miles by car.

Shepard Bay stretches along Highway 26 a total distance of about three blocks. The downtown consists of the Moose Lodge, a baseball field named Veteran's Park, Partenam's Bar, Richie's Market (Beer-Wine-Liquor-Takeout), a small fire department
building and post office. The village does not have a fast-food chain nor does it have a traffic light. But what the village does have is a school, one filled with kids and serves as a point of great pride for this small community.

The school sits a stone’s throw, a distance of some two hundred feet, from Chippewa Lake. The sign in front of the school reads “Shepard Bay Schools – A private school education in a public school setting.” The date on the updated, three-story brick schoolhouse reads “1914.” The school sits among a cluster of homes on or near Chippewa Lake that are distinguished by their metal roofs. Metal roofs are common in the Upper Peninsula; metal roofs shed snow much more easily than conventional asphalt roofs. While rooftop snow accumulations may not be of concern to most people, it is in the Upper Peninsula. The reason is simple: according to the National Weather Service, Michigan’s Upper Peninsula can typically receive an average of 200 inches of snow each year, the most of any non-mountainous region in the continental United States. This also helps to explain why the parking lot of Shepard Bay Schools is filled with four-wheel drive vehicles.

The community is poor; the average per capita income in Shepard Bay is $15,727, roughly one-third less than the statewide average. Of Shepard Bay’s 301 students, fully 46% qualify for free or reduced hot lunch.

While Superintendent Dr. Robert Vaughn’s background may be considered atypical, his leadership qualifications are traditional in the truest sense. A former Division I head football coach, Vaughn exhibits all the candor and directness you would expect of an athletic leader. As the conversation quickly turned to the various problems faced by many rural school districts today, it becomes clear that Vaughn’s management style befits
his background. His leadership philosophy can best be described by this comment:

“There is too much going on in schools to be limited to strictly a traditional educational approach.”

Dr. Vaughn is an Upper Peninsula native, born and raised in Iron River. He graduated from and played football at Northern Michigan University and later received his Masters degree in social work from the University of Michigan. In 1978, he began work on his PhD at Southern Illinois but put that on hold in order to pursue a career as a college football coach. For the next 30 years his career followed the nomadic path typical of a major college coach including stops at Southern Illinois, Kansas, Northwestern, Wake Forest, New Mexico, Eastern Michigan and Bowling Green. He returned to Southern Illinois as head coach but was let go by the university in 2000. It was at Southern Illinois where he finally completed his PhD in social work in 2002. The next year he was hired as Assistant Principal and Athletic Director at Belding High School and the following year as superintendent of Shepard Bay Schools.

When asked to describe the relationship between the school and the community, Dr. Vaughn described it in this way:

This school is the focal point of this community. Without this school the community would cease to exist. It is a beautiful area, with the lake and water. But the focal point is the school. Schools of choice make a difference but people like sending their kids here. It’s a down to earth group of people who just love their school.

In terms of characterizing the effectiveness of his tenure as superintendent Dr. Vaughn observed:
I think we have done a solid job. I think a lot of that stems from the fact that I have a tremendous board, not a micro-managing type of board. When we came here in 2004 we were in serious debt, about $250,000 plus the state aid note. We reduced that and now we are in the black and are very proud of that. I had to make some tough decisions and some of them were unpopular. I am happy where we are but I am happier about the fact that we have made changes that have made us a better academic institution. The school had been kind of floundering in my opinion and things just weren’t being done in an orderly fashion. We had to change the principal, which was very difficult. So we made the right changes which allowed us to be a bronze medal winner in the U.S. News and World Reports list of best high schools in the country.

Regarding the school district’s future challenges and prospects Dr. Vaughn shared his thoughts:

I think the future challenge will be to maintain our enrollment. I think the big challenge is to continue to promote ourselves and insist that we offer the same things as those “big schools.” That’s what we need to do. Next year we are starting an alternative school and we are also switching to trimesters. And we will be the first school in the area to make that switch.

Case Seven: Superintendent Eli Wallach, Slayton Falls, Michigan

Slayton Falls (population 370) in northern Lower Michigan is not a place you go to, it is a place you go through – on your way to somewhere else. Like so many small communities in northern Michigan with their 1950s era motels, Slayton Falls sits on a two-lane highway waiting for summer tourists or winter skiers who simply are not
coming. It is summer and the Vacancy sign is lit at the Fawn Motel on a Friday in June. There is no downtown area. Two gas stations, two restaurants and a few motels sit along the highway in a community ("Home of the Polish Festival the First Weekend in August" according to the village welcome sign) three blocks wide and eight blocks long.

Slayton Falls sits five miles south of its big brother Slayton City. Slayton City sits on the south shore of Lake Hiawatha, a lake that features a connecting channel to Lake Michigan. Slayton City has marinas, condominiums, internet cafés and fudge shops; Slayton Falls has the Brown Trout Motel and Mountain View Estates, a singlewide mobile home park. Ironically, given the state’s economy and despite Slayton City’s apparent affluence, there appears to be a higher percentage of For Sale signs on the front lawns of the condominiums in Slayton City than there are among the older homes in Slayton Falls.

According to the Slayton Area Sesquicentennial Committee brochure (Harbor House Publishers, 2006) Harriet and John Miller became the area’s first settlers in November of 1856. The first post office was actually housed in their living room. The Michigan lumbering boom of the late 1800s brought additional settlers. After the Great Chicago Fire in 1871 the city of Chicago was largely rebuilt with the white pine and hardwood harvested from northern Michigan forests. During this time passenger rail service came to Slayton City. With the railroad transporting people from Grand Rapids (roundtrip ticket $4.00), Detroit ($5.00) and Chicago ($6.00), summer resort traffic flourished. The Slayton City Railroad Company ran 13 trains and employed 180 people during its peak. Lumber production also boomed. According to the Committee’s
brochure, on a Thursday in June 1911, six ships in Lake Hiawatha were loaded with some 3,873,000 board feet of lumber.

The rebuilding of the city of Chicago marked the beginning of the end of the lumbering era. Not far behind, the era of large-scale rail passenger service also ended; the last passenger train from Slayton City ran in 1978. Today the area's main attractions are its scenic beauty and outdoor recreational opportunities that include fishing, hunting, golfing and skiing.

Superintendent Eli Wallach is a tall, friendly man with an easy-going manner. He has taken a traditional path to the superintendency of Slayton Falls. He is a graduate of Western Michigan University and spent his first three years after graduation teaching in Alaska. A native of Petoskey, he returned to Michigan and landed a teaching position in Mackinac where his wife was also hired to teach. For the next 22 years he served as a teacher, coach, athletic director and principal at Mackinac before he was hired six years ago as superintendent of Slayton Falls. Like some of the superintendent subjects in this study Wallach's career will end with a nontraditional twist: he is retiring at the end of this school year. Only he is not really retiring. In order to save the district money; he will collect his pension and continue to work full-time as superintendent at one-third of his current salary — 100% of the headaches for 33% of the pay.

Wallach described Slayton Falls as a blue-collar community filled with industrious and hardworking people. He shared that most adults in the community drive to Petoskey, Slayton City or Gaylord for work. In per capita terms, the area is poor; the average per capita income of $15,029 is one-third less than the statewide average. The school district's enrollment is 304 and 43% of those students qualify for free and reduced
hot lunch. Wallach characterized the relationship between the school and community in this way:

I would say it is excellent. People are proud of the school and what it means to the community and kids. They are very supportive of the school. This building was built ten years ago and I think it was a big turning point for the community. There was some serious conversations as to whether the district would continue or go away. The community worked hard and built this building. It wasn’t like they weren’t proud of the school before, but a new building will really change attitudes, minds and everything and I think it really happened here.

When asked to gauge the effectiveness of his tenure as superintendent he tried to adopt an upbeat tone:

I’ve enjoyed the six years I’ve been here, but I don’t enjoy the economic climate school districts are in right now. I do feel some things could have been done 5 or 10 years ago that would have made things different. I truly feel our legislators let us down, not only school districts but the whole state of Michigan. But I do love what I do, I love working with kids so it has been overall a very excellent experience for me.

In terms of describing the district’s future challenges and prospects the conversation again turns to financial concerns. As Wallach explained:

We are unique because we are an out of formula district so the majority of our funds are raised through non-homestead property taxes. That is because of the local ski resort. But recently we’ve been through a big tax tribunal case with the ski resort and so we are going to have to pay back $300,000 which comes out of
our fund equity and it hurts. As an out of formula district the state does not make up that lost revenue. So we are going to lose approximately $70,000 a year in revenue. Another challenge is our enrollment. We are about 25% school of choice and that is where we were at when I got here six years ago. But when I started our enrollment was around 320 to 325 kids and now we are at 250. Our kindergarten classes aren’t as big as our graduating classes. Parents in our area have lost jobs and the economy has gotten worse. A lot of kids have just flat out moved, not to other districts but out of the state.

Within-Case Analysis

Common Themes

A summary of this study’s case descriptions reveals three major themes. The first theme is that of financial struggle. Each superintendent cited school finance as a primary challenge and pressing daily concern. For these school leaders and their districts, declining student enrollments and shrinking state aid payments have worked to significantly reduce school revenues. Each of the seven superintendents indicated they had found it necessary to eliminate jobs in order to balance their district’s budgets. Such decisions are difficult and unpopular in small rural communities where a job with the local school system is viewed as a precious commodity.

The second theme has to do with the nontraditional backgrounds and occupational circumstances of each of the superintendents. Three of the superintendents hail from either a business or an athletic background. The others are either serving in some non-traditional capacity (one is a dual superintendent serving two districts and another serves
a joint role as both superintendent and principal) or have made a non-traditional career
decision (one is retiring and being re-hired by his district and another is retiring in order
to hasten the district’s move to a single administrator).

The third and final theme has to do with the contextual reality confronting each of
these school leaders. That contextual reality is quite simple – compete or die. The hard
truth for small rural school districts is that public education has increasingly become a
competitive sport, with clear winners and losers. The winners, the survivors, will be those
districts who are able to find ways to differentiate themselves and their offerings. The
losers will disappear, either through consolidation or closure.

These nontraditional school leaders clearly grasp this new reality. This is reflected
in such comments contained in the case descriptions that include: “we were the first in
the area to go to trimesters,” or “we will become the leader in information technology in
the state of Michigan,” or “academically we have always set a high bar and in terms of
schools of choice we are considered an attractive school.” These superintendents view
aggressive, market-driven leadership as the means for survival in an increasingly
competitive educational landscape.

Leadership Priorities

Three common leadership priorities emerged from the interviews and case
descriptions. These three priorities represent the primary goals or commitments of both
the superintendent and the school organization. Leadership priorities are what drive and
shape leadership practice. Leadership practices are the daily actions, activities and habits
the school leader uses to actively pursue leadership priorities.
The first superintendent priority is *all students can and will achieve academic success*. Despite having student poverty rates nearing 50%, the schools and communities described by interview subjects in this study were places where high student academic performance was valued and expected.

The second superintendent priority is to have a *high quality teacher in each classroom*. Interview subjects cited the quality of the classroom teacher as being the most critically important factor in determining student academic success. As one superintendent described it: "It’s the magic that happens between student and teacher - that is what makes student achievement."

The third superintendent priority is to *create resources* by either finding new sources of revenue or reprioritizing the district’s financial commitments. Declining enrollment and reduced state aide payments have combined to cut rural school revenues. The school leaders in this study have had to become more creative in terms of finding new sources of school monies and more assertive in terms of reprioritizing how existing monies are spent.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this study is to examine how Water’s and Marzano’s correlates of effective superintendent leadership practice have been applied by rural superintendents who have successfully improved student academic performance in their districts. Case descriptions have been presented in this chapter to provide the reader with an appreciation for the contextual differences and commonalities that exist among study subjects. Differences and commonalities that emerge in the case descriptions often
foreshadow more significant themes that will be identified and categorized in the next chapter, the study’s cross-case analysis (Yin, 1994).

A summary of this study’s case descriptions reveals three major themes. The first theme is that of financial struggle. Each superintendent subject cited school finance as a primary challenge and pressing daily concern. Declining student enrollments and shrinking state aid payments have worked to significantly reduce rural school revenues. The second theme has to do with the nontraditional backgrounds and occupational circumstances of each of the superintendent subjects. Each of the school leaders either hails from a business or an athletic background or is serving in some non-traditional capacity. The third theme has to do with the contextual reality faced by each of the rural superintendents in this study. That contextual reality is quite simple – compete or die. The superintendents in this study view aggressive differentiation as the best means for small school survival in an increasingly competitive public school marketplace.

Additionally, three common superintendent priorities emerged from the subject interviews and case descriptions. The first superintendent priority is that all students can and will achieve academic success. The second superintendent priority is to have a high quality teacher in each classroom. And the third superintendent priority is to create resources by either finding new sources of revenue or reprioritizing the district’s existing financial commitments. Chapter Five’s cross-case analysis will list the leadership practices used by these school leaders to pursue these three leadership priorities. Additionally, Chapter Five will group each leadership practice by theme, with each theme representing or reflecting a distinct leadership philosophy.
CHAPTER V

CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine how Waters’ and Marzano’s (2006) correlates of effective superintendent leadership practice have been applied by rural superintendents who have successfully improved student academic performance in their districts. More particularly, the goal of this study is to gain a better understanding of how these correlates might translate into effective leadership practice within a rural school context.

A typical analytical approach in a multiple case study is to provide a detailed description of each case, a within-case analysis, followed by a thematic analysis across the cases, or cross-case analysis (Creswell, 2007). Chapter Four provided the within-case analysis and this chapter will provide the cross-case analysis. A cross-case analysis is often referred to as the theoretical propositions approach to data analysis (Yin, 1994). With the theoretical propositions approach, the analysis is conducted within a defined framework steeped in previously-established scholarship. This analytic method is favored by most academics because of its ability to link a study’s research data to previously established theory (Yin). For this study, that previously established theory is Water’s and Marzano’s (2006) six correlates of effective superintendent practice.
According to Rudestam and Newton (2007), qualitative research methods are grounded in a constructivist theory of knowledge. In constructivist theory, knowledge or truth are formed as a result of individual perspective. As such, both constructivist theory and qualitative research place great store in the centrality of lived experiences (Rudestam and Newton). This study’s intent is to gain special insight through first-person accounts of the ways in which individuals experience superintendent leadership in rural K-12 school districts where student achievement is on the rise. To that end, this study views the question of effective leadership practice through the experiences of both the superintendent subjects and the principals, teachers and board trustees who observe their work. By studying the phenomenon of rural superintendents who have led their districts through a process of raising student achievement and asking them to share their leadership experiences, it is this study’s hope to uncover useful, pragmatic insights into the practices of these successful leaders.

Participants

Audio-taped interviews were conducted with each of the seven superintendent subjects on their district campuses. Additionally, interviews were conducted and tape recorded with a building principal, teacher and board trustee from each district. Unfortunately, no board trustee was available to be interviewed by the researcher from the Slayton Falls school district. In total 27 interviews were conducted and tape recorded. These recordings were later transcribed into written form. Copies of each transcribed interview were emailed to participants to verify accuracy and to allow each participant an opportunity to make any final revisions or corrections to the transcripts prior to analysis. These written transcripts proved to be the primary source of research data for this study.
Secondary data sources included board meeting minutes, school newsletters, school memoranda and direct observations by the researcher.

Leadership Priorities

From the interview transcripts, a coding process was used to highlight the macro-level goals discussed or referenced by participants during the course of each interview. From these macro-level goals certain common leadership priorities among the seven superintendents emerged from the transcripts and were identified.

These leadership priorities represent the primary goals or commitments of each school leader. It is these leadership priorities that organize the superintendent’s work life and give it structure. The daily activities and work practices of the rural superintendents in this study revolve around these leadership priorities. While each leader’s responsibilities are wide-ranging, it is these leadership priorities that provide clarity, coherence and direction to the superintendent’s work life.

It is important to draw a clear distinction between leadership priorities and leadership practices. Leadership priorities represent the superintendent’s primary goals and organizational commitments. Or as Superintendent Bronson described it: “That’s who I am and that’s what I believe in.” While leadership priorities articulate the school leader’s most important commitments, leadership practices are the means and methods used by the superintendent to pursue those commitments. Leadership practices are the daily actions, activities and habits the school leader uses to actively pursue leadership priorities.
Leadership Priority #1: All Students Can and Will Achieve Academic Success

The first and most important superintendent priority to emerge from the interview transcripts is *All students can and will achieve academic success*. Despite having student poverty populations nearing 50%, the schools and communities described by interview subjects in this study were places where high student academic performance was valued and expected. For some superintendent subjects that commitment to academic success began even before their first day on the job. As Superintendent Bronson described it:

> It was the backbone of my interview...And I made it very plain and clear, that if they choose me as superintendent that our one focus would be on student achievement and student achievement for all. And that if they hired me their days of micro-managing the district were over.

Superintendent McQueen also spoke of his conversation with the board of education at the time he was hired:

> I just want what’s best for kids...When I make decisions, even when I got hired on from the board of education, when they decided to hire me, my comment to them was there are 1,530 students in the district and I told them I had just adopted 1,530 students. I will treat every kid like they were my own.

The leadership priority of *All can and will* is less about the test scores of individual students and more about adults in school leadership positions who are willing to accept responsibility for student academic performance. As Superintendent Bronson explained:

> I can’t sit here and tell you that every one of my staff members believes “All can and will.” We’ve had some changes in our principals because they didn’t believe
that all can and will. And they didn’t have what it takes to deal with the daily grind of that...But we’re at a point now where we say, if you don’t believe it, at least act and pretend like you do.

Leadership Priority #2: A High Quality Teacher in Each Classroom

The second superintendent priority to emerge from the data is to have a high quality teacher in each classroom. Interview subjects cited the quality of the classroom teacher as being the most critically important factor in determining student academic success. As Superintendent Dexter described it: “When everybody realizes that it’s the magic that happens between student and teacher, that that is what makes student achievement, the rest is easy.”

In order for all students to achieve academic success superintendent subjects described the most essential requirement as being a high quality instructor delivering high quality instruction. As Superintendent Dr. Vaughn observed: “I am a believer that despite what the union says it doesn’t matter how many kids are in the classroom, and the research says it doesn’t matter, it’s the quality of the teacher that you bring in.”

Superintendent McQueen listed the attributes he looks for when hiring new teachers:

What I look for first basically is a passion for kids. I really look for somebody who cares. Who walks down the hall with the students, puts their arm around them and talks to them? If you don’t care about kids, you are not working here. You are in the wrong business. I also look for work ethic. Are those individuals committed to the district? And I look for knowledge. Do they have a capacity? Are they looking to grow and are they seeking knowledge?
Superintendent Bronson echoed Superintendent McQueen's sentiments: "I look for people that are committed to, not giving lip service to, but are committed to kids. And are honest, have integrity and that have a solid work ethic."

Leadership Priority #3: Creating Resources

The third and final superintendent priority to emerge from the data is *Creating resources* by either finding new sources of revenue or reprioritizing the district's financial commitments. Declining enrollment and reduced state aide payments have combined to cut rural school revenues. The school leaders in this study have had to become more creative in terms of finding new sources of school monies and more assertive in terms of reprioritizing how existing monies are spent. As Superintendent Bronson shared: "Student achievement now drives the budget in our district. So if that means we have a part-time staff member here or a part-time staff member there or if we lay off someone it's based on the needs of our district."

As Superintendent Brynner related: "You know you can have a priority on being academically sound, but you have to be financially sound to get to it. It's a chicken and egg thing. So you are always trying to balance that." As Superintendent Coburn explained: "To save dollars our district has always been very aggressive in terms of new things, technology wise as an example."

Superintendent Dr. Vaughn described the priority of creating resources in this way:

The mantra here for me is that kids come first. If we are going to have to curtail something it will be with some magic if I could. We are going to push numbers, push resources using our Title I monies, using our at-risk monies. What we did
four years ago is we got an Impact Eight grant from the Coast Guard. Someone enlightened me that we could get that...We received that for 3 or 4 years so that was helpful. So we are always trying to maximize the dollars that we have.

Leadership Practices

Leadership practices are the daily actions, activities and habits the school leader uses to actively pursue leadership priorities. In response to the researcher’s interview questions, each study participant was asked to describe witnessed actions or activities used by their district’s superintendent to pursue the school organization’s priorities. Identifying those specific leadership practices that have allowed these superintendents to lead their districts to academic success is the purpose of this study.

During the interview protocol, special care was taken by the researcher to discourage interview participants from stating value-based opinions or judgments (“The superintendent does this well and that not so well”). Instead participants were encouraged to describe and give examples of the superintendent’s daily work habits and activities (“He sends an email every Friday, or meets with the principals every Monday morning”). Similarly, popular education-speak references such as “we are data-driven” or “spiraling instruction” were ignored unless those descriptions were tied to the citation of a specific leadership practice.

The interview transcripts were reviewed and references to specific leadership practices were highlighted and identified. In total, 388 specific citations were identified among the 27 interviews. For identification and reference purposes, each individual citation was coded by district and participant source. Additionally, for data verification and authentication purposes, each leadership practice had to have been cited by at least
two interview participants in order to be recognized for this study. A total of 57 leadership practices met that criterion. The ten most frequently referenced practices are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Ten Most Frequently Cited Superintendent Leadership Practices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Citations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does not limit Principal’s authority</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has an open door policy</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secures grant/bond money for technology upgrades</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creates hybrid positions</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talks constantly about student achievement</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balances/cuts the school’s budget</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourages professional development for teachers</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Takes a hard line in union contract negotiations</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student achievement data is analyzed for gaps</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching staff develops school’s curriculum</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data revealed a few surprises among the study’s most-frequently cited leadership practices. While references to such practices as Balances/cuts the school’s budget and Encourages professional development for teachers were to be expected, several practices contained in Table 1 were not expected. For example, the leadership practice Does not limit the Principal’s authority was cited 27 times - the highest number in the study. When superintendent subjects were asked to describe the extent to which their principal’s authority was limited, most either could not articulate a limitation or
insisted no such limitation existed. Most participants responded in a manner similar to that given by Superintendent Bronson:

They can make any decision that they are willing to be responsible for. I encourage that... [The middle school principal] has at the present time the ability to deal directly with the board. And that’s based on trust and performance and respect...That’s how it works. So if you say, is there anything that they can’t do? The answer is there is nothing that they can’t do.

Superintendent McQueen echoed Superintendent Bronson sentiments in this way: I give them [my building principals] full authority to make decisions, because I do trust them. Yes they are going to make mistakes but you learn from those mistakes...And I let them make decisions but again I tell them make decisions in the best interest of kids. So when you make a decision, make the decision as though they were your kids. Would you make the same decision if it was your child instead of John Doe’s child in that classroom?

The second most-frequently cited leadership practice was Has an open door policy. Superintendent Brynner described what an open door policy meant at his school district:

Let me define what that is. If there are unresolved issues that anyone has...Whether it be a student, a parent or a community member, I am always willing [to discuss those issues] and I think most people will tell you now that that is the case. Most people think that this is a scary office or something...I go down to the elementary building fairly often to see the kids, just so they know who I
am...Now they are not afraid of me...And so if the kids know that, I feel it rubs off on the parents.

The fourth most-cited leadership practice, *Creates hybrid positions*, reflected one of the methods used by superintendent subjects in this study to balance their district’s budgets. Creating a hybrid position involves the practice of combining two, usually administrative, positions and having one individual serve both roles. Examples of hybrid positions created by superintendent subjects in this study include: Superintendent-Business Officer, Superintendent-Principal, Principal-Curriculum Director, Guidance Counselor-Teacher and Dual Superintendent. At its most basic level, creating a hybrid position requires the superintendent ask a single individual to perform the work responsibilities previously held by two individuals.

When it comes to asking the district’s employees to do more, many of the superintendent subjects in this study are individuals who believe in leading by example. Superintendents Bronson (Superintendent-High School Principal), McQueen (Superintendent-Business Manager), Brynner (Superintendent-Business Manager) and Coburn (Dual Superintendent) all were school leaders who, at the time of this study, were serving their districts in a dual or hybrid capacity.

The fifth most-cited leadership practice was *Talks constantly about student achievement*. Several subjects described the importance of keeping the organizational conversation focused on student academic achievement. As Superintendent Bronson explained:
I guess the day by day message in our district, I think if you ask any board member what’s the one reason we exist – it’s student achievement. And how often do they hear that from me? They hear it in every conversation that we have.

The eighth most-cited leadership practice, *Takes a hard line in union contract negotiations*, is perhaps the most compelling leadership practice to emerge among the top ten. For this research study, *Takes a hard line in union contract negotiations* is separate and distinct from the leadership practice of *Balances/cuts the school’s budget*. For the purposes of this study, *Balances/cuts the school’s budget* is operationally defined as any leadership practice involving budget decisions that lie within the superintendent’s scope of authority. Cutting a building’s budget for textbooks would provide one such example. Conversely, *Takes a hard line in union contract negotiations* consists of leadership practices that involve decisions that lay outside the superintendent’s authority and are acquired through the negotiation process with the district’s employee unions. For this study, *Takes a hard line in union contract negotiations* will be operationally defined as any cited practice that includes one of the following: (a) employee health care benefit reductions, (b) employee salary freezes, (c) employee seniority step freezes, (d) the privatization of operational services, or (e) the declaration of impasse and unilateral imposition of the school district’s last contract offer.

In difficult financial times, the negotiation process can become a source of anger and hostility in and among school colleagues and members of the local community. For the school leader, the acrimony of difficult union negotiations can exact a heavy toll in terms of both personal and professional relationships in a small, rural community.
Superintendent Grissom described the process of leading the board of education through difficult negotiations in this way:

> You know we have been negotiating for three years and we are very close to probably declaring impasse. So that is very, very challenging...This would be the second district I’ve done that with and so I am becoming an expert in something that I don’t want to get too good at.

Dr. Vaughn spoke of his most recent battle with the local teacher’s union and described it in this way:

> I am still going to be tough when I have to be tough...Frankly, I don’t think the teachers believe this, but do I think they are underpaid? Yes. Do I think they get a very good health insurance plan? Yes. But the dynamics are such that we don’t have the money because we are not a profit-making organization to give them more...You have to make those kinds of tough decisions and stay within the framework of what you have.

The next step in the data analysis was to sort the leadership practices by philosophical theme. As an example two of the practices cited in Table 1, *Does not limit the Principal’s authority* and *Teaching staff develops the school’s curriculum*, share a common leader philosophy that reflects a belief in the importance of employee autonomy. Similarly, the practices *Has an open door policy* and *Talks constantly about student achievement* share a leadership philosophy that conveys a belief in the importance of organizational transparency. Among the 57 cited leadership practices in this study, six distinct leadership philosophies emerged and were identified. Each of the leadership practices in this study can be classified into one of these philosophic categories. The six
leadership philosophies are: (a) Transparency, (b) Proximity, (c) Autonomy, (d) Constructive Confrontation, (e) Making Hard Choices, and (f) Celebration.

Leadership Philosophies

Leadership Philosophy #1: Transparency

The first leadership philosophy to emerge from the research data was Transparency. Transparency will be defined in this study as those leadership practices that convey and clarify: (a) what the school district’s priorities are, (b) what practices have been or will be adopted by the school to pursue those priorities, and (c) the rationale behind why a particular practice has been or will be adopted. Transparency is about allowing others inside and outside the school organization to see and to understand. It is about answering the question: what is the school’s leadership doing and why are they doing it?

Superintendent Coburn described transparency in terms of school finances: “Well, we are pretty open. One of the words you hear now is transparency, but we have always been that way. Our budget isn’t a secret; I don’t have this stash of money I am hiding.”

In terms of making the work of the board of education more transparent, Superintendent McQueen described one of his first acts as superintendent:

The first thing I did was to disband the board committee structure and we adopted a committee of the whole organization...I could see where three board members were presenting something and I felt that as one of the other four board members I would feel uncomfortable passing a resolution that I didn’t know too much
about...So now basically all seven board members hear everything and can ask questions.

Superintendent Coburn passionately described the importance of transparency in the current era of heightened public accountability:

The days of any public entity doing what they want and how they want and saying this is the way it is, are gone. The community wants to know, the parents and students want to know why you are doing what you are doing. As we are making cuts, they ask why are you cutting? Well, because we have no money. Well, show us that you have no money. People want to see that that is where it is at. Now they understand it – because they have the same budget problems at home.

The following are examples of leadership practices cited in this study that reflect Transparency as a leadership philosophy: (a) Has an open door policy, (b) Presents student achievement data to the board, (c) Principal sits at table with board of education, and (d) Board is organized as a committee of the whole.

Leadership Philosophy #2: Proximity

The second leadership philosophy to emerge from the data was Proximity. For this study, Proximity will be defined as those leadership practices in pursuit of district priorities that take advantage of the close personal familiarity that develops between those who live and work in small communities. More than anything else Proximity is about distance. Compared with those who live and work in urban or suburban communities, the physical and social distance between people in rural communities is much shorter.
Superintendent Coburn spoke of the importance of having people teach in the same school district they live in: “I think it makes a huge difference when your [the teacher’s] children go to your school...Every time something is going on they are concerned...because they are not just drawing a paycheck”.

Superintendent McQueen described his effort to stay visible in the local community:

We want to get better...The only way that I will get better and the school will get better is by having [the community’s] input. So that is why I am very visible and I am in the hallways, in the classroom and in the lunchroom and everywhere. I talk to people on an informal basis. They are our friends and part of our family and I talk to them like that.

Examples of leadership practices cited in this study that reflect the leadership philosophy of Proximity include: (a) Visits classrooms, (b) Rides school bus and visits cafeteria, and (c) Regularly visits elementary school.

Leadership Philosophy #3: Autonomy

The third philosophy to emerge from the data was Autonomy. Autonomy represents those leadership practices that provide others with the freedom to develop and implement their own methods for pursuing the district’s priorities. Autonomy is about freedom and control. It is about school leaders who have great faith in the abilities of the people that they work with; the type of faith that strengthens an individual’s belief in their own capabilities.

Superintendent Dexter spoke of the importance of listening in terms of uncovering the hidden talents in others:
Everybody has leadership talent. It is in recognizing what area that their strong points are in. And how do you recognize it? You listen, because the thing that develops more talent and the willingness of people to come forward and share the load is when you listen to what they have to say.

Many of the school leaders in this study described the transformative power of Autonomy and its potential for empowering an entire school organization. Subject interviews were filled with commentary regarding the importance of allowing people the freedom to succeed and to fail on their own terms. In particular, references to failure were common throughout the transcripts. Many comments reflected school leaders who believed that failure, when compared with success, provided the richer source of both personal and professional growth. Typical of such comments was one shared by Superintendent McQueen: “I give them full authority to make decisions, because I do trust them. Yes they are going to make mistakes but you learn from those mistakes.”

Superintendent Bronson was passionate in his description of Autonomy being fundamentally about earning trust through performance:

If it’s their success, it’s their success. If it doesn’t work out the way we want, because I don’t believe there is a failure, it’s an opportunity to learn. If there’s going to be heat coming from it, I’ll take the heat for it...That builds trust. You can talk until you’re blue in the face, but when it comes time to perform you better perform and step up to the plate and you better not be looking around to pass the blame to someone else...The biggest thing I’ve done is to be consistent as to what my expectations are and what support they can expect to get from me.
Dr. Robert Vaughn echoed Bronson’s sentiments: “I think the only way you build trust is with your performance. You simply have to perform...so I think to engulf that trust is really about your actions and what you accomplish.”

Among the cited practices in this study that reflect the leadership philosophy of Autonomy were: (a) *Does not limit Principal’s authority*, (b) *Teaching staff develops the school’s curriculum*, (c) *Teacher professional development is in-house/led by staff*, and (d) *Teaching staff develops common assessments to track student achievement district-wide*.

Leadership Philosophy #4: Constructive Confrontation

The fourth leadership philosophy to emerge from the data was *Constructive Confrontation*. Hoover and DiSilvestro (2005) describe confrontation as course confirmation and, when needed, course correction. They insist that the source of most conflict in organizations can be traced back to failed expectations, the inability of one individual to meet the performance expectations of another. According to these two authors, failed performance is typically confronted after the fact, when it is too late to provide the struggling performer with the appropriate level of needed assistance. Often conversations regarding struggling performance are postponed because they tend to be unpleasant or difficult.

The problem with typical confrontation is that it tends to be critical rather than prescriptive. Constructive Confrontation is the leadership philosophy that believes leaders must care enough to act consistently on the front end to address and solve performance problems. For the purposes of this study, Constructive Confrontation will be operationally defined as those leadership practices that: (a) reaffirm and track progress
towards the district’s priorities, (b) acknowledge and address any misunderstanding of expectations or gaps in performance, and (c) provide corrective methods or strategies for improving performance.

Constructive Confrontation is very different from constructive criticism. Whereas constructive criticism tends to focus on individual shortcomings, Constructive Confrontation focuses on collective shortcomings. Constructive criticism can be characterized by the declarative statement: “You have a problem.” By contrast, Constructive Confrontation makes a statement and adds a question: “We have a problem. What can we do to help?”

No where is this leadership philosophy more apparent than in those practices that pursue the leadership priority All students can and will achieve academic success. Superintendent Coburn described the process in his district for reviewing student academic performance with the board of education: “With the school board we share scores, very specific in terms of why we think the score is where it is and if the scores are below what our expectations are, then we begin to ask the question ‘why’?”

Superintendent Bronson spoke of efforts to improve student academic performance in his district: “We look at [our student achievement] data so that we can determine next year what our staffing should be. Where do we need more skills at? Where do we need more support?”

Constructive Confrontation also applies to teacher instructional performance in terms of expectations for growth. Superintendent McQueen discussed the importance of tracking instructional performance:
We’ve had a couple of probationary teachers that we’ve let go and some tenured people that we’ve let go... We went through the process of trying to help them. But if the capacity is not there to improve and to be an effective teacher... if that person cannot show the growth and improvement that we feel they need to be effective in this school district then it is time to move on.

Superintendent McQueen also shared his thoughts on the report card system used by his district that reflects the Constructive Confrontation leadership philosophy:

We’ve revamped our report cards to read not just A, B, C but also to include Grade Level Content items so that the parent knows if their kid learned it because there is a check mark beside each one... If the child didn’t learn it then that teacher has to go back and make sure that child does get it and work with the parents.

Superintendent Bronson described how his district provides a variety of tutorial programs for those students who need additional help:

[We run] tutorials before, during and after school. We run a Saturday school program, a Sunday afternoon program based on our students’ needs, not for discipline issues, strictly student achievement issues... The areas they need the help in most often is Algebra I, Geometry and Algebra II... During our Christmas vacation we ran six half-days of school where we had tutorials and we’ll run it all summer long.

Superintendent Bronson also described how the philosophy of Constructive Confrontation is applied to helping both struggling and academically successful students in his district:
Our [academic] success rate continues to get higher and higher. But we are looking for that student that’s not making it, how do we get them to make it? The student with a 24 on the ACT, how do we get that to 28? And the kid with a 28, how do we get that to 32?

The following are all examples of practices cited in this study that reflect the leadership philosophy of Constructive Confrontation: (a) Student achievement data is broken down and analyzed for gaps, (b) Targeted tutoring is provided for students who need academic help, (c) Teacher instructional performance is evaluated, (d) Peer coaches are assigned to teachers who need to improve their instructional performance, and (e) Superintendent and teachers conduct home visits when students are struggling academically.

Leadership Philosophy #5: Making Hard Choices

The fifth leadership philosophy is Making Hard Choices. Making Hard Choices involves those leadership practices that require: (a) that a difficult decision be made, and (b) that decision involves either a break with school-community tradition or will have a real or perceived negative impact on someone’s financial or working condition.

Making Hard Choices is about toughness and it is about sacrifice. Toughness in terms of the school leaders’ ability to make and live with decisions that negatively impact the lives of others. And sacrifice in terms of the school leader’s relationship with the affected individuals and their constituents.

Superintendent Bronson described the controversy that ensued when his district made the decision to eliminate the high school guidance counselor position and instead place five paraprofessionals in the classroom:
We were the first district in the area to layoff our guidance counselor...And so when we did that there was a big uproar in the community. This person had been here for 40 some years, etc., etc. My question to the board was simply this: tell me how a guidance counselor positively impacts student achievement for all? That was the discussion. And when people came to the board meetings [I asked them to] bring me the documentation or data that substantially addresses that spending $100,000 on a guidance counselor is more productive than spending $100,000 on five highly-qualified aides that can help our kids with skills in literacy and numeracy and we’ll do it. At our institution...student achievement drives everything.

Making Hard Choices also at times involves the removal of ineffective performers. Superintendent McQueen described the importance of removing ineffective teachers:

We have released some teachers here in the last five years. It has not been easy. But again, like I tell my principals, if you walk into a classroom and if you see that things are not happening would you want your child in that classroom? If you walk out of that room saying my child would not be in that room, I would select Teacher A instead of Teacher B, then we have a problem and we have to fix it. So we have released teachers and they have been tenured. It’s not the old story, oh it costs $220,000 to get rid of a tenured teacher. No, if you do your evaluations properly and you work with them it can be done.

Superintendent Dr. Vaughn shared his thoughts on the need for more, not less confrontation in public education:
Quite frankly, I think we have to move from communication to confrontation in education. What’s happened is that we communicate the problem, we don’t have this or we don’t have that. The problem is that nobody wants to confront the issue. So what we have is avoidance, we continue to communicate and talk about our problems but nothing gets done...In terms of me being a confrontational type person, I think that it is because of my athletic background. But where I have changed though is I do confront issues but I am probably not as combative as I once was.

The following cited practices were among those that reflect the leadership philosophy of Making Hard Choices: (a) Replaces building principal for performance reasons, (b) Replaces teachers for performance reasons, (c) Creates hybrid positions, (d) Takes a hard line in union contract negotiations, and (e) Reduces the number of staff for financial reasons.

Leadership Philosophy #6: Celebration

The sixth leadership philosophy was Celebration. Celebration is about those leadership practices that highlight the successful individual and collective progress being made by the school district in pursuit of its priorities. Celebration is about taking the time to reflect and to acknowledge progress. Superintendent McQueen described what happened when his district introduced a new alternative education program for high school students:

We started an alternative school five years ago. I was sitting in the classrooms in the high school and I was watching our student body and some of those kids were not learning...So I said some kids need a different environment. So we started an
alternative education school and it has been very successful. Three years into its existence it became the Michigan Alternative School of the Year.

The following practices cited in this study reflect the leadership philosophy of Celebration: (a) Announces student awards at board meetings, and (b) District successfully passes bond issue.

Effective Leadership Practice: Where Priorities and Philosophy Meet

The final step in the data analysis was to align the 57 cited leadership practices by leadership priority and leadership philosophy. Each leadership practice was cross-matched with a leadership priority and a leadership philosophy. The data categories (priority, practice and philosophy) were then aligned in order to produce a single data summary table. This data summary is presented in Table 2 Superintendent Leadership Practices by Priority and Philosophy. This table represents the substantive findings of this study. Chapter Six will discuss the relevance and significance of these findings in terms of previously established scholarship.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this study is to examine how Waters' and Marzano's (2006) correlates of effective superintendent leadership practice have been applied by rural superintendents who have successfully improved student academic performance in their districts. This study's intent is to gain special insight through first-person accounts of the ways in which individuals experience superintendent leadership in rural K-12 school districts where student achievement is on the rise.
Interviews were completed with the seven superintendent subjects and a principal, teacher and board trustee from each subject district. In all, 27 interviews were completed and transcribed for analytical purposes. These written transcripts contained participant responses to interview questions and proved to be the primary source of research data for this study. Participant responses were coded and classified into three distinct reference categories: (a) leadership priorities, (b) leadership practices, and (c) leadership philosophies.

The first category, leadership priorities, were participant citations that referenced the macro-level or primary goals of the superintendent subjects. It is these leadership priorities that shape the superintendent’s work life and give it structure. Three common leadership priorities were identified in this study. Those leadership priorities were: (a) All students can and will achieve academic success, (b) A quality teacher in each classroom, and (c) Creating resources.

The second category, leadership practices, involved participant citations that referenced the daily actions, activities or habits used by superintendent subjects to pursue the three leadership priorities. Each interviewed participant was asked to describe witnessed actions or activities used by their respective school leader to pursue leadership priorities. For data verification purposes, each leadership practice had to have been cited by at least two participants in order to be recognized for this study. A total of 57 leadership practices met that criterion.

The third category, leadership philosophies, was generated by classifying each of the 57 cited leadership practices by philosophic theme. Among the 57 cited leadership practices identified in this study, six distinct leadership philosophies emerged and were
identified. The six leadership philosophies were: (a) Transparency, (b) Proximity, (c) Autonomy, (d) Constructive Confrontation, (e) Making Hard Choices, and (f) Celebration.

Finally, a two-step process was used to align the three leadership categories into a single data summary table. First, each cited leadership practice was matched with the corresponding leadership priority that practice was designed to pursue. Second, practices within each priority category were then grouped by leadership philosophy. This process yielded a data summary table that is featured at the end of this chapter and entitled Table 2. Superintendent Leadership Practices by Priority and Philosophy. This table represents the substantive findings of this study. Chapter Six will discuss the significance and relevance of these findings in terms of the study’s theoretical framework, Waters’ and Marzano’s (2006) six correlates of effective superintendent practice.
Table 2. Superintendent Leadership Practices by Priority and Philosophy

**Priority #1: All Students Can and Will Achieve Academic Success**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transparency</th>
<th>Proximity</th>
<th>Autonomy</th>
<th>Constructive Confrontation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Superintendent has an open door policy</td>
<td>Superintendent talks to students in hallway</td>
<td>Principal presents student achievement data to board</td>
<td>Trade name software/learning programs are used</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superintendent constantly talks about student achievement</td>
<td>Superintendent rides school bus and visits cafeteria</td>
<td>Student achievement data is broken down and analyzed for gaps</td>
<td>Advanced placement classes are offered for high achieving students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superintendent is highly visible in the community</td>
<td>Superintendent regularly visits elementary school</td>
<td>Targeted tutoring is provided to students who need academic help</td>
<td>Superintendent and teachers conduct home visits when students are struggling academically classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superintendent presents student achievement data to board</td>
<td>Superintendent has annual, beginning year pep talk with each grade in high school</td>
<td>Core review classes are offered and designed to improve students core academic skills</td>
<td>An alternative education program is offered to students who are struggling in a traditional</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Priority #1: All Students Can and Will Achieve Academic Success

**Celebration**

Superintendent announces student awards at board meetings

### Priority #2: A High Quality Teacher in Each Classroom

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transparency</th>
<th>Teachers present curriculum information to the board of education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Superintendent talks about the importance of hiring quality teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Proximity</strong></td>
<td>Superintendent visits classrooms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Superintendent and Principal talk frequently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Superintendent conducts cultural/learning style surveys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Superintendent targets and recruits top teacher graduates from local universities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Superintendent hosts/attends teacher festivities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Autonomy</strong></td>
<td>Superintendent does not limit Principal’s authority (limit is undefined)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teaching staff develops the school’s curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher professional development is in-house/led by staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teaching staff leads the school improvement process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teaching staff develops common assessments to track student achievement district-wide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Constructive Confrontation</strong></td>
<td>Superintendent encourages professional development for teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher instructional performance is evaluated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peer coaches are assigned to teachers who need to improve their instructional performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Curriculum is changed in response to gaps in student academic performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Superintendent has weekly administrative staff meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Paraprofessionals are assigned to classrooms that require additional academic support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Making Hard Choices</strong></td>
<td>Superintendent replaces building principal for performance reasons</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Table 2 — Continued**

**Priority #3: Creating Resources**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transparency</th>
<th>Superintendent presents financial information to the board</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School board members attend professional development training</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constructive Confrontation</th>
<th>Superintendent finds grants/passes millage for technology upgrades</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School district switches to trimesters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Superintendent negotiates needed contract language changes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Making Hard Choices</th>
<th>Superintendent creates hybrid positions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Superintendent makes cuts to balance the district's budget</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Superintendent takes a hard line in union contract negotiations (health care reductions, step or pay freezes, privatizing services, declaring impasse)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Superintendent reduces the number of staff for financial reasons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Curriculum department heads are uncompensated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>District adopts larger class sizes/shorter school year for financial reasons</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Celebration                  | District successfully passes bond issue                             |
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine how Waters’ and Marzano’s (2006) correlates of effective superintendent leadership practice have been applied by rural superintendents who have successfully improved student academic performance in their districts. More particularly, the goal of this study was to gain a better understanding of how these correlates might translate into effective leadership practice within a rural school context.

Previous scholarship on school leadership practice has established that the best measure of leadership effectiveness is student academic performance (Leithwood, 1995). Improving student achievement requires the successful implementation of meaningful reform; the catalyst for that meaningful reform is the superintendent leader (Fullan, 2002). Despite the search for the charismatic school leader by many boards of education, quality leadership is practice-based, not personality-based (Reeves, 2006). According to Reeves, effective leadership is founded in a skill set that can be defined and improved upon in a systematic way.

Effective school leaders are generally distinguished by three qualities: (a) the ability to make improving student academic achievement the school organization’s primary focus (Leithwood, 1995; Reeves, 2006), (b) the ability to initiate and sustain
meaningful reform (Fullan, 2002, 2003, 2004; Waters & Marzano, 2006), and (c) the ability to build and distribute leadership capacity (Fullan, 2002, 2003, 2004; Hargreaves & Fink, 2004; Reeves, 2006).

Waters’ and Marzano’s (2006) study of effective superintendant practice has uncovered six specific leadership responsibilities that are positively correlated with improved student achievement. Those six leadership correlates are: (a) collaborative goal-setting that includes all the district’s relevant stakeholders, (b) establishing non-negotiable goals for student achievement and classroom instruction, (c) aligning board support for the district’s non-negotiable goals, (d) continuous monitoring of the district’s progress in attaining its non-negotiable goals, (e) effectively utilizing resources to support the accomplishment of district goals and (f) superintendents providing defined autonomy to principals to lead their building’s efforts to attain district goals within clearly defined operational boundaries.

While Waters’ and Marzano’s meta-analysis has received well-deserved acclaim, their findings are more applicable to the leadership contexts faced by urban and suburban school leaders. These same findings are not as easily applied to the leadership contexts faced by rural school leaders. An analysis by the researcher of the studies included in Waters’ and Marzano’s meta-analysis revealed that many of the studies used sampling methodologies that excluded rural districts from being part of their research samples. Thus, many of the studies that served as the basis for Waters’ and Marzano’s work do not reflect the realities and work contexts of rural schools.

Rural superintendents face leadership challenges that are contextually unique (Lamkin, 2006). These challenges are: (a) a rural community defined by poverty and
economic decline (Peshkin, 1978; Seal & Harmon, 1995), (b) a rural school administrator overburdened with a wide range of responsibilities (Arnold, 2000, 2004; Arnold et al, 2005; Lamkin, 2006; Leithwood, 1995), (c) a rural school leader forced to serve a uniquely public role (Arnold, 2000, 2004; Arnold et al., 2005; Lamkin, 2006), and (d) a rural culture steeped in tradition and deeply resistant to change (Peshkin, 1978; Seal & Harmon, 1995).

Although rural schools constitute a significant portion of public elementary and secondary education in the United States, little high-quality research has been conducted on rural education issues (Arnold, 2000, 2004; Arnold et al, 2005; DeYoung, 1987; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Khattri et al., 1997; Lamkin, 2006). In particular, there exists little insight into what constitutes effective leadership practice for rural school administrators (Arnold, 2000; Arnold et al., 2005). The purpose of this study was to investigate how Waters’ and Marzano’s (2006) correlates of effective superintendent leadership practice have been applied by rural superintendents who have successfully improved student academic performance in their districts.

Review of Research Questions

Research Question #1: Findings Related to Waters and Marzano

The first research question asked: How does an effective rural superintendent go about making the task of improving student academic achievement the primary focus of the district’s collective efforts? This research question was designed to specifically address the first three of Waters’ and Marzano’s six correlates of effective superintendent leadership practice. Those first three correlates were: (a) Collaborative goal-setting that
includes all the district’s relevant stakeholders, (b) Establishing non-negotiable goals for student achievement and classroom instruction, and (c) Aligning board support for the district’s non-negotiable goals. The study’s findings related to the first research question will be reviewed in terms of each of these three correlates.

With regards to the first Waters and Marzano correlate, Collaborative goal-setting that includes all the district’s relevant stakeholders, the study produced no citations to indicate that collaborative goal-setting was a common practice among the superintendent subjects and their districts. One practice, Uses school-community focus groups, was cited but was referenced in terms of gathering community input when district spending cuts and difficult budgeting decisions had to be made. Similarly, Conducts cultural/learning surveys was also cited but that practice was designed to provide a better understanding of employee learning styles. In short, there were no specific references made in the study that cited any type of formal, goal-setting procedure.

Regarding Waters’ and Marzano’s second correlate, Establishing non-negotiable goals for student achievement and classroom instruction, the study contained numerous references regarding superintendent efforts to establish student academic achievement as the district’s most important goal. In fact, the first two leadership priorities that emerged from the study, All students can and will achieve academic success and A high quality teacher in each classroom closely mirrored this correlate. These two priorities represented the primary goals and work commitments of the school leaders in this study. The majority of the leadership practices cited in this study represented the means and methods used to pursue these two non-negotiable goals.
There was no evidence or data to indicate that these two priorities were developed in collaboration with other district stakeholders. In fact, two of the subjects indicated that they had informed the board of education at their initial job interview of their intention to make improving student academic achievement their top leadership priority. This data, coupled with the lack of citations regarding goal-setting by collaboration or consensus, would suggest that goal-setting in these subject districts was largely driven by the superintendent.

In addition to Waters’ and Marzano’s correlates, the leadership priorities that emerged in this study reflect the previous scholarship of Leithwood (1995), Reeves (2006) and Collins (2001). Separate studies by Leithwood and Reeves on school leadership provided similar conclusions: effective school leaders make enhancing student academic achievement the organization’s first priority. Similarly, Collins’ (2001) study of successful business executives established that the leaders of successful, good-to-great companies tended to focus on and relentlessly pursue a limited number of organizational priorities. The three leadership priorities that emerged from this study, and that framed the work lives of the superintendent subjects, are consistent with Collin’s work.

The study’s findings were also consistent with Waters’ and Marzano’s third correlate, *Aligning board support for the district’s non-negotiable goals*. The results indicate that in subject districts the process of building support for meaningful reform, the work of focusing the school organization on improving student academic performance, began with the board of education. References to practices that involved the superintendent working closely with the board of education were numerous. There were a total of 16 cited leadership practices under the category of Transparency, practices that
convey the district’s priorities and the methods used to pursue those priorities. Of those 16 cited leadership practices, 9 involved the board of education. Of those nine board-related practices, four involved direct discussions or conversations regarding student academic performance.

This is the first appearance of the most significant finding in this study: the importance of direct conversations about student academic achievement. Previous scholarship has established that building consensus for reform aimed at improving student academic achievement is the primary focus of the school leader (Purkey & Smith, 1982). Fullan (2001) referred to this process as collective mobilization, the ability to commit people and their energies towards the attainment of a worthy goal. For the superintendents in this study, the process of implementing meaningful reform began with an organizational conversation at the board level. The Transparency practices cited in this study that involved superintendent-board interaction were little more than forums for direct conversation about student academic achievement. In essence, these direct conversations about student achievement represented the primary organizational conversation. The next section will explore how the school leaders in this study built momentum for reform by creating additional forums for direct conversations with the adults and students in their rural communities.

Research Question #1: New Findings

The findings in this study were consistent with Waters’ and Marzano’s second and third correlates Establishing non-negotiable goals for student achievement and classroom instruction, and Aligning board support for the district’s non-negotiable goals. The next set of study findings involved the practices subjects used to take the
organizational conversation regarding the need for meaningful academic reform and to extend that conversation to the adults (parents, community members, teaching staff) and students in the community. This meant creating forums for discussions between the superintendent and individuals in the community regarding the importance of student academic achievement.

Previous scholarship has established that rural communities are places where close-knit relationships are developed among life-long residents (Lamkin, 2006). These close-knit relationships are characterized by a distinguishing feature: familiarity (Peshkin, 1978). In rural communities, relationships and connections to other people are given primacy. The reliability of shared information is based primarily upon the reputation of the source. Because rural institutions lack layers of organizational bureaucracy, their leaders tend to be highly accessible to community members - which allows for direct, verbal communication (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). For school leaders, this means that a personal conversation with a community member is considered to be the best and most reliable form of communication.

From the research findings it is clear the superintendent subjects in this study understand this. Seven of the 16 Transparency practices cited in this study involved the creation of forums for personal conversation between the superintendent and adults in the community. Of these practices Superintendent has an open door policy was the most important. This particular leadership practice was cited by all seven subjects and was the second most frequently cited practice in the entire study.

In order to gain support for improving student academic achievement, the school leader must convince parents, teachers and community members to support the district’s
reform initiatives. For the school leaders in this study, this often meant engaging in conversation in places where people were most comfortable: at church, the gas station, the diner, the barbershop or the football stadium. In the words of Superintendent McQueen: “I am very visible and I talk to people on an informal basis. They are our friends and part of our family and I talk to them like that.” For the rural superintendents in this study, support for academic reform was largely built one conversation at a time.

The school leaders in this study used a similar approach with students. The Proximity leadership practices cited in this study took advantage of the close distance between the superintendent’s office and the students. These practices included superintendent classroom visits, cafeteria visits, elementary building visits, school bus rides, hallway conversations and grade-level pep talks. In short, these practices represented opportunities for the superintendent to talk personally with students about the importance of academic achievement.

The leadership practices that superintendent subjects used to encourage direct, personal conversations with adults (Transparency) and students (Proximity) in their efforts to build support for academic reform represent new findings in this study.

Research Question #2: Findings Related to Waters and Marzano

The second research question asked: How does an effective rural superintendent go about building and distributing leadership capacity in a manner that supports the district’s collective efforts to improve student achievement? This research question specifically addressed the fourth of Water’s and Marzano’s six correlates: Continuous monitoring of the district’s progress in attaining its non-negotiable goals. This question
focused on the practices used by superintendent subjects to improve both student academic and teacher instructional performance.

The study’s findings were consistent with Water’s and Marzano’s fourth correlate. The study was filled with references regarding leadership practices aimed at improving both student academic and teacher instructional performance. These same findings were also consistent with Collins’ (2001) work that described good-to-great companies as being highly disciplined organizations that focused on a limited number of performance-related goals.

Most of the leadership practices referenced and related to this research question were associated with the Constructive Confrontation philosophy. Constructive Confrontation was defined as those practices that: (a) tracked progress towards the district’s priorities, (b) acknowledged gaps in performance, and (c) provided corrective strategies for improving performance. In total, there were 16 cited leadership practices under the Constructive Confrontation philosophic theme. Of those 16 practices, 13 involved methods aimed at assisting either student academic or teacher instructional performance. These findings reflected school leaders whose top two priorities involved improving student academic performance and teacher instructional performance.

The Constructive Confrontation practices used to monitor performance in this study revolved around three questions. First, what is the current performance level of the student or teacher? Second, what is the desired performance level of the student or teacher? And third, what additional help can be provided to the student or teacher to raise their performance to the desired level?
Previous scholarship has established that a school leader must be confrontational and address the most brutal facts of the school organization's present reality if meaningful academic reform is to succeed (Collins, 2001; Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000; Schmoker, 2006). The findings in this study are consistent with that theory. For example, Student achievement data is broken down and analyzed for gaps reflected a practice that confronted and monitored student academic performance. Similarly, Teacher instructional performance is evaluated was a cited leadership practice that confronted and monitored teacher instructional quality. Thus, in terms of Continuous monitoring of the district's progress in attaining its non-negotiable goals, the study's findings were consistent with Waters' and Marzano's fourth correlate. What represented new findings in this study were those leadership practices that involved: (a) the providing of assistance to struggling performers, and (b) the removal of struggling performers.

Research Question #2: New Findings

The Constructive Confrontation leadership practices in this study that involved the monitoring of student academic and teacher instructional performance involved three questions. First, what is the current performance level of the student or teacher? Second, what is the desired performance level of the student or teacher? And third, what additional help can be provided to raise that performance to the desired level? While the leadership practices associated with the first two questions are consistent with Water's and Marzano's fourth correlate, it is the practices associated with the third question that represent new findings in this study.

For example, in the previous section the leadership practices of Student achievement data is broken down and analyzed for gaps and Teachers instructional
Performance is evaluated were cited as practices associated with the monitoring of student academic and teacher instructional performance. To use an analogy from the field of medicine, both of these reflect “diagnosis-related” practices or practices that evaluate the condition of a performance or performer. In this study, the leadership practice of Targeted tutoring is provided to students who need academic help reflects a “treatment-related” practice, a practice designed to help improve the performance or aid the performer.

Rather than have an academically struggling student fail a class and then simply re-take it, targeted tutoring was an intervention practice designed to prevent academic failure from occurring. Similarly the practice Advanced placement classes are offered for high achieving students was a treatment-related practice designed to academically challenge high-achieving students. Again, such Constructive Confrontation practices went beyond the normal monitoring process and were instead designed to help struggling performers and to prevent failed performance.

Treatment-related practices were also cited with regards to teacher instructional performance. Peer coaches are assigned to teachers who need to improve their instructional performance and Paraprofessionals are assigned to classrooms that require additional academic support were two examples of treatment-related practices designed to help improve instructional performance. These treatment-related leadership practices related to aiding struggling performance, both for students academically and teachers instructionally, represent new findings in this study.

What also represented new findings in this study were leadership practices related to the removal of teachers and principals whose performance did not improve after
treatment-related practices had been administered. The practices of Replaces teachers for performance reasons and Replaces building principal for performance reasons were two cited practices associated with the Making Hard Choices leadership philosophy. Making Hard Choices was defined as leadership practices that involved either a break with school-community tradition or that imposed a negative impact on someone’s financial or working condition.

While not all of the superintendents in this study indicated that they had removed either a teacher or principal for failed performance, several did. Superintendents Bronson, McQueen and Vaughn indicated they had removed either a teacher or building principal for performance-related reasons during their tenures. Superintendent McQueen comments provide a good commentary regarding the practice of removing low-performing teachers:

We have released some teachers here in the last five years. It has not been easy. But like I tell my principals, if you walk into a classroom and if you see that things are not happening would you want your child in that classroom? If you walk out of that room saying my child would not be in that room, I would select Teacher A instead of Teacher B, then we have a problem and we have to fix it. So we have released teachers and they have been tenured. It’s not the old story, oh it costs $220,000 to get rid of a tenured teacher. No, if you do your evaluations properly and you work with them it can be done.

Because the practices Replaces teachers for performance reasons and Replaces building principal for performance reasons occur so infrequently in public schools, and because they were cited by three of the seven superintendents in this study, they will be considered new findings for the purposes of this study.
Research Question #3: Findings Related to Waters and Marzano

The third research question asked: How does an effective rural superintendent go about articulating and allocating defined autonomy in a manner that supports the district’s collective effort to improve student achievement? This research question specifically addressed the sixth of Waters’ and Marzano’s correlates: Superintendents providing defined autonomy to principals to lead their building’s efforts to attain district goals within clearly defined operational boundaries. The study produced strong, clear evidence that supported this sixth correlate.

The most frequently cited leadership practice in the entire study was *Superintendent does not limit Principal’s authority (limit is undefined)*. In fact, *Superintendent does not limit Principal’s authority* was cited by every single one of the 27 interview participants in the study. This finding is not surprising given that rural superintendents typically assume a broad range of responsibilities, when compared with urban and suburban school leaders, because there tend to be fewer administrators in their districts (Arnold, 2000, 2004; Arnold et al., 2005; Lamkin, 2006; Leithwood, 1995). Thus it makes intuitive sense that rural superintendents would seek to delegate responsibility to building principals in order to lighten their own workloads as much as possible.

Besides being consistent with Waters and Marzano, this leadership practice also reflected Fullan’s (2003) theory that leadership capacity building requires the sharing of leadership, the allocating of responsibility in proportion to each individual’s choice-making capacity. Additionally, the practice of delegating authority to building principals is consistent with Reeves’ (2006) theory of distributed leadership. Reeves’ work insisted that distributed leadership is centered in the belief that the group is smarter than the
individual, and that institutions are best served when leadership is distributed and supported by an entire team.

The fact that the superintendents in this study provided their building principals with a great deal of autonomy does not represent a new or significant finding. What does represent a new and significant finding is the nature of the working relationship between the superintendent and the building principal, a relationship best characterized as intimate, immediate and informal.

Research Question #3: New Findings

Because a number of autonomy-related practices were cited in this study, the leadership theme of Autonomy was identified as a separate philosophic category. In this study, Autonomy was defined as those leadership practices used by superintendent subjects to provide others with the freedom to develop and implement their own methods for pursuing the district’s leadership priorities. These Autonomy practices held special significance with regards to the granting of operational autonomy to building principals.

In small rural school districts where resources and personnel are limited, the practice of superintendents delegating authority to building principals represents no great insight. And, as the most frequently cited leadership practice in the study, it would be easy to dismiss Superintendent does not limit Principal’s authority (limit is undefined) as simply a matter of chief executives attempting to lighten their administrative workloads. But for the superintendent subjects in this study, the practice of granting autonomy to building principals was unique in two respects. First, the autonomy granted to building principals was largely undefined. And second, the granting of that autonomy
stemmed from the unique working relationship between the superintendent and building principal, a relationship that can be characterized as intimate, immediate and informal.

When subjects were asked to describe how their principal’s authority was limited, none of the superintendents could provide a definitive answer. One superintendent spoke in terms of a budgetary constraint, but none of the seven could articulate any discernible limit to their principal’s operational authority. A typical response generally involved an assertion that the superintendent “trusted” their building principal.

Previous research has established that rural superintendents operate within a community context where both personal and working relationships are intimate (Arnold, 2000; Arnold et al., 2005; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Lamkin, 2006). In terms of administrative support, most of the school leaders in this study employed only one or two building principals in their districts. Given that most of the districts in this study contained only a single school building, many of the building principals were housed in offices that sat next to the superintendent’s office. Because of this close physical proximity, the subjects in this study interacted with their principals on many occasions throughout the workday.

As a result, the rural school leaders in this study were keenly familiar with the daily activities and actions of their building principals. This close proximity helped to foster a superintendent-principal work relationship that proved to be much more intimate, immediate and informal when compared with the work relationships shared by school administrators in larger, non-rural districts. Thus when superintendent subjects responded that they “trusted” their building principals, this response was another way of stating that the school leader possessed a unique insight into the performance capabilities of their
building principals. In essence, instead of using the terms “intimate, immediate and informal” to describe their working relationship with their building principals, the superintendent subjects simply used the word “trust.”

It is this unique working relationship that provides rural superintendents with a better vantage point from which to gauge and track administrator performance. As such, this intimate, immediate and informal relationship between the superintendent and the building principal represents a new finding for the purposes of this study. As Superintendent Dr. Vaughn commented, “I think the only way you build trust is with your performance. You simply have to perform.” When asked how he limited his building principal’s authority, Superintendent Bronson answered in terms of performance related to the district’s efforts to improve student achievement:

And so [in this district] the more administrators were willing to handle the more they got. Consequently, those that weren’t willing to do more got passed up… [And soon] conversations started that this is your responsibility, student achievement is the core of it. And no it doesn’t matter how many detentions you are dealing with. What are you doing in the classroom? What does the test data say? What are you doing for strategies? What are the areas of strength and need for improvement for this teacher? The more they wanted, the more they got. And if they didn’t step to the plate, those people are no longer with us.

Another cited example of an Autonomy leadership practice was Principal presents student achievement data to board of education. Again, Superintendent Bronson described how this practice worked in his district:
You know you sat there last night at the board meeting and watched her get up out of the audience and come and sit right at the board table...I’ve seen superintendents at other institutions that were too insecure, they would have had to receive the credit because of their ego. She’s our person...We have tons of conversations, but that’s her baby. She’s the one who reports the data. She’s the one who talks about plans of remediation. That’s how it works. So if you say, is there anything that they [the principal] can’t do, the answer is there is nothing that they can’t do.

Both Superintendent does not limit Principal’s authority (limit is undefined) and Principal presents student achievement data to board of education are leadership practices consistent with Fullan’s (2004) description of distributed leadership as demanding trust. Demanding trust implies that leaders have a responsibility to invest in others, to take a chance on creating an environment where people will take risks and be supported in their efforts.

Even though the practice Superintendent does not limit Principal’s authority (limit is undefined) is consistent with Waters and Marzano (2006), Fullan (2004), and Reeves (2006) work related to distributed leadership, it still represents a new finding for the purposes of this study. The reason it represents a new finding is that principal autonomy in subject districts was based upon the intimate, immediate and informal working relationship between the superintendent and building principal.

Research Question #4: Findings Related to Waters and Marzano

The fourth and final research question asked: How does an effective rural superintendent go about aligning resources in a manner that supports the district’s
collective effort to improve student achievement? This research question specifically addressed the fifth Waters and Marzano correlate: Effectively utilizing resources to support the accomplishment of district goals. This correlate involved leadership practices that worked to align the district’s resources, both financial and human, behind its leadership priorities. The study’s findings included practice citations that were consistent with this correlate.

In particular, the study’s findings included citations that referenced the third leadership priority: Creating resources. Creating resources involved practices that supported the study’s first two leadership priorities by: (a) finding new sources of revenue, or (b) re-prioritizing the district’s financial commitments. As Superintendent Bryner related: “You know you can have a priority of being academically sound, but you have to be financially sound to get to it.”

In this study, the leadership philosophy Making Hard Choices was most closely aligned with the Creating resources leadership priority. Of the eight leadership practices associated with the Making Hard Choices philosophy, six involved school finance. Because all of the rural districts in this study were experiencing financial difficulties, subjects indicated that they spent a great deal of their time searching for new sources of funds and re-evaluating existing expenditures.

With regard to aligning resources to support academic reform, two new findings emerged from this study. Those two new findings were: (a) the leadership practice of Superintendent takes a hard line in union contract negotiations, and (b) leadership practices related to the re-alignment of resources.
Research Question #4: New Findings

Of the cited practices in this study, the leadership practice of Superintendent takes a hard line in union contract negotiations (health care reductions, step or pay freezes, privatizing services, declaring impasse) was one of the most compelling. Of the 57 leadership practices cited in the study, Superintendent takes a hard line in union contract negotiations was the 8th most-frequently referenced practice. More significantly, this leadership practice was cited by a majority of the superintendent subjects in this study.

For the purposes of this study, Superintendent takes a hard line in union contract negotiations is separate and distinct from the leadership practice of Balances/cuts the school's budget. In this study, Balances/cuts the school's budget is operationally defined as any leadership practice that involves discretionary budget decisions that can be made by the superintendent. Cutting a building’s budget for textbooks would provide one such example. Conversely, Superintendent takes a hard line in union contract negotiations are practices that involve financial decisions that lay outside the superintendent’s authority and must be acquired through the negotiation process. This includes any leadership practice that involves: (a) employee health care benefit reductions, (b) employee salary freezes, (c) employee seniority step freezes, (d) the privatization of operational services, or (e) the declaration of impasse and unilateral imposition of the school district’s last contract offer.

A difficult negotiations process can negatively affect both a school and a community. For the school leader, acrimonious union negotiations can exact a heavy toll in terms of both personal and professional relationships. Despite these challenges, the majority of the superintendent subjects cited practices that involved taking a hard line in
the negotiations process. Superintendent Dr. Vaughn described the importance of making
difficult decisions and the reality of living with their aftermath:

So, you make a tough decision, people are angry for awhile but you keep your
powder dry because it is really those tough decisions that benefit the district long
term. Those are long term decisions that you are making for the betterment of
kids, so you are willing to go through a rough patch because it’s going to make
the district better off. The thing that is frustrating for me though is that the
community doesn’t always understand that and can’t recognize why you are doing
it. And then you have to live with it and that’s the way it goes and I think that is
the downside part of making those decisions.

The second new finding involved leadership practices that were related to the re-
alignment of resources. While a number of cited practices were consistent with Water’s
and Marzano’s fifth correlate, which involved the alignment of resources to support the
district’s goals, a number also involved the re-alignment of resources. It is these re-
alignment practices that are not found in Water’s and Marzano’s work and that represent
a new finding in this study.

Previous scholarship has established that changing public schools and public
school cultures is difficult (Seal & Harmon, 1995). A variety of forces, most with a deep
investment in established relationships and traditions, generally oppose reform and seek
to maintain the status quo (Fullan, 2004; Peterson & Short, 2001; Schmoker, 2006).
When this institutional opposition is coupled with a rural culture that is deeply resistant to
change, the prospect of reforming a rural school district in any meaningful way would
seem to be remote (Peshkin, 1978).
However, there are cited leadership practices in this study that represent both a re-alignment of district resources and a break with the status quo. These practices reflect a willingness by the superintendent subjects to re-deploy their institutional resources to their highest or best use in order to pursue the district’s first priority: All students can and will achieve academic success.

Superintendent Bronson captures the essence of this re-alignment of resources as he described the process used by his district to decide whether or not to eliminate the high school guidance counselor position:

We were the first district in the area to layoff our guidance counselor... And so when we did that there was a big uproar in the community. This person had been there for 40 some years, etc, etc. My question to the board was simply this: tell me how a guidance counselor positively impacts student achievement for all? [So] when people came to the board meetings and [during] the public comment [I asked them] bring me the documentation or data that substantially addresses that spending $100,000 on a guidance counselor is more productive than spending $100,000 on five highly-qualified aides that can help our kids with skills in literacy and numeracy and we’ll do it. So at our institution, from a financial standpoint, student achievement drives everything.

There were two cited practices that represented a re-alignment of district resources aimed at better serving the district’s primary goal of All students can and will achieve academic success. The first was Targeted tutoring is provided to students who need academic help. Superintendent Bronson described the extent of his district’s financial commitment to help academically struggling students:
There are a lot of added costs in terms of tutorials before, during and after school. We run a Saturday program, a Sunday afternoon program based on our students' needs... During our Christmas vacation we ran six half-days of school where we had tutorials and we'll run it all summer long.

A second practice that represented a re-alignment of district resources was an *alternative education program is offered to students who are struggling in a traditional classroom*. In many communities an alternative education program is viewed as a place where disruptive students are sent after they have been removed from a traditional classroom for disciplinary reasons. In many communities, the decision to spend money to start an alternative education program for these students would trigger controversy. However, two of the superintendent subjects in this study indicated that they made the decision to start an alternative education program in their districts because they believed it represented a different and better opportunity for some students to become academically successful. This leadership practice is consistent with both the re-alignment of district resources and the pursuit of the leadership priority *All students can and will achieve academic success*.

Suggestions for Further Research

Based upon the findings and results of this study, two subject areas emerged that warrant additional study. The first involves research related to non-traditional superintendents that serve rural districts and the second involves studying the academic success of rural school districts in Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

The first suggested area of study would focus on the effect non-traditional superintendents have in influencing academic reform in rural districts. All of the
superintendent subjects in this study either hailed from a non-traditional background or were serving their districts in a non-traditional capacity (Superintendent-Principal or Superintendent-Chief Financial Officer). Based on the academic success of these subjects and their districts, is there something about a non-traditional background that renders school leaders more effective compared with individuals from traditional backgrounds? Based upon the 57 leadership practices and six leadership philosophies that emerged from this study, are non-traditional superintendents more adept at holding students accountable for academic performance and teachers accountable for instructional performance? Are non-traditional superintendents better suited for making difficult decisions (reflected in the Making Hard Choices leadership philosophy) or better trained in the art of negotiation (reflected in the leadership practice of Superintendent takes a hard line in union contract negotiations)? Or, in terms of building public support for meaningful academic reform, are non-traditional superintendents simply better salespeople when compared with traditionally-trained superintendents? These are all questions and areas that warrant additional study.

The second area of further research suggested by this study calls for a closer examination regarding the academic success of rural school districts in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. How is it that this area, which houses only 3% of Michigan’s total population (MDE, 2010), had half of the schools (4 out of 8) meet the rigorous standards for inclusion in this study? How did these small, isolated rural school districts become so academically successful? Do the seven districts included in this study represent a methodological anomaly or is some regional phenomenon taking place? Is there less student transiency among the geographically isolated school districts in the Upper
Peninsula? Is the nature or level of community support different in the Upper Peninsula than it is in Michigan's Lower Peninsula? These are all questions that warrant additional study. The academic performance of the Upper Peninsula districts in this study suggests the need for a better understanding of the factors that helped to influence their success.

**Overall Conclusions**

The purpose of this study was to examine how Waters' and Marzano's (2006) correlates of effective superintendent leadership practice have been applied by rural superintendents who have successfully improved student academic performance in their districts. More particularly, the goal of this study was to gain a better understanding of how these correlates might translate into effective leadership practice within a rural school context. This qualitative research adds to the literature on effective leadership practice by studying the practices of rural superintendents who have successfully implemented academic reform and improved student academic performance in their districts.

Although rural schools constitute a significant portion of public elementary and secondary education in the United States, little high-quality research has been conducted on rural education issues (Arnold, 2000, 2004; Arnold et al., 2005; DeYoung, 1987; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Khattri et al., 1997; Lamkin, 2006). According to Arnold, this dearth of research places rural schools at a disadvantage because it has provided little insight into what constitutes effective leadership practice for rural school administrators. As a result, there exists a significant gap in the knowledge base regarding the work and practice of effective rural superintendents (Arnold et al., 2005; DeYoung, 1987).
In 2006, Waters and Marzano completed a comprehensive study on the influence school district leadership has on student academic performance. Their conclusions: a statistically significant relationship exists between the quality of superintendent leadership and average student achievement. In particular, their findings indicated that six specific leadership responsibilities were correlated with having a profoundly positive impact on average student achievement. These six correlates were: (a) collaborative goal-setting that includes all the district’s relevant stakeholders, (b) establishing non-negotiable goals for student achievement and classroom instruction, (c) aligning board support for the district’s non-negotiable goals, (d) continuous monitoring of the district’s progress in attaining its non-negotiable goals, (e) effectively utilizing resources to support the accomplishment of district goals and (f) superintendents providing defined autonomy to principals to lead their building’s efforts to attain district goals within clearly defined operational boundaries.

Although Water’s and Marzano’s work has received well-deserved acclaim, it is based on an operational context more consistent with that of urban and suburban schools. According to DeYoung (1987), the problems of rural minority and special-needs students have not been adequately met by urban-based models of service delivery. Thus, the goal of this study was to extend Water’s and Marzano’s leadership correlates and apply them to a rural school context.

The findings of this study were remarkably consistent with Water’s and Marzano’s six correlates with one exception. That exception involved Water’s and Marzano’s first correlate, collaborative goal-setting that includes all the district’s relevant stakeholders. There was no evidence to indicate that collaborative goal-setting
was a common practice in subject districts. Rather, the study’s findings concluded that goal-setting was largely a top-down endeavor driven by the superintendent leader.

In terms of study results that added to the literature beyond Waters’ and Marzano’s six correlates, there were seven new and significant findings. These new findings are listed in Figure 1. First, academic reform in subject districts was not collaboratively-based. The superintendent leader acted as the catalyst for reform and the reform process involved building support for two leadership priorities: (a) *All students can and will achieve academic success*, and (b) *A high quality teacher in each classroom*. These priorities were neither collaboratively-based nor established by committee; these priorities were the school leader’s priorities. The process of academic reform in this study involved making the superintendent’s two main leadership priorities the district’s two main priorities. These priorities represented the primary work commitments of the school leader and reform became a matter of convincing others to support those same commitments.

The second new finding revealed that subject superintendents built support for academic reform through direct, personal conversations with others regarding the importance of student achievement. These conversations involved board members, teachers, adults and students in the community. Many of the cited leadership practices in this study were little more than forums created by the school leader to hold conversations about student achievement. These forums started with direct conversations at the board level that, consistent with Water’s and Marzano’s third correlate, were designed to build support for academic reform. Additional forums were utilized to encourage face-to-face conversations with adults and students in the community.
**Figure 1. New Findings.**

**Effective Leadership Correlates**
- Marzano and Waters (2006)
- Forner (2010)

**Effective Rural Leadership Practices**
- Forner (2010)

1. No formal collaboration. Reform and goal-setting led by superintendent.
2. Support for reform built through direct, personal conversations superintendent.
3. Constructive confrontation: Intervention strategies are provided for struggling students.
4. Low-performing teachers or principals are removed.
5. The close working relationship with the building principal is leveraged.
6. Takes a hard line in union contract negotiations.
7. Re-aligns financial commitments to match district priorities.

**Effective Rural Leadership Priorities**
- Forner (2010)

- All students can and will achieve academic success
- A high quality teacher in each classroom each classroom
- Creating resources

---

All students can and will achieve academic success.

A high quality teacher in each classroom.

Creating resources.
This second finding represents the most significant insight in the entire study - the importance of direct, personal conversations about student achievement between the superintendent and members of the rural community. Because rural schools lack layers of organizational bureaucracy, rural superintendents are highly accessible – which allows for direct, verbal communication with members of the community (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). The superintendents in this study encouraged that accessibility and used it to their advantage. That meant engaging in conversations about the importance of academic reform at church, the gas station, the barbershop and the football stadium. For the superintendent subjects in this study, support for meaningful academic reform was largely built one conversation at a time.

The third new finding in the study involved the constructive confrontation approach used by school leaders to monitor student academic and teacher instructional performance. Performance evaluations by school leaders were constructively-focused rather than critically-focused. These evaluations were aimed at improving performance and not punishing the performer. Instead of being labeled a success or failure, student academic and teacher instructional performance was evaluated in terms of how that particular performance could be improved. What represented a new finding in this study were those intervention practices that focused on helping struggling performers preempt failure.

The fourth new finding in this study involved the willingness of school leaders to remove teachers and building principals who were unable or unwilling to improve their job performance as it related to improving student achievement. Three out of the seven superintendents in this study indicated that they had removed either a teacher or building
principal for performance-related reasons. The superintendents in this study clearly adopted a "grow or go" approach to teacher and principal performance. Teachers who were unable to sufficiently grow their instructional capacities and principals who were unable to sufficiently grow their leadership capacities were removed. This is indicative of a strong commitment to the goal of having a quality teacher in each classroom. And it also reflects school leaders who are willing to hold teachers and principals accountable when improvement in performance is considered necessary.

The fifth new finding in the study involved the uniquely close working relationship between the superintendent and building principal, a relationship that can be characterized as intimate, immediate and informal. Given the physical confines of the rural school environment, the superintendent subjects in this study worked and interacted with their building principals several times each day. Thus these rural school leaders were keenly aware of their building principal's actions and activities on a daily basis. This intimate, immediate and informal working relationship provided study subjects with a unique insight with regards to the performance capabilities of their building principals. As a result of this special relationship, superintendent subjects displayed a willingness to support their building principals by granting them broad operational autonomy in their efforts to improve student academic achievement.

The sixth and seventh new findings involved rural school leaders who displayed a willingness to make difficult financial decisions. The sixth new finding involved superintendents taking a hard line during the union contract negotiation process. Taking a hard line was related to the following contract initiatives: (a) employee health care benefit reductions, (b) employee salary freezes, (c) employee seniority step freezes, (d)
the privatization of operational services, or (e) the declaration of impasse and unilateral imposition of the school district's last contract offer. The majority of the superintendent subjects in this study made reference to engaging in one or more of these practices during their tenures. Similarly, the seventh new finding involved school leaders who were willing to re-prioritize the district’s existing financial commitments and to re-align resources to support the district’s efforts to improve student academic performance.

With regards to taking a hard line during union contract negotiations and the re-alignment of district resources, both of these findings are indicative of two things. First, they are indicative of school leaders who are committed to making certain that adult-driven financial interests do not supersede the school’s student-driven academic priorities. And second, they are indicative of leaders who are disciplined enough to sacrifice some personal popularity in the short term if it means protecting and furthering the district’s interests over the long run.

Implications for Rural Superintendent Leadership Practice

The superintendents in this study were all practitioners of Water’s and Marzano’s six correlates of effective leadership practice. The success of these leaders and their leadership practices, in terms of both reflecting and extending Water’s and Marzano’s work, have the potential to assist rural boards and rural superintendents in their efforts to pursue academic reform in their districts.

For rural boards of education, a number of the findings in this study are of special significance. First and foremost is the need to hold more conversations about the importance of student academic achievement. This means more conversations with parents, community members and staff both inside and outside of school. As stewards of
the rural community, boards of education have a special obligation to see that adults and children understand the new economic reality: that academic success translates to economic success. Rural students who lack academic success will live lives characterized by diminished economic opportunity and limited choice. As such, rural boards of education must support their school leader’s efforts to pursue the dual priorities of academic success for all and a quality teacher in each classroom.

Also, it is important that board members support their school leader’s efforts to maintain individual and institutional accountability. First, boards must support superintendents in their quest to hold teachers and principals accountable for student academic performance. This may at times require the removal of an employee for performance-related reasons. Second, the board of education has to stand fast and support the school leader to ensure adult-driven interests do not override student-driven priorities during the negotiations process or when re-aligning resources.

For rural school leaders, this study holds several implications. The first and most important is the need for more direct, personal conversations between the school leader and members of the community regarding the importance of improving student academic achievement. Second is the need for leaders to remain focused on a limited number of priorities. In this study those priorities were academic achievement for all, a quality teacher in each classroom and creating resources that support needed academic reform.

Third, rural school leaders need to be constructively confrontational in terms of student academic and teacher instructional performance. This means first monitoring performance and then implementing intervention practices designed to improve performance and preempt failure. In this study, struggling students and teachers were not
ignored. In both cases, intervention practices were implemented in order to provide special help to those students and teachers who needed it.

As a finding, providing help to students and teachers who need it would appear to be rather pedestrian. But in today’s culture, where concerns about self-esteem border on the obsessive, it is not. In this study, leadership conviction trumped social convention. The priorities of academic success for all and a quality teacher in each classroom outweighed the social stigma of providing tutors to struggling students and peer coaches to struggling teachers. For the superintendent subjects in this study, the risk of bruising an individual student’s or teacher’s psyche was a secondary concern when compared with the need to improve their academic or instructional performance.

The fourth implication for rural superintendents involves the need to hold teachers and principals accountable for their performance. In this study, unacceptable instructional performance was met with intervention strategies designed to help improve that performance. Teachers or principals who were unable or unwilling to improve their performance were removed. Such decisions are difficult but necessary for district’s committed to academic success for all and to assuring that a quality teacher is teaching in each classroom.

The fifth implication for rural school leaders involves taking advantage of their uniquely close working relationships with their building principals. Because of the close proximity and intimate nature of this working relationship, rural superintendents possess special knowledge regarding the unique strengths and weaknesses of their building administrators. Smart rural superintendents will take advantage of this special knowledge
in order to leverage the strengths of these building leaders in support of the district's efforts to raise student achievement.

Finally, it is important that rural superintendents be able to make difficult decisions and to display an ability to live with the short-term unpopularity that inevitably results. This is particularly true in matters that involve the negotiations process or the realignment of district resources. A rural superintendent who is able to make hard decisions is indicative of two things. First, it indicates a school leader who is committed to making certain that adult-driven financial interests do not supersede the school's student-driven academic priorities. And second, it indicates a leader who is disciplined and thick-skinned, someone who is prepared to sacrifice some personal popularity in the short term if it means protecting and furthering the district's interests over the long run.

This study's intent was to identify those leadership practices used by successful rural superintendents so that other school leaders might benefit and employ them to great effect in their own districts. And because of this focus on leadership practices, it is with some trepidation that this researcher addresses the topic of leadership characteristics. But this is being done as both a practical matter and a matter of practice - the hiring of new superintendents by rural boards of education.

The question is simple: when hiring a new superintendent what is the one quality rural boards should look for, the one characteristic common among all the successful school leaders in this study? The answer is not so simple. For a study intent on dealing with tangibles, how to describe the intangibles? How do you characterize a superintendent who responds to a practice-related question in this way: "You know I
believe that I was brought to this district to serve kids and to serve all kids. That’s my passion. That’s who I am?”

Perhaps the best response this researcher can provide can be found in the work of Michael and Caldwell (2004, p. 383). These authors describe a *stoic optimist* as “an individual with the ability to align both intention and desire with reality.” In terms of characterizing the school leaders in this study, that description sounds just about right.
REFERENCES


*Journal of Research in Rural Education, 20*(6), 1-23.


*Journal of Research in Rural Education, 22*(1), 1-16.


Appendix A

HSIRB Approval Letter
Date: May 6, 2010

To: Patricia Reeves, Principal Investigator
   Mark Former, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number: 10-04-15

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled "An Examination of the Leadership Practices of Effective Rural Superintendents: A Multiple Case Study" has been approved under the expedited category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note that you may only conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In addition if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: May 6, 2011
Appendix B

Requesting Participation Letter
Dear Superintendent,

My name is Mark Forner and I am a teacher in the Indianapolis public school system. In addition to my teaching responsibilities, I am also a doctoral student at Western Michigan University. I am writing to invite you to participate in a qualitative research study on the leadership practices of effective rural superintendents. This research project is part of the requirements for a doctoral degree in Educational Leadership. You are being invited to participate in this study as a direct result of your district’s exceptional improvement in student academic performance over the past five years.

I hope you will agree to participate! **Your participation will consist of two (2) 60-minute interviews about your background and your leadership practices and work habits. Additional data to be collected will include written communications (board minutes, superintendent memorandums, school newsletters) as well as direct observation of board and staff meetings that provide evidence of the ways in which your efforts work to improve academic achievement in your district. Finally, other participants (board trustees, principals and teachers) will be asked to share their observations about your leadership practices and work habits that support academic achievement in your district.**

*If you agree to participate, you will be asked to provide to the researcher a list of names of potential participants. These names should include board members, principals and teachers from your district who are familiar with your work practices. These individuals will be contacted by the researcher in order to secure their consent to participate.* Each of these individuals will participate in a 60-minute interview. My plan is to conduct all interviews on the same day at your school site. Interview questions will be submitted to each participant ahead of time. During each interview I will be taking notes and each session will be recorded by tape recorder. Post-interview transcripts will be provided to each participant in order to assure accuracy.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary; participants may withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Each study participant’s identity will be kept strictly confidential. Your name and your school district’s name will not appear in the study. Your stories or reflections will be referenced by a pseudo name. All transcripts will be kept on a CD-ROM in a secured office in the researcher’s home.

I will follow-up with a phone call to you within a few days. In the meantime, I can be contacted by email at markforner@gmail.com or by phone (231) 730-7945. Thanks for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Mark Forner
Appendix C

Superintendent Consent Document
Department of Educational Leadership, Research and Technology
Dr. Patricia Reeves, Principal Investigator
Mark Forner, Student Investigator
An Examination of the Leadership Practices of Effective Rural Superintendents: A Multiple Case Study

You are invited to participate in a study entitled "An Examination of the Leadership Practices of Effective Rural Superintendents." This study is being conducted by Mark Forner, an Indianapolis public school teacher and doctoral student in the Educational Leadership doctoral program at Western Michigan University. This study is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Patricia Reeves, Mr. Forner's dissertation committee chair.

The following information is designed to assist you in making an informed decision regarding your participation in this study. Your participation is strictly voluntary and non-binding. You may choose to participate and later opt to withdraw from the study. Your decision to waive participation now, or to withdraw from the study later, will not affect your relationship with Western Michigan University in any way. **No interview will commence nor will any data be collected until each participant's formal consent is secured by a signature on this consent document.** Your signature at the end of this form will be your formal acknowledgement that you agree to participate in this study.

The purpose of this study is to examine the leadership practices of effective rural superintendents. **The study's focus is to identify those specific superintendent leadership work practices that have contributed to student academic success in your district. By consenting to participate in this study, you are agreeing to allow other study participants within your district to share information about you and your leadership practices and work habits.**

Your participation will consist primarily of **two (2) 60-minute interviews.** The first interview will ask you to describe your background and your district. The second interview will consist of a series of questions that focus on your work practices that are aimed at improving student academic achievement in your district. Your interview questions will be provided to you ahead of time in order to allow for preparation and reflection. **The interview questions to be asked of you and other participants in this study will not be of a value-based nature ("how well does he or she do this"). Rather, participants will be asked to share their observations regarding your work practices ("what does he or she do") that support your district’s efforts to improve student achievement.** Each interview will be audio recorded and transcribed into a written record in order to ensure the accuracy of the collected information. You will be able to ask the interviewer to turn off the audio recording equipment at any time during the interview. **Prior to the study’s completion, you will have the opportunity to review a written transcript of your interview in order to assure the accuracy of your recorded comments.**

Please do not hesitate to ask questions about the study before participating or while the research is taking place. The results of this study will be made available to you upon your request.

**In addition to participant interviews, data collection will also consist of direct observation by the researcher (board and staff meetings) and written communications (board minutes, school newsletters, memorandums from you to the board, principals...**
and teaching staff). You will be asked to present examples of written communication to the researcher that are tied to your efforts to improve student achievement in your district.

Ensuring the confidentiality of data is the norm in research. Your name and your school’s name will not be used in the dissertation dissemination process. This information will be known only to the researcher. Pseudonyms will be used for participants (i.e. Superintendent 1, Teacher 2, etc.) and general terms will be used in reporting results (i.e. “Five of the principals commented...”).

Written transcripts and collected data will be stored and secured until the completion of the project. After the study’s completion, these documents will be stored on the campus of Western Michigan University for at least three years. The audio transcripts will be destroyed once: (a) the transcription process has been completed and a written record produced and (b) each participant has had a chance to review the written record to make sure that their interview comments were accurately reflected. Your total time commitment for participating should be no more than four hours, including both interview sessions. There are no other known risks or discomforts associated with participating in this study.

There may be potential benefits to be gained from your participation in this study. Those potential benefits may include the opportunity to gain insight into those best practices used by rural superintendents that have helped them improve student academic performance in their districts, and to apply some of these same best practices in your own school district.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact Mark Forner, the student investigator at (231) 730-7945 (cell) or via email at markforner@gmail.com. You may also contact the Chair, the Western Michigan University Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at (269) 387-8293 or via email at hsirb@wmich.edu or the Vice President for Research at (269) 387-8298 if any questions or issues arise during the course of the study.

This consent document has been approved for use by the researcher for a period of one year by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. Do not participate in this study if the stamped date is older than one year.

A signed copy of this consent form will be given to you for your records.

Participant ___________________________ Date ___________________________

Consent obtained by: ___________________________

Interviewer/Student Investigator ___________________________

Date ___________________________
Appendix D

Participant Consent Document
You are invited to participate in a study entitled "An Examination of the Leadership Practices of Effective Rural Superintendents." This study is being conducted by Mark Forner, an Indianapolis public school teacher and doctoral student in the Educational Leadership doctoral program at Western Michigan University. This study is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Patricia Reeves, Mr. Forner's dissertation committee chair.

The following information is designed to assist you in making an informed decision regarding your participation in this study. Your participation is strictly voluntary and non-binding. You may choose to participate and later opt to withdraw from the study. Your decision to waive participation now, or to withdraw from the study later, will not affect your relationship with Western Michigan University in any way. **No interview will commence nor will any data be collected until each participant's formal consent is secured by a signature on this consent document.** Your signature at the end of this form will be your formal acknowledgement that you agree to participate in this study.

The purpose of this study is to examine the leadership practices of effective rural superintendents. **The study's focus is to identify those specific superintendent leadership work practices that have contributed to student academic success in your district.** By consenting to participate in this study, you are agreeing to share information about your district superintendent's leadership practices and work habits.

Your participation will consist of **one 60-minute interview.** This interview will consist of a series of questions that focus on your superintendent's leadership practices and work habits that are aimed at improving student academic achievement in your district. Your interview questions will be provided to you ahead of time in order to allow for preparation and reflection. **The interview questions to be asked of you and other participants in this study will not be of a value-based nature ("how well does he or she do this"). Rather, participants will be asked to share their observations regarding the district superintendent's work practices ("what does he or she do") that support the district's efforts to improve student achievement.** Each interview will be audio recorded and transcribed into a written record in order to ensure the accuracy of the collected information. You will be able to ask the interviewer to turn off the audio recording equipment at any time during the interview. **Prior to the study's completion, you will have the opportunity to review a written transcript of your interview in order to assure the accuracy of your recorded comments.** Please do not hesitate to ask questions about the study before participating or while the research is taking place. The results of this study will be made available to you upon your request.

**In addition to participant interviews, data collection will also consist of direct observation by the researcher (board and staff meetings) and written communications (board minutes, school newsletters, memorandums from the superintendent to the board, principals and teaching staff).** Superintendent participants will be asked to
present examples of written communication to the researcher that are tied to your efforts to improve student achievement in your district.

Ensuring the confidentiality of data is the norm in research. Your name and your school’s name will not be used in the dissertation dissemination process. This information will be known only to the researcher. Pseudonyms will be used for participants (i.e. Superintendent 1, Teacher 2, etc.) and general terms will be used in reporting results (i.e. “Five of the principals commented…”).

Written transcripts and collected data will be stored and secured until the completion of the project. After the study’s completion, these documents will be stored on the campus of Western Michigan University for at least three years. The audio transcripts will be destroyed once: (a) the transcription process has been completed and a written record produced and (b) each participant has had a chance to review the written record to make sure that their interview comments were accurately reflected. Your total time commitment for participating should be no more than two hours, including your interview session. There are no other known risks or discomforts associated with participating in this study.

There may be potential benefits to be gained from your participation in this study. Those potential benefits may include the opportunity to gain insight into those best practices used by rural superintendents that have helped them improve student academic performance in their districts, and to apply some of these same best practices in your own school district.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact Mark Forner, the student investigator at (231) 730-7945 (cell) or via email at markforner@gmail.com. You may also contact the Chair, the Western Michigan University Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at (269) 387-8293 or via email at hsr@wmich.edu or the Vice President for Research at (269) 387-8298 if any questions or issues arise during the course of the study.

This consent document has been approved for use by the researcher for a period of one year by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. Do not participate in this study if the stamped date is older than one year.

A signed copy of this consent form will be given to you for your records.

Participant ___________________________ Date ___________________________

Consent obtained by: ___________________________
Interviewer/Student Investigator

Date ___________________________
Appendix E

Interview Protocol
Interview Introduction

Thank-you for agreeing to participate in this study. With your permission I would like to record this interview in order to accurately reflect your thoughts and observations. You may request that the tape recorder be turned off at any time.

The improvement in your district’s academic performance over the past five years has been impressive. Your community should be proud of this accomplishment. While most of the credit certainly should go to the students and their hard work, some of that credit and praise should go to your districts’ teachers, principals and the superintendent.

Today we are going to talk a little bit about the work of the superintendent. In our discussion, I am going to ask you a few questions that will require you to describe, in your own words and based upon your own observations, the work and activities of your superintendent. In particular, I will ask you to describe your superintendent’s work activities and habits. For the purposes of this interview, I am not looking for value-based opinions or judgments (“He does this well and that not so well”). Instead, I will be asking for you to describe or give examples of the superintendent’s work habits, activities and practices (“He sends an email every Friday, or meets with the principals every Tuesday morning”) that you have observed.

Are we ready? Let’s begin.

Superintendent Interview – First Interview (Case Description)

Question #1) Can you briefly describe your background, career path and how you became superintendent of this school district?

Question #2) Can you briefly describe this community in economic, demographic and geographic terms?

Question #3) Can you provide a brief history of this school district?
Question #4) Can you briefly describe or characterize the relationship between the school and the local community?

Question #5) Can you provide a brief, personal appraisal regarding the overall effectiveness of your tenure?

Question #6) Can you provide a brief description of your district’s future challenges and prospects?

Superintendent Interview – Second Interview

Question #1) How do you go about making student achievement the most important thing in your district?

   a) Can you describe specific actions or activities you do with your school board?
   b) Can you describe specific actions or activities with your building principals?
   c) Can you describe specific actions or activities with your teaching staff?
   d) Can you describe specific actions or activities with students or parents?

Question #2) How does your district go about spending money in a manner that upholds student achievement as the district’s most important priority?

   a) What specific steps do you take in establishing your district’s budget?
   b) Who is involved in the budget-setting process?
   c) When a conflict arises, what is the final criterion used to make a decision?
   d) If there is a conflict, describe the process for resolving it?

Question #3) What do you do specifically that helps you grow and develop leadership talent in your district?

   a) How do you recognize leadership talent? What specifically do you look for?
   b) Once you recognize a talented individual, what specifically do you do next?
   c) What do you do specifically to encourage or help these individuals to develop their leadership skills? Can you provide examples?

Question #4) What specifically do you do to build trust with the people that you work with?
a) How do you build trust with your building principals?

b) How much authority or responsibility do you give your principals?

c) When and how do you limit their authority and responsibility?

d) How do they know where their authority stops?

e) Give examples of a decision a principal can make and one they cannot make.

f) How do you build trust with board members?

g) How do you build trust with teachers?

Question #5) What are the two actions or activities you do as superintendent that have contributed the most to improving student academic performance in your district?

Board Trustee Interview

Opening Question: Can you briefly describe the length and nature of your working relationship with the superintendent?

Question #1) How does the superintendent go about making student achievement the most important thing in your school district?

a) Can you describe specific actions or activities the superintendent has done with the school board?

b) Can you describe specific actions or activities the superintendent has done with parents and the community?

Question #2) How does the superintendent go about spending money in a manner that upholds student achievement as the district’s most important priority?

a) What specific steps does the superintendent take in establishing the district’s budget?

b) Who is involved in the budget-setting process?

c) When a conflict arises, what is the final criterion used to make a decision?

d) If there is a conflict, describe the process the superintendent uses to resolve it?

Question #3) What does your superintendent do specifically that helps grow and develop leadership talent in your district?
a) What does your superintendent do when he or she recognizes leadership talent?

b) What does your superintendent do specifically to help or encourage these individuals to develop their leadership skills? Can you provide examples?

Question #4) What does your superintendent do to build trust with the people that he or she works with?

a) Can you describe specific actions or activities the superintendent has done to build trust with board members?

Question #5) What are the two actions or activities your superintendent has done that have contributed the most to improving student academic performance in your district?

Principal Interview

Opening Question: Can you briefly describe the length and nature of your working relationship with the superintendent?

Question #1) How does the superintendent go about making student achievement the most important thing in your school district?

a) Can you describe specific actions or activities the superintendent has done with building principals?

b) Can you describe specific actions or activities that superintendent has done with the teaching staff?

c) Can you describe specific actions or activities the superintendent has done with parents and the community?

Question #2) How does the superintendent go about spending money in a manner that upholds student achievement as the district’s most important priority?

a) What specific steps does the superintendent take in establishing the district’s budget?

b) Who is involved in the budget-setting process?

c) When a conflict arises, what is the final criterion used to make a decision?

d) If there is a conflict, describe the process the superintendent uses to resolve it?
Question #3) What does your superintendent do specifically that helps grow and develop leadership talent in your district?

a) What does your superintendent do when he or she recognizes leadership talent?

b) What does your superintendent do specifically to help or encourage these individuals to develop their leadership skills? Can you provide examples?

Question #4) What does your superintendent do to build trust with the people that he or she works with?

a) Can you describe specific actions or activities the superintendent has done to build trust with principals?

b) Can you describe specific actions or activities the superintendent has done to build trust with teachers?

c) How much authority or responsibility does the superintendent give his or her building principals?

d) When or how does the superintendent limit their authority or responsibility?

e) How do the building principals know where their authority stops?

f) Give me an example of a decision you can make as a building principal and one that you cannot make.

Question #5) What are the two actions or activities your superintendent has done that have contributed the most to improving student academic performance in your district?

Teacher Interview

Opening Question: Can you briefly describe the length and nature of your working relationship with the superintendent?

Question #1) How does the superintendent go about making student achievement the most important thing in your school district?

a) Can you describe specific actions are activities the superintendent has done with building principals?

b) Can you describe specific actions or activities that superintendent has done with the teaching staff?
c) Can you describe specific actions or activities the superintendent has done with parents and the community?

Question #3) What does your superintendent do specifically that helps grow and develop leadership talent in your district?

a) What does your superintendent do when he or she recognizes leadership talent?

b) What does your superintendent do specifically to help or encourage these individuals to develop their leadership skills? Can you provide examples?

Question #4) What does your superintendent do to build trust with the people that he or she works with?

a) When it comes to building principals, what does the superintendent do to build trust?

b) When it comes to the teaching staff, what does the superintendent do to build trust?

c) How much authority or responsibility does the superintendent give his or her building principals?

d) When or how does the superintendent limit their authority or responsibility?

Question #5) What are the two actions or activities your superintendent has done that have contributed the most to improving student academic performance in your district?

Thanks for participating! May I contact you if needed to clarify your responses?
Appendix F

Transcriptionist Confidentiality Form
Transcriptionist Confidentiality Form

I, ______________________________________, transcriptionist, agree to maintain full confidentiality in regards to any and all audiotapes and documentation received from ______________________________________ related to his doctoral study on _____________. Furthermore, I agree:

1. To hold in strictest confidence the identification of any individual that may be inadvertently revealed during the transcription of audio taped interviews, or in any associated documents;

2. To not make copies of any audiotapes or computerized files of the transcribed interview texts, unless specifically requested to do so by ________________;

3. To store all study-related audiotapes and materials in a safe, secure location as long as they are in my possession;

4. To return all audiotapes and study-related documents to ________________ in a complete and timely manner.

I am aware that I can be held legally liable for any breach of this confidentiality agreement, and for any harm incurred by individuals if I disclose identifiable information contained in the audiotapes and/or files to which I will have access.

_____________________________  ______________________
Signature                  Date
Appendix G

Superintendent Subject Profiles
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Enrollment</th>
<th>Poverty Percent</th>
<th>2008 Graduation Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Charles Bronson</td>
<td>630</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>98.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooper Beach, MI</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yul Brynner</td>
<td>951</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>98.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carpenter, MI</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Coburn</td>
<td>385</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>90.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glenn Lake, MI</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brad Dexter</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grissom, MI</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve McQueen</td>
<td>1,542</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>93.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schirra, MI</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Robert Vaughn</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>91.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shepard Bay, MI</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eli Wallach</td>
<td>394</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>93.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slayton Falls, MI</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Students qualifying for free or reduced lunch

Appendix H

Coded Practice Citations from Interview Transcripts
Citation codes:
1st digit - School number (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7)
2nd digit - Interview source (S - Superintendent, P - Principal, T - Teacher, B - Board Trustee)
3rd & 4th digits - Citation number from interview source


School 1 - Superintendent 1

1S1 - Committee of the whole T
1S2 - Community-based strategic plan T
1S3 - Mission statement...belief statements CC
1S4 - Tutorials before, during and after school...Saturday school program, a Sunday afternoon program CC
1S5 - During our Christmas vacation we ran 6 half-days of school where we had tutorials and we’ll run it all summer long CC
1S6 - Supportive of structural and language changes [teacher contract] CC
1S7 - Spending money for professional development CC
1S8 - Sharing data with them [board of education] T
1S9 - How often do they hear that from me? They hear it in every conversation. T
1S10 - We’ve had Pat Davenport in our district meet with the board T
1S11 - School board members attend professional development opportunities T
1S12 - We have staff members monthly...making presentations at our board meetings that reinforce why we exist T
1S13 - That’s what we talk about [student achievement] T
1S14 - Changes in our principal because they didn’t believe all can and will HC
1S15 - When you put the achievement data on the table T
1S16 - We don’t have an overabundance of coaches. We don’t have an overabundance of people in the fine arts HC
1S17 – We were the first district in the area to layoff our guidance counselor...then spending the $100,000 on 5 highly-qualified aides HC

1S18 - $40,000 budgeted a year as a line item for curriculum revisions T

1S19 - $50,000 per year [budgeted] for technology T

1S20 – As we look at that data so we can determine next year what our staffing is and how it is. Where do we need more skills at? Where do we need more support at? CC

1S21 – Do we need to go more tutoring in the morning or in the afternoon or during the day or on weekends? CC

1S22 – Try to encourage professional development opportunities CC

1S23 – Continue to have conversations with them T

1S24 – We’ve done a ton of stuff including cultural surveys and building level plans P

1S25 – We’ve done individual surveys through an outfit called LSI P

1S26 – We have 10 PD days built into our contract CC

1S27 – [Professional development] led 100% by our faculty A

1S28 – Peer coaches CC

1S29 – Let’s utilize [her] as our K-8 principal and Curriculum Director HC

1S30 – Based on our declining enrollment we don’t have a high school principal HC

1S31 – [The principal] has at the present time the ability to deal directly with the board A

1S32 – [The principal will] get up out of the audience and come and sit right at the board table T

1S33 – She’s the one [the principal] who reports the data. She’s the one who talks about plans of remediation A

1S34 – A new board member...So it’s really spending that time trying to educate them T

1S35 – Superintendent working at a table in the hallway [observed by researcher] P
School 1 – Principal 1

1P1 – Professional development days…one a month, all year long CC

1P2 – We are learning in-house from each other [faculty presentations] A

1P3 – He just talks the talk. He talks all the time. This is our job. We are here to have students be successful T

1P4 – A group was formed to kind of decide what the focus of our school should be T

1P5 – Our vision statement and our belief statement T

1P6 – Zero-based budget HC

1P7 – We looked at our data. Everything is data-based. T

1P8 – [The superintendent] promotes, supports, encourages, quizzes T

1P9 – He sent me to conferences, to workshops CC

1P10 – When I make a mistake the talk is always behind closed doors and you know what can we learn from this and where do we go forward from here? CC

1P11 – I can pretty well make any decision A

1P12 – LSI which stands for Learning Styles Inventory…different behaviors that you exhibit that are how you act P

1P13 – We also did one [LSI] group wise…organizational culture inventory P

1P14 – Eliminating the bureaucracy A

School 1 – Teacher 1

1T1 – He is the building principal and superintendent HC

1T2 – Constantly having meetings, sharing data and having discussions T

1T3 – [Professional development] it’s prepared by our school improvement committee, board members, administrators, staff members CC

1T4 – One professional development day each month CC

1T5 – [After each PD session] will go through reflections and plan our next PD for the next time A
1T6 – PD days it’s expected that OK you will have assignments A

1T7 – Now you need to bring student sample of how you’ve taught that in your classrooms [to the next PD session] CC

1T8 – The superintendent is in and out all the time [classrooms] P

1T9 – It’s a quick in and out [classrooms] P

1T10 – School improvement committee A

1T11 – Our meetings [school improvement] are from 7:00 to 9:00 at night T

1T12 – On the first day of school ...he puts all the freshmen together in the gym and he will say to them “alright freshmen, this is the chat you are going to get. These are my expectations, this is when your GPA starts”. Then he pulls the tenth graders out and has a different talk with them P

1T14 – He has now put three of us in coaching positions CC

1T15 – Lifestyle inventory as a staff P

1T16 – [The superintendent] he is our building principal HC

1T17 – He called me in to help with scheduling two summers ago...I came in on my day off HC

1T18 – Constant hallway interaction P

School 1 – Board Member 1

1B1 – That the superintendent has done with us that has emphasized student achievement is number one is preaching and believing T

1B2 – On student benchmarks, every month, last year it was every month, this year it is every other month, and we receive a report card on where our students are in math CC

1B3 – Ten different benchmarks they are assessing that we see as a school board CC

1B4 – Bringing in of teachers to explain how they do things with the curricular calendar T

1B5 – Math in phys ed T

1B6 – Alternating [staff presentations] every other month with English and math CC
1B7 – Parent teacher conferences of course CC

1B8 – Home visits by the superintendent, home visits by our teachers CC

1B9 – Increase math time from one period to one period and a half...Now all math classes, from K to 7th grade and from 7th grade to 12th grade are an hour and a half. We took another step and did it with English. So now our English classes from 7th to 12th grade are an hour and a half periods CC

1B10 – Add skills classes for students who are falling behind CC

1B11 – We have big classrooms in certain areas HC

1B12 – Made a commitment budgetary wise to have a certified aide in there CC

1B13 – No committees so the whole board is involved T

1B14 – They coach each other but they work collaboratively in someone’s intervention that they all use CC

1B15 – EBLI which stands for Evidence Based Literacy CC

1B16 – At every board meeting we have students...we have seven or eight students at various levels starting in fourth grade on up, come who are invited every month to bring a reading sample and a writing sample T

1B17 – Stop Light writing CC

1B18 – But they have to be data-driven ideas CC

1B19 – Brian Ware Safari CC

1B20 – LSI training P

1B21 – He is the superintendent but he’s also the principal HC

School 2 – Superintendent 1

2S1 – I have cut $1,000,000 plus out of our budget...over the last four years HC

2S2 – We reduced some health benefits HC

2S3 – They [the teachers] actually gave us back half of their step scale HC
2S4 – The board [on budget matters] has been pretty good about giving me the final say A

2S5 – Right now we set limits on spending. They used to be able to spend $1500 or whatever. Now we’ve got that down to $500 because cash flow is an issue HC

2S6 – Open door policy…if there are unresolved issues that anyone has…student, a parent, a community member. I am always willing. T

2S7 – I try to start fostering relationships in my elementary building. I go down to the elementary building fairly often P

**School 2 – Principal 1**

2P1 – We talk about data, test scores, final exams, school improvement interventions T

2P2 – Incorporate a new class, a math lab class…where those students who seem to be struggling with math will take an extra hour of math rather than an elective CC

2P3 – A four core review class…a MME prep along with some other life skills CC

2P4 – He writes articles for the paper T

2P5 – He highlights some of our achievements at board meetings T

2P6 – He asks building principals to write articles and to put them in our local paper T

2P7 – We don’t have department heads and we don’t have curriculum chairs anymore. We do, but we don’t have paid positions anymore HC

2P8 – Asking people personally to attend certain conferences CC

2P9 – He will go to their classrooms, he will speak with them, and he will email them P

2P10 – He has an open door policy T

2P11 – He is very visible and he is at tons of events T

2P12 – I am there [at board meetings] every month. Every month we have to do a report to the school board, every single month T

2P13 – Implementing this Four Core Review class last year CC

2P14 – Shorter school year …we have a longer day HC
School 2 – Teacher 1

2T1 – He writes articles [local newspaper] T

2T2 – Avenues of communication open T

School 2 – Board Member 1

2B1 – He has workshops specifically geared to have us focus on our responsibilities as policymakers CC

2B2 – We have [board] subcommittees A

2B3 – This superintendent … established an open door policy in such a way that everyone in the community parent or not, has access to him T

2B4 – We changed things so that our categories are more clear, more open and easier to understand [budget]…And we also have completely revamped so that finances are totally transparent to the board T

2B5 – We would not take money from a student academic need in order to fulfill a sports want T

2B6 – We have a person who has not shown the leadership that we all wanted or expected from this particular person [administrator] HC

2B7 – Open door policy T

2B8 – Open door policy T

School 3 – Superintendent 1

3S1 – So to save dollars this district which has always been very aggressive in terms of new things, technology wise as an example CC

3S2 – Dual superintendency HC

3S3 – For next year Algebra 1 in 9th grade [moved from 7th grade] CC

3S4 – We have also tried to have hires who can teach more than one subject CC

3S5 – With the school board we share scores very specific in terms of why we think the score is where it happens to be and if the scores are below what our expectations are, then we begin to ask the question “why”? CC
3S6 - We will have the main discussion [test scores with the board] once the information is released to the districts...Significant conversations at the board level come later on when the data is released T

3S7 - I don’t do much with the teachers, that’s the principal’s job A

3S8 – There are mailings that go home T

3S9 – Parent-teacher conferences CC

3S10 – The group that makes Spell Check for Microsoft...so we were able to contact them and get access to that program...we were able to bring that software in which in turn relieved an English teacher of having to read and grade 50 essays a night CC

3S11 – We received the Read to Learn grant CC

3S12 – We have laptops 5th grade through high school CC

3S13 – The board pretty much likes to be hands on with that type of thing [committee as a whole] T

3S14 – So our goal [teacher salaries] is county average. Right now we are not able to do that because we have had two years of state freezes HC

3S15 – As we are making cuts, they ask well why are you cutting? Well, because we have no money. Well show us that you have no money. People want to see that that is where it is at. Now, they understand it because they have the same budget problems at home T

3S16 – We are open to any question T

3S17 – I don’t think there is necessarily a limit on their authority A

**School 3 – Principal 1**

3P1 – He is a numbers kind of guy, graphs and charts are pretty important to him...the MEAP data, in terms of AYP, but also the MME data CC

3P2 – He’s pretty much left that to me [teaching staff and curriculum] A

3P3 – Orientation night with 7th grade where we talk about academics and also talk about the transition from middle school to high school. So he comes in and talks about the importance of grade point average and all those things that count in high school P
3P4 – That is one program that I just felt, I don’t think that would be a good decision…And he asked, OK what can we cut? What else can we do? That’s really been the process HC

3P5 – Yes he keeps piling it on [delegating work] A

3P6 – Develop chart and analyze individual student’s test scores, in terms of charts and graphs CC

School 3 – Teacher 1

3T1 – I see him walk down the hallway and some little child walks up and says “superintendent, superintendent” and he stops and talks to them like they are the most important person in the world P

3T2 – I have gone to a national conference CC

3T3 – It is timed shared like a Professional Learning Community thing CC

3T4 – And even just playing with kids, knowing that he is paying attention to them and what they are doing P

3T5 – During Spirit Week we have a tug of war. And he comes in and is the master of ceremonies for the tug of war CE

School 3 – Board Member 1

3B1 – We are constantly updated at least monthly and sometimes twice a month as to where we stand with our budget, school funding and what we need to be doing. So it’s not a big surprise somewhere T

3B2 – We pretty much work 90% of the time as a committee of the whole T

3B3 – He has an open door policy T

3B4 – [Dual superintendency] we did it first with another district and then we started to do it with our business office and with the ISD and now we have five schools in that business cooperative HC

School 4 – Superintendent 1

4S1 – Technologically we are ahead of everybody up here, far ahead CC

4S2 – We’ve gone in four years to a district that was hemorrhaging money to the tune of $400,000 per year to a balanced budget…we were overstaffed HC
I keep the school board aware.

My principal sits at the board table.

I delegate almost total responsibility for the academic program.

We’ve privatized and actually contracted a lot of the operational service out.

We are going to a single superintendent/principal position next year.

The focus on school improvement is at the teach and student level.

No I don’t touch that [professional development].

Our website and newsletter.

I do a lot of focus groups with parents and community members.

I’m involved in the community, the Lions Club, they see me out walking.

Broad goals actually go through a series of meetings with a focus group.

Teachers have direct responsibility [school improvement plan].

English class did a project where they presented to the school board.

She is one of the school improvement team leaders.

He [principal] and I talk constantly.

Probably the biggest improvement that I have made … is being willing to listen.

We have been negotiating for three years, we are very close to probably declaring impasse… This would be the second district I’ve done that with.

One is just having conversations about it [student achievement].

Directly talking with kids from kindergarten on up.

The willingness to trust people that my way may not be the best way to go.

School 4 – Principal 1

Superintendent trusts the staff to go do it.
4P2 – Principal goes to different meetings and learns as much about student achievement as he can CC

4P3 – Building principal sits at the board table T

4P4 – I [principal] have my own agenda or section at each board meeting A

4P5 – I make sure that they know every award that every kid gets CE

4P6 – We have a principal’s round table meeting every month so I meet with all the local principals together CC

4P7 – When we don’t do well I give them reasons why [student achievement] CC

4P8 – I tell my staff that we have to be a little harder on our kids regarding curriculum CC

4P9 – So I let my board know that [student achievement] because sometimes my board is always used to hearing good news or we’re great, we’re great. CC

4P10 – I did this whole chart over the last five years that compared GPA and ACT scores CC

4P11 – When I become both the superintendent and principal HC

4P12 – I always encourage my teachers to get involved in as many things as possible as far as extra development CC

4P13 – He delegates…it is very rare for him to say no A

4P14 – We constantly are changing our curriculum CC

4P15 – We create classes for kids who are struggling CC

4P16 – Figure out ways to get our kids who are brighter faster and on to the higher things CC

4P17 – I have a cookout with staff the first day of school and at the end of the year CE

4P18 – Older kids interact with our younger kids, like reading month. They will go down and read with the kids or do problems with the kids P

School 4 – Teacher 1

4T1 – Our superintendent currently is more of a hands-off kind of person. He likes to delegate duties to the principal and to other teachers A
4T2 – We take a lot of the initiative and do a lot of things on our own to make things work A

4T3 – We received a service learning grant. We’ve had teachers do service learning projects CC

4T4 – Next year the superintendent and principal positions will be one position HC

4T5 – School improvement plan…so they came to me and asked me if I’d be willing to enter this in A

4T6 – When the whole service learning grant came out…we got all the overhead projectors when they first came out, we were the first district in the area to get them CC

School 4 – Board 1

4B1 – We are in a very tight, financial time right now but making the hard decisions so that it doesn’t affect the classroom right now is really what it comes down to HC

4B2 – We are focused on professional development in our board meetings on a monthly basis T

4B3 – Recent millage issue we just passed CE

4B4 – Communicating via email, via letter home to the kids T
4B5 – The superintendent for the first eight weeks last year drove 5 or 6 kindergarten kids home at noon P

4B6 – My wife commented is just having him be very visible when you are picking your kids up from school T

4B7 – Scheduling [advanced] classes every other year and what not CC

4B8 – Our high school principal…he has allowed him to take over more and more responsibility and to take over and to make decisions A

4B9 – Focus groups but basically he has gotten members of the community and students involved T

4B10 – Last year he met one-on-one with each of the board members to talk about or give them an opportunity to discuss any issues T
School 5 – Superintendent 1

5S1 – We just had a recent bond issue that passed 618 yes to 130 no, a $6.9 million dollar bond issue CE

5S2 – We make that very well known through our newsletters [open door policy] T

5S3 – We charge people literally next to nothing to use the library service P

5S4 – One year on a $13 million budget I had to cut over a million dollars. That was four years ago and I’ve got to cut out a million again this year HC

5S5 – I am very visible. I visit each classroom every year so that the students can see me and the teachers can see me in their classrooms T

5S6 – I go to all the extra curricular events T

5S7 – We are making cuts and reductions and keeping those as far away from the classroom as possible HC

5S8 – We are going to sit down with the union and try to redo our schedule so that we can have more time for kids CC

5S9 – We passed a bond issue and one of our initiatives is technology CE

5S10 – We can provide every student with a computing device CC

5S11 – We are looking at digitalizing educational resources and instructional materials so that the kids’ textbooks could be on the laptop. We are looking at putting wireless devices in our school buses CC

5S12 – We can get our parents more involved in their student’s education if they can bring home a device CC

5S13 – The trust came from the budgets I presented and the information I was providing them T

5S14 – We adopted a committee of the whole organization T

5S15 – Plus I communicate all the time with my board…it is almost an email daily T

5S16 – If changes need to be made it has to be based upon good, research-based information CC

5S17 – The principals and administrative staff meet weekly, each Monday morning CC
5S18 – We have parent open houses... and we open the doors for them T

5S19 – Each building does send home a lot of information to the parents T

5S20 – January is when I start looking and formulating a good budget... so if we have to make staffing adjustments we want to jump on them and make them right away HC

5S21 – We do like to go out and recruit staff, we don’t like to just put out a vacancy notice P

5S22 – I’ve gotten to know key people in each university so they inform me when they have a cracker jack elementary teacher here and if you have an opening you might want to take a look P

5S23 – I am superintendent and chief financial officer HC

5S24 – We’ve tried to maintain as many programs as we can HC

5S25 – What we have to do just to make our budget is cut $900,000 and not go into fund equity HC

5S26 – What I look for is a passion for kids; I really look for somebody who cares. Who walks down the hall talks to the students, puts their arm around them and talks to them? P

5S27 – You know the media can kill you or help you along... what you do is you go to their turf P

5S28 – I’m on the bus, I always tell [the bus drivers] that they are the most important. The first person the kids see in the morning and the last person they see at night is you P

5S29 – I am on the bus and I am in the cafeteria P

5S30 – You can stop me or stop in any time... and I even tell the public that, the parents T

5S31 – I am very visible... and I talk to people on an informal basis T

5S32 – I do trust my building principals, I am a hands-off kind of guy... I give them full authority to make decisions A

5S33 – I give them a lot of latitude to make decisions A

5S34 – I’ve really focused since I’ve become superintendent on the elementary P
5S35 – Our curriculum, our alignment and our assessments. I’m a big data guy. Our decisions have to be made based upon data CC

5S36 – And the staff did it themselves [curriculum] A

5S37 – They worked as departments [curriculum] A

5S38 – We just didn’t put that curriculum into place, they also developed their own assessments A

5S39 – So basically every quarter, there is a quarterly assessment because they need to know CC

5S40 – We’ve revamped our report cards to read not just A, B, C but it is based upon the GLC’s…parents receive our curriculum compact so they know what is being taught in a building T

5S41 – So if the child didn’t learn it, that teacher has to go back and make sure that child does get it and work with the parents [GLCs on report card] CC

5S42 – We have used data a lot. We have gone to the MI Tracker system CC

5S43 – We basically have down to the individual student what grade level they are at and using our own, local assessments CC

5S44 – If certain things aren’t happening in a certain grade level with a certain teacher we know about. And we have released some teachers here in the last five years… [in the same grade] would you want your child in that classroom…I would select Teacher A instead of Teacher B then we have a problem and we have to fix it. So we have released some teachers and they have been tenured. HC

5S45 – It’s not the old story, oh it costs $220,000 to get rid of a tenured teacher, no if you do your evaluations properly and you work with them it can be done. And that’s another thing we have done is to re-vamp our whole teacher evaluation system HC

5S46 – We’ve had a couple of probationary teachers that we’ve let go and some tenured people that we’ve let go CC

5S47 – We went through our process of trying to help them [teacher evaluations] CC

5S48 – We have to make sure that we have the best teachers in front of our kids T

5S49 – If that person cannot show the growth and improvement that we feel to be effective in this school then it is time to move on HC
5S50 – We started an alternative school five years ago CC

5S51 – Three years into its existence it became the Michigan Alternative School of the year CE

School 5 – Principal 1

5P1 – A big decision or major expenditure … he always reiterates what is best for kids? T

5P2 – He makes a great effort to go to classrooms and to interact P

5P3 – Yes he is at everything… he is a very visible person, very active in the community T

5P4 – He knows kids by name and he’ll see kids in the morning and talk to them about whatever P

5P5 – He is tremendous about listening to my ideas T

5P6 – He always tries to have a Monday morning meeting with the administration CC

5P7 – So the conversation yesterday was how do we save $900,000 and stay out of the classroom as much as we can? HC

5P8 – I think the superintendent in general has given a lot of responsibility to people A

5P9 – [teachers] they ran for our school improvement process and they ran it and did it A

5P10 – He doesn’t meddle in the day-to-day things A

5P11 – We started an alternative education program CC

5P12 – He’s made some hard decisions about getting rid of people too HC

5P13 – He’s made it clear that he has high expectations as well CC

5P14 – I feel like I have a lot of authority to make decisions A

5P15 – So that’s a real strength that he has, to allow us to do our jobs A

5P16 – He’s sat in kindergarten classrooms. He’s road school buses P

School 5 – Teacher 1

5T1 – He does his thing in the office and just lets us teach A

5T2 – He is visible… every time I go to an activity I see the superintendent there T
5T3 – We had a bond proposal so he made himself available to the public T

5T4 – He’s got an open door policy T

5T5 – From what I’ve seen...that building principals run their buildings A

5T6 – Looking for grants, looking for ways to bring technology into the classroom CC

5T7 – We just took a trip to Wisconsin to visit a school and to look at their technology and he came with because he wanted to see and make sure CC

5T8 – Letting people that he has hired to do their jobs A

School 5 – Board Member 1

5B1 – Assessing these teachers, you know regular teacher assessments by our building principals CC

5B2 – We are constantly making a list of prospective teachers from the local universities P

5B3 – A committee of the whole work session each month T

5B4 – Anything positive [presented to the board] that is happening as well CE

5B5 – He keeps us informed as to what is happening here at the school on a day-to-day basis T

5B6 – Well he really believes and so does the board that academics are most important...we have to save programs. We haven’t cut anything. If we make any cuts it’s going to be non-academic first T

5B7 – What he does is to delegate authority A

5B8 – He’s not afraid to delegate authority. But then you monitor their performance along with it A

5B9 – If we make a mistake, say hey, I think we went in the wrong direction here. Back up, look at it and say we have to start over. He’s done that CC

5B10 – He encourages open dialogue. I don’t have to be afraid of stopping by his office or talking to him on the phone or sending him an email T

5B11 – And also he is huge on the constant upgrade of technology...we’ve got a big technology upgrade coming with our new bond issue CC
School 6 – Superintendent 1

6S1 – When we came here in 2004 we were in serious debt, about $250,000 plus the state aid note. We reduced that we are now in the black and very proud of that. I had to make some tough decisions HC

6S2 – I had to make some unpopular decisions HC

6S3 – We had to change the principal which was difficult HC

6S4 – We hired a counselor…a half-time teacher and counselor HC

6S5 – Next year we are switching to trimesters CC

6S6 – We are taking on an alternative school here CC

6S7 – I like to get the test results from the counselor and really examine the numbers CC

6S8 – I do an annual report with those [student test scores] T

6S9 – I really communicate with the principal. I don’t like to micromanage so I run things through him and then let him run it down to the teachers A

6S10 – We are going to push numbers, push resources use our Title 1 monies, use our at risk monies…we got an Impact Eight grant CC

6S11 – We are going to inundate more technology this year through QZAP loan CC

6S12 – The previous principal…had been here for some time and maybe he had lost his enthusiasm for his role. So I said OK we need someone who likes their role but is going to take the leadership and run with it HC

6S13 – The principal and I have our conversations which sometimes they are in depth P

6S14 – I am still going to be tough when I have to be tough HC

6S15 – In the confrontation we had with the union was we were staying at zero percent increase and you are not going to get your steps and something is going to be done. Very difficult, very confrontational but it got done and we got into the black HC

6S16 – I think the hiring process we have been able to hire some new teachers so we have brought in some good teachers T
6S17 – We have accommodated that by pulling some kids out of the classroom some at-risk kids CC

6S18 – And supported them by hiring some paras to help with that [at risk students] CC

6S19 – We have to make sure we focus in on those kids who are at-risk and what we can provide them so they can be successful and graduate T

6S20 – Our guidance counselor is a part-time counselor...we need a part-time counselor and he fulfills a lot of roles for us. He’s our data guy HC

**School 6 – Principal 1**

6P1 – He started taking looks at trying to reduce costs down that didn’t directly effect instruction HC

6P2 – He privatized busing as a way to do that HC

6P3 – He was able to find some monies, a donation that was given to us which helped tremendously. We’ve made a major change last year we put a new computer lab downstairs CC

6P4 – New computer lab downstairs with smart board technology. We replaced the computer lab upstairs with new computers. We have projectors in every classroom CC

6P5 – He took out a loan, a zero percent interest loan in order to make some things happen [technology] CC

6P6 – I deal with all aspects of that part of that [curriculum] A

6P7 – We are moving to trimesters next year CC

6P8 – An opportunity to do guided academics with a teacher if someone wants to challenge themselves with a higher math course CC

6P9 – So again for a small district we are offering additional courses CC

6P10 – We are going to put in some more applied processes that we didn’t have time to do before because the period was to short CC

6P11 – We were meeting as a committee every week after school for an hour [focus groups] T

6P12 – [Trimesters] we decided it was time to bring in the student council and their parents…and here is your chance to voice some concerns T
6P13 – But pretty much I have complete autonomy to do what needs to be done and that is what he expects of me.

6P14 – [Professional development] I have asked for some specific things to be done for next year. But that will be in-house because it is specific to our school improvement goals.

6P15 – Implementation of more technology inside of the building.

School 6 – Teacher 1

6T1 – He was involved particularly early on with creating the school improvement plan.

6T2 – The principal is mostly in charge of looking over curriculum and monitoring the teaching staff.

6T3 – We implemented Power School so parents can keep track of how their students are doing online and can communicate with teachers.

6T4 – We do the P.R. and the newsletters and getting involved with the newspapers as much as possible.

6T5 – He does have an open door policy.

6T6 – Parents do approach him and they do work through issues.

6T7 – The principal monitors and evaluates us and they do walk-thrus and try to make sure that things are going well.

6T8 – We have had a lot of good conversations and he has been in my classroom.

6T9 – I teach English courses as well as guidance counseling.

6T10 – He and [the principal] meet almost daily or practically every day.

6T11 – Fiscally we went from a big deficit to actually being in the black and the accountant said that that was the type of turnaround that you just don’t see, it usually takes a couple of years.

6T12 – We have implemented a tutoring program for at risk kids.

6T13 – Technology…we have grown leaps and bounds. I mean projectors, document cameras, smart boards.
6T14 – That was probably the biggest thing he has done. Is to just keep us fiscally sound HC

6T15 – We are switching to trimesters CC

School 6 – Board Member 1

6B1 – We do meet and see a lot of the parents at games because at a small school you have a lot of kids involved in sports T

6B2 - We are going to make financial decisions that are in the best interest of kids T

6B3 – [Privatized busing] We only have 3 or 4 buses. We thought that we could save money and still provide the same services HC

6B4 – To develop leadership within the teaching ranks, I think he tries to put that burden on the principal A

6B5 – He’s very open and honest with us T

6B6 – We did go through some financial problems and he really dug in and held the line with all kinds of pressure HC

6B7 – But when he says something he’s true, none of this wishy-washy stuff. You know what is exactly on his mind T

6B8 – [The previous superintendent] he wouldn’t stand up to the pressure that negotiations puts on a person... This superintendent is tougher, he’s tough-skinned and he’s doing what he has to do and it is not always easy HC

6B9 – [Negotiations] you get to a point where you start giving in to them. But we’ve been tough we haven’t given in HC

School 7 – Superintendent 1

7S1 – Just trying to communicate all these different things with all the different parties T

7S2 – They are professionals and as long as they are making good professional decisions and we have a path we are going down A

7S3 – I guess just trying to communicate with the board all the changes that come along in education T

7S4 – Our Title 1 programs and 21st Century Learning Center we have to use data to drive those programs CC
7S5 – [Curriculum] the principal and teachers do that A

7S6 – We’ve reduced four staff members at this point HC

7S7 – I am retiring…I will work my 1/3 of the time that I am allowed to under the new pension HC

7S8 – We talked about going to a single administrator district and this might be the transition towards that HC

7S9 – We just put together a little incentive package that we hope might help that along [retiring teachers] CC

7S10 – We have some strong teachers that our principal uses in the school improvement line A

7S11 – My philosophy is not to get in their way [principal and teachers] because they are professionals A

7S12 – The door is open T

7S13 – There has been some remediation [teachers] CC

7S14 – You are honest with people and treat them with respect and allow them the freedom to do their jobs and not go in there and say “this is exactly how you are going to do this” A

School 7 – Principal 1

7P1 – Listen to what our teachers need and to what they are saying T

7P2 – Specific kids are targeted and who need the extra help hopefully we are raising their test scores CC

7P3 – [Teaching staff] work together on unit tests and common assessments through the ISD A

7P4 – I am probably in every classroom 3 to 4 times every week, maybe for a short period P

7P5 – We get very little money for Title anymore. And so we have to be very careful and do our research on how we are going to get the best bang for our buck CC

7P6 – It’s one of those things where you are used to budgeting and used to doing things with X amount of dollars and you know you are wiping out 1/5 or 1/6 of our total income. And having to deal with that HC
7P7 – We hired someone half time to kind of cover that void HC

7P8 – If my authority is limited, it is limited very little A

7P9 – Our offices are only 20 feet apart P
7P10 – I always try to run it by him and say here is what I think on this. What do you think? P

7P11 – Listening to the needs of the people that bring them to him T

7P12 – It is getting the right people hired [teachers] in the right positions CC

7P13 – He is in classrooms as often as superintendents are P

7P14 – We had a younger teacher and some parents had some concerns...he and I observed and went in and said to better serve everybody here is a way to better collect homework CC

School 7 – Teacher 1

7T1 – Disaggregate the MEAP test...where 45% of our kids were failing in...and try and categorize that and then we would focus in on those areas CC

7T2 – We’ve integrated an SSR program and have targeted it towards low readers CC

7T3 – And then we’ve got the data analysis through Accelerated Reader and Star Reader so we get feedback...so being able to track that data we can see how we are doing CC

7T4 – The biggest thing is autonomy...the superintendent is giving us that kind of freedom A

7T5 – Our last two superintendents have been pretty involved in staff festivities, they go to our parties P

7T6 – They have a very open door policy T

7T7 – We are so small you work with them a lot closer than, like the last district I worked in the superintendent was housed in a building that sat across town P

7T8 – You know last year we laid off two teachers HC

7T9 – We...took all the state standards, there are 91 benchmarks, and we condensed them down to 41, down to one piece of paper double-sided A
Appendix I

Distribution of Coded Practice Citations by Philosophy
* Denotes practices with at least two citations

(Bold) Denotes superintendent priority (ACW – All Students Can and Will, TQ – Teacher Quality, CR – Creating Resources)

TRANSPARENCY (106 citations)
1) *Superintendent has an open door policy (ACW)  
   2S6, 2P10, 2T2, 2B3, 2B7, 2B8, 3S15, 3S16, 3B3, 4S18, 5S2, 5S18, 5T3, 5T4,  
   5B10, 6T5, 6T6, 6B5, 7S12, 7P1, 7P11, 7T6, 5P5

2) *Superintendent constantly talks about student achievement (ACW)  
   1S9, 1S13, 1P3, 1P8, 1T2, 1B1, 2P1, 4S20, 6B7, 7S1, 7S3, 1S23, 2B5, 5P1, 5B6,  
   6B2, 6S19

3) *Superintendent is highly visible in the community (ACW)  
   2P11, 4S12, 4B6, 5S6, 5S30, 5S31, 5P3, 5T2, 6B1

4) *Superintendent uses school-community focus groups (ACW)  
   1S2, 1P4, 4S11, 4S13, 4B9, 6P11, 6P12

5) *Superintendent contacts board members frequently (CR)  
   4S3, 5S15, 5B5, 3B1, 4B10, 1S34, 1T11

6) *Superintendent presents student achievement data to the board (ACW)  
   1S8, 1S15, 1P7, 2P5, 3S6, 6S8

7) *School board is organized as a committee of the whole (CR)  
   1S, 1B13, 3S13, 3B2, 5S14, 5B3

8) *Teaching staff present curriculum information to board (TQ)  
   1S10, 1S12, 1B4, 4S8, 4S16

9) *School contacts parents through website/email/newsletters sent home (ACW)  
   3S8, 4S10, 4B4, 5S19, 6T3

10) *Superintendent writes articles for the local newspaper (ACW)  
    2P4, 2P6, 2T1, 6T4

11) *Superintendent presents budget information to board (CR)  
    1S18, 1S19, 2B4, 5S13

12) *Principal sits at board table (ACW)  
    1S32, 4S4, 4P3
13) *Students present examples of their work to board (ACW)
   1B16, 4S15
14) *Superintendent talks frequently about hiring quality teachers (TQ)
   6S16, 5S48
15) *School has a mission statement and belief statements (ACW)
   1S3, 1P5
16) *Board receives professional development training (CR)
   1S11, 4B2
17) Student report cards reflect GLC’s and letter grades
   5S40
18) Math is taught in phys ed
   1B5

PROXIMITY (43 citations)
1) *Superintendent talks to students in hallway (ACW)
   1S35, 1T18, 3T1, 3T4, 4S21, 4B5, 5S26, 5P4
2) *Superintendent visits classrooms (TQ)
   1T8, 1T9, 2P9, 5P2, 6T8, 7P4, 7P13, 5S5
3) *Superintendent and Principal talk frequently (TQ)
   4S17, 6S13, 6T9, 7P9, 7T7, 7P10
4) *Superintendent conducts cultural/personality surveys (TQ)
   1S24, 1S25, 1P12, 1P13, 1T15, 1B20
5) *Superintendent rides school bus/visits cafeteria (ACW)
   5S28, 5S29, 5P16
6) *Superintendent targets/recruits top graduates from local universities (TQ)
   5B2, 5S21, 5S22
7) *Superintendent regularly visits elementary building (ACW)
   2S7, 5S34
8) *Superintendent gives an annual, beginning year pep talk to high school classes (ACW)
   1T12, 3P3
9) *Superintendent attends/hosts teacher festivities (TQ)
   4P17, 7T5

10) Older students work in classes with younger students
   4P18

11) Public library housed in school
   5S3

12) Superintendent visits local newspaper
   5S27

AUTONOMY (56 citations)
1) *Superintendent does not limit Principal’s authority (limitation undefined) (TQ)
   1P11, 3S17, 3P5, 4S22, 4P13, 4T1, 4T2, 4B8, 5S32, 5S33, 5P8, 5P10, 5P14,
   5P15, 5T5, 5T8, 5B7, 5B8, 6S9, 6P13, 6B4, 7S11, 7S14, 7P8, 7T4, 3S7, 1P14

2) *Teaching staff develops the school’s curriculum (TQ)
   3P2, 4S5, 4P1, 5S36, 5S37, 5T1, 6P6, 6T2, 7S2, 7S5

3) *Professional development for teachers is in-house/led by staff (TQ)
   1S27, 1P2, 1T5, 1T6, 4S9

4) *Teaching staff leads the school improvement process (TQ)
   1T10, 4S14, 4T5, 5P9, 7S10

5) *Principal presents student achievement data to the board (ACW)
   1S31, 1S33, 2P12, 4P4

6) *Teaching staff develops the district’s own common assessments (TQ)
   5S38, 7P3, 7T9

7) Superintendent has final say on budget
   2S4

8) Board has subcommittees
   2B2

CONSTRUCTIVE CONFRONTATION (111 citations)
1) *Superintendent secures grant/bond money for technology upgrades (CR)
   3S1, 3S11, 4S1, 4T3, 4T6, 6P3, 7S4, 3S12, 5S10, 5S11, 5T6, 5T7, 5B11, 6S10,
   6S11, 6P4, 6P5, 6P15, 6T13, 5S12
2) *Professional development for teachers is offered to enhance skills (TQ) 1S7, 1S22, 1S26, 1P1, 1P9, 1T3, 1T4, 1T7, 2P8, 3T2, 3T3, 4P2, 4P6, 4P12, 6P14, 6T1

3) *Student achievement data is broken down and analyzed for gaps (ACW) 1B2, 1B18, 5S16, 3S5, 3P1, 3P6, 4P7, 4P9, 4P10, 6S7, 7T1, 1B3, 1B6

4) *Targeted tutoring is provided to students who need academic help (ACW) 1S4, 1S5, 1S21, 6S17, 6T12, 7P2, 7T2, 7T3

5) *Teacher instructional performance is evaluated (TQ) 4P8, 5S41, 5S47, 5P13, 5B1, 6T7, 7P12

6) *Peer coaches are assigned to teachers who need to improve their instructional performance (TQ) 1S28, 1T14, 1B14 5B9, 7S13, 7P14, 1P10

7) *Core review classes designed to improve test-taking skills are offered (ACW) 1B10, 2P2, 2B3, 2P13, 4P15, 6P10

8) *Curriculum is revised in response to student performance on assessments (TQ) 1S20, 3S3, 4P14, 5S35, 5S39, 5S43

9) *Software/learning program with trade name is used (ACW) 1B15, 1B17, 1B19, 5S42, 3S10

10) *District switched to trimesters (CR) 6S5, 6P7, 6P9, 6T15

11) *Advanced placement classes offered for high-achieving students (ACW) 4P16, 4B7, 6P8

12) *Superintendent negotiated needed language changes in union contracts (CR) 1S6, 1B9, 5S8

13) *Superintendent/teacher conducts home visits (ACW) 1B7, 1B8, 3S9

14) *District offers an alternative education program (ACW) 5S50, 5P11, 6S6

15) *Superintendent holds weekly administrative staff meeting (TQ) 5S17, 5P6

16) *Para-professionals are assigned to classrooms that require additional academic support (TQ) 1B12, 6S18
17) District offered early retirement incentive to staff
   7S9

18) Board workshop
   2B1

19) Superintendent attempts to hire teachers who can teach more than one subject
   3S4

**HARD CHOICES** (65 citations)
1) *Superintendent creates hybrid positions (example: Superintendent-Principal) (CR)
   1S17, 1S30, 1T1, 1T16, 1B21, 4S7, 4P11, 4T4, 7S8, 6S20, 6T9, 7P, 6S4, 1S29, 3S2, 3B4, 5S23, 7S7

2) *Superintendent balances/cuts the school’s budget (CR)
   2S1, 2S5, 3P4, 4S2, 4B1, 5S4, 5S7, 5S24, 5S25, 5P7, 6S1, 6P1, 6T14, 7P6, 7P5, 1P6

3) *Superintendent takes a hard line in union contract negotiations (health care benefit reductions, pay and step freezes, privatizing services, declaring impasse) (CR)
   2S2, 2S3, 3S14, 4S19, 6S2, 6S14, 6S15, 6T11, 6B6, 6B8, 6B9, 4S6, 6P2, 6B3

4) *Superintendent reduces number of staff for financial reasons (CR)
   1S16, 7S6, 7T8, 5S20

5) *Curriculum department heads are uncompensated (CR)
   2P7, 1T17

6) *District adopts larger class sizes/shorter school year for financial reasons (CR)
   1B11, 2P14

7) *Superintendent replaces principal for performance reasons (TQ)
   1S14, 6S3, 6S12, 2B6

8) *Superintendent replaces teachers for performance reasons (TQ)
   5S44, 5S46, 5S49, 5P12, 5S45
CELEBRATION (7 citations)
1) *Superintendent presents student awards to board (ACW)
   4P5, 5B4, 5S51
2) *District passed bond millage issue (CR)
   4B3, 5S1, 5S9
3) Superintendent is master of ceremonies during Spirit Week
   3TF