Superintendents' Use of Research-Based Responsibilities/Practices in High-Performing School Districts

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SUPERINTENDENTS' USE OF RESEARCH-BASED RESPONSIBILITIES/ PRACTICES IN HIGH-PERFORMING SCHOOL DISTRICTS

by

Wayne Russell Stitt

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: Van Cooley, Ed.D.

Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan
May 2010
The purpose of this research study was to identify "how" effective superintendents use the research-based leadership responsibilities/practices outlined in Marzano and Waters' (2006) meta-analysis that significantly and positively impact student achievement. A second purpose of this research was to find challenges that superintendents face in their attempts to be successful within their school districts.

The study employed a qualitative multi-site case study using elite purposeful sampling. Five superintendents in southwest Michigan were targeted and agreed to participate in this study. They were the only superintendents in this region who met the criteria, which included school districts who have a total student population from 2,500 to 3,700 students and who have demonstrated excellence in leading their respective school districts towards high achievement on the Ed Yes Report Card for at least five years.

For this study the researcher utilized multiple sources of evidence to analyze information gleaned from semi-structured interviews, a review of support documentation, and observation notes from meetings. This triangulation of data was used to do a within-case and cross-case analysis to analyze and interpret the data to find common themes that are shared among those superintendents in the study. The themes
identified were found to correspond to the research-based superintendent responsibilities. While most of the best practices identified in Marzano and Waters’ meta-analysis were found to be themes in this study, it is apparent that each superintendent carried out those practices in different ways.

In particular, the findings showed that of the 51 research-based practices found to aid superintendents in leading their district to high student achievement, 41 of them were found to be themes in this study, with an additional 3 themes emerging. Additional findings were found in three prominent challenges. These challenges were money, time, and buy-in from stakeholders. Superintendents voiced their concerns over these specific problems in their attempts to carry out all of specific research-based responsibilities/practices. The study identifies specific ways the superintendents addressed these obstacles. It was found in this study that the superintendents implemented all of the research-based best practices to combat these obstacles.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This endeavor would not have been successful without the support, guidance, direction, and patience of my family, friends, mentors, professors, and committee members. My family constantly encouraged me. My friends inspired me to continue.

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Wayne Russell Stitt
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Public school districts, now more than ever, are challenged to ensure that all students succeed. Holding school districts accountable for increasing student achievement is the central theme of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Among the requirements of NCLB is that all states must establish high standards and, by 2014, all students must demonstrate proficiency in the established state objectives by passing local assessments and/or the state high stake tests. Schools that do not make adequate growth each year must provide supplemental services, take corrective actions, and, if still not meeting standards after five years, may need to submit to state control over the school operations (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

Public education is under increasing scrutiny from the media and politicians. A picture is being painted of schools commonly showing signs of underachievement and mismanagement. The pressures from these images, warranted or not, mandate leaders to perform at increasingly higher levels, requiring them to be actively engaged as instructional leaders. The role of the superintendent has changed from typical “administrator” to more of an instructional leader. Knowing how to improve learning, teaching, and student performance, while also generating community support and leadership capacity are important characteristics of a superintendent’s job (Bjork, 2001).
The role of the superintendent becomes even more complex and more important with all the changes and mandates. The job description of superintendent is not as clear cut and predictable as it was in past years. Because all schools are expected to improve and, in some cases, make dramatic improvements, the role has become that of a change agent. The path toward positive change has many avenues, and each educator has a philosophy about which is the best to take (Malone, 1999). Which methods will yield long term results? Which methods will result in better test results on state assessments and ultimately fund our schools? What teaching methods are pedagogically sound and what do we do if the efforts to fund our schools go against what we know is best for student learning? Finding successful leadership in a time of so much instability and reform becomes imperative. More specifically, as the leader of the leaders in the school system, finding what works with successful superintendents in today's school climate is more important than ever and time is definitely an issue.

Adding to this challenge is the fact that the pool of candidates and aspiring superintendents is shrinking to alarming proportions (Chaddock, 1999). It is estimated that within the decade those from the baby boom age will be retiring, which will account for 8,000 to 14,000 public school districts looking for a new superintendent (Larsen & Whritner, 2001). There are many reasons associated with the high turnover rate among school superintendents, which include financial problems in the district, low salaries, and inadequate staffing (Scherer, 1995). Paul Houston, Executive Director of the American Association of School Administrators stated, "The job is impossible, the expectations are inappropriate, the training is inadequate, and the pipeline is inverted" (Lashway, 2003, p. 2).
Despite these problems, the fact remains there are superintendents working in school systems today that use methods which meet state standards, provide for school funding, and utilize methods which increase long term results for our students. The current study attempts to add to the literature by revealing specific responsibilities and practices of successful superintendents.

As the leader of the school district, the superintendent is instrumental to the success or failure of schools. Marzano and Waters (2006) identified six specific leadership responsibilities which, when addressed correctly, yield positive results. In their meta-analysis they found a positive correlation (.24) between district leadership and student achievement. It can be predicted that there will be a gain of 9.5 percentile points if the superintendent improved his abilities one standard deviation. The six district-level leadership responsibilities that significantly impact the superintendent's abilities to lead are as follows: goal setting process, non-negotiable goals for student achievement and instruction, board alignment supporting district goals, monitoring the goals, use of resources to support the goals, and providing a defined autonomy to principals. Marzano and Waters also identified practices that help superintendents with their responsibilities. These practices are embedded in the above responsibilities and will be addressed in the review of literature and findings of this study.

These studies are important to recognize that there are successful leaders following successful practices that directly correlate to higher achievement within their school districts. The problem that remains is that little attention has been given to the specific behaviors of successful superintendents. The topic of finding a true profile of a successful superintendent, which is the focus of this dissertation, has not been given
adequate attention. The need for this is extremely important in today's educational climate. Aspiring and struggling superintendents need a model from which to base their practices in order to meet today's demands for their leadership.

Problem Statement

Leadership is inextricably tied to the success of any school district. The portrait of the superintendency as an impossible or undesirable profession damages the aspirations of those who would like to take on this very important position (Edwards, 2006; Hayes, 2006). In order to meet the high demands of leading a successful school system, successful superintendents need to lead the charge. The problem statement is captured in the following statement: There is no evidence on how superintendents' actions as related to methods, philosophies, and other practices positively impact student achievement.

Current research has shown specific leadership responsibilities and practices that positively impact student achievement (Marzano & Waters, 2006). The researcher will examine these findings, which have yet to be examined against actual systems that contribute to exemplary practice in the superintendency, to see to what extent, if any, these practices are employed by highly effective Michigan superintendents. Most importantly, if specific responsibilities and practices are found, the researcher will determine how the superintendent carries out those responsibilities and practices that lead to student achievement.
Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to identify specific responsibilities and practices of effective Michigan superintendents. For this investigation, the title of “effective” superintendent is defined as superintendents who have successfully led their respective districts in meeting Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) since the inception of the Ed Yes Report Card, which came about as the result of the federal mandates from No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. In 2005-06, school districts in Michigan had to attain target achievement goals in English language arts and mathematics. Annually, districts must meet or exceed the other academic indicators set by the state: graduation rate for high schools and attendance rates for middle and elementary schools. Achievement goals must be reached for each subgroup (i.e., economically disadvantaged, marginalized ethnic groups, students with disabilities, and students with limited English proficiency) that has at least 30 students in each group. School districts in this study had to receive mostly 90% A’s annually on the Ed Yes Report Card and have established leadership with the superintendent leading the district for at least five years. A second purpose of this research is to reveal similarities between and among the effective superintendents on how they address their leadership responsibilities/practices that current research suggests is exemplary.

Despite the fact that there have been empirical studies recently about superintendent responsibilities and practices that show how strong superintendent leadership is essential to student achievement, there has been little research on “how” superintendents best utilize the specific research-based responsibilities/practices. In
adding to research, this study will attempt to also find detractors that superintendents face in their attempts to be successful within their school districts. It is important to find how successful superintendents overcome barriers that may potentially lead their district to high student achievement.

Research Questions

The study will attempt to answer the following two research questions:

1. Do effective superintendents exhibit behaviors and actions that support current exemplary leadership research on responsibilities/practices? If so, how?
2. What are the factors that detract superintendents from successfully carrying out their responsibilities/practices? How do they overcome those barriers?

Significance of the Study

Most studies regarding superintendents have addressed general descriptors while providing little information about the impact of their leadership on student achievement (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000; Hodgkinson & Montenegro, 1999; Sharp & Walter, 1997). Recently, Marzano and Waters (2006) found that superintendent leadership does matter and has a positive impact on student achievement. In Marzano and Water’s meta-analysis they discovered six responsibilities that, if superintendents successfully implement through effective practices, positively impact student learning.

The research supplements the knowledge base by specifically interviewing effective superintendents to see to what extent, if any, do they employ the specific research-based leadership responsibilities and practices and then how they implement
them. The study investigates “how” superintendents carry out the research-based specific responsibilities and practices, while also adding to the research any additional findings found during this study. In addition, the findings may identify limitations or detractors that take away or limit the work of the superintendent in his/her ability to successfully implement responsibilities and practices that assist in improving student achievement.

As stated above, demands that confront public schools are greater than ever. The push for accountability, as measured by student performance, is increasing (Glass et al., 2000). The superintendent, as the leader of the school district, faces the ever-changing educational landscape by developing ways to lead his followers that encourage innovation, increase communication, build shared vision, and involve all constituents in the task of education (Hoyle, 1995). In short, the leadership role of the superintendent is crucial to the success of the organization (Lashway, 1999).

In conclusion, this study was designed to demonstrate specific superintendent leadership characteristics that can assist aspiring and practicing superintendents. This investigation attempted to isolate, identify, and relay behaviors used to successfully lead their respective school districts towards student academic success.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative multi-site case study using elite purposeful sampling interviewing superintendents in effective school districts in the state of Michigan. Both a within-case and cross-case synthesis was used to analyze and interpret the data. The primary source of data collection for this study was interviews conducted with superintendents. In addition, data were collected by Internet and district literature (e.g.,
annual report, strategic plan, and board minutes), and observations were made of the superintendents in their daily work. The specifics of this study are explored to a greater extent later in the methodology section.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is that it included only effective superintendents in southwest Michigan. The terms by which effective is defined in this study may or may not be the results of actions by the superintendent. Those interviewed were/are in leadership roles within the school and community, rather than a random sample.

The researcher is not a practicing superintendent and is therefore evaluating and interpreting the data collected based on the researcher's knowledge and experience. This study was also limited, due to the small sample size of superintendents located in rural southwest Michigan school districts who serve from 2,500 to 3,700 students.

Delimitations

Delimitations of this study concerned the boundary of the problem, the participants studied, and the setting of the study. The study focused on the demonstration of instructional leadership characteristics of effective Michigan superintendents. In addition, the perceptions of others within the leadership circle concerning the instructional leadership characteristics of these superintendents were considered.
Organization of the Study

Chapter II consists of a review of literature and related research. Chapter III includes the methodology used to conduct the investigation. Results, themes, and emerging themes are presented in Chapter IV. A summary, conclusions, and recommendations for additional research are presented in Chapter V.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter II reviews superintendent leadership responsibilities and practices that lead to student achievement and the challenges superintendents face in their position. In the first section, the Marzano and Waters (2006) meta-analysis is presented in conjunction with additional research in relation to based practices used by superintendents that lead to high student achievement. The specific responsibilities related to Marzano and Waters meta-analysis that contribute to effective leadership follow. The final section presents specific challenges superintendents face while leading their respective school districts.

Marzano and Waters (2006) examined 27 studies that addressed the instructional leadership role of the superintendent that can improve student achievement. Studies used for this meta-analysis were conducted since 1970. There were 2,817 districts involved, while 3.4 million students were quantified looking at the increase of student achievement. The following questions were addressed in their study.

Question 1 – What is the strength of relationship between leadership at the district level and average student academic achievement in the district?

Question 2 – What specific district leadership responsibilities are related to student academic achievement?
Question 3 – What specific leadership practices are used to fulfill these responsibilities?

The meta-analysis found that superintendent leadership does matter. In addition, the investigation identified six responsibilities that, if superintendents successfully implement through effective practices, can positively impact student learning. They also uncovered a number of best practices that support the superintendent’s leadership strategies and practices. The final two questions examined specific studies that Marzano and Waters (2006) used in their meta-analysis. Additional research supported and added to the work of Marzano and Waters. Finally, detractions that compromise or limit the work of the superintendent were also noted in the literature.

District Leadership Makes a Difference – Question 1

With the independent variable being district-level leadership and the dependent variable being student achievement, it was found that there was, on average, a strong positive correlation (.24) between the district-level leadership and student’s academic success.

Superintendent Leadership Responsibilities – Question 2

Goal-Setting Process

Effective superintendents incorporate all stakeholders in establishing goals for the school district. They ensure that principals are actively providing leadership since they are the ones who will implement and articulate the goals for their respective schools. This
process does not mean that the superintendent has to secure consensus from all relevant stakeholders. There needs to be an acceptable agreement with the district goals that all will support and assist in the attainment of the goals established.

*Non-Negotiable Goals for Achievement and Instruction*

It is the superintendent’s obligation to ensure that, through the goal-setting process, the end result is that all staff focuses on school improvement and increasing student achievement and classroom instruction. Specific achievement targets need to be established for all students and schools in the district. An action plan should be established to provide a blueprint for success. A common framework for instructional planning and design, student vocabulary development and enhancement, and effective instructional strategies will assist leaders in meeting district and building goals, and student learning outcomes.

*Board Alignment with and Support of District Goals*

The school board plays an important role in the goal setting process. Proper alignment and support for the non-negotiable goals is essential. Boards also help to ensure that goals remain the focus of the school district. Boards adopting a district five-year plan to address achievement and instruction goals institute a best practice that can enhance student learning. Without focus, a school board can add to the barriers that detract from student achievement. In addition, the researchers (Marzano & Waters, 2006) found that district success could be compromised if individual school board members pursued their own interests in lieu of not focusing on district goals.
Monitoring Goals for Achievement and Instruction

An important role of the superintendent is to continually monitor district goals and to make sure that they are the main focus of the district. Achievement and instructional goals need to be the primary indicator for student success.

Use of Resources to Support the Goals for Achievement and Instruction

The superintendent must allocate the necessary resources to accomplish the district’s goals. This includes time, money, personnel, and materials to help meet the goals. A meaningful commitment to professional development is vital to the school improvement process. Ensuring this process is aligned to the district goals is a key.

Defined Autonomy and Superintendent Relationship with Schools

If superintendents provide principals with “defined autonomy,” it will positively impact student achievement. This translates into setting clear, non-negotiable goals for learning and instruction and allowing the principal to take ownership and responsibility in meeting those goals. It does not include site-based management, which has a negative correlation to student achievement.

Practices that Assist with the Superintendent’s Leadership Responsibilities

The findings of the Marzano and Waters (2006) meta-analysis study identified best practices that superintendents used to assist in carrying out the six responsibilities. Table 1 summarizes key superintendent responsibilities, average correlation gain when implemented, and best practices.
Table 1

Leadership Responsibilities and Practices Found in Meta-Analysis

<table>
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<th>Average Gain</th>
<th>Practices Used to Carry Out the Responsibilities</th>
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<td>Goal-setting process</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>- Develop shared vision for goal setting process</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Use goal setting process to set goals with board and administration</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>- Develop goals based on achievement</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>- Communicate expectations to all administrators</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction</td>
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<td>- Model understanding of instructional design</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>- Establish clear priorities among the district’s goals</td>
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<td>- Adopting instructional methods for the district’s curriculum</td>
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<td>- Adopt and implement an instructional program</td>
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<tr>
<td>Board alignment with support of district goals</td>
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<td>- District goals are agreed by board president</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Type and nature of conflict is agreed with by board president</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Agreeing with the political climate of the district with the board president</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Nature of teaching/learning is agreed with by board president</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Provide professional development for the school board</td>
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<td>- Agree with board president on effectiveness of board training</td>
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<td>Monitoring goals for achievement and instruction</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>- Use an instructional evaluation program to evaluate district’s instructional program</td>
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<td>- Get feedback from instructional evaluation program</td>
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<td>- Use a system to manage instructional change</td>
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<td>- Evaluate principals annually</td>
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<td>- Report student achievement data to school board on a regular basis</td>
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<td>- Make sure that all curricular needs are met for all student populations</td>
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<td>- Observe classrooms during school visits</td>
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<td>- Coordinate efforts within the organization to increase reliability and have systems in place to respond to failures</td>
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<td>Use resources to support goals for achievement and instruction</td>
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<td>- Adopt an instructional and resource management</td>
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<td>- Provide extensive professional development to principals and teachers</td>
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<td>- Train the staff on a common yet flexible instructional model</td>
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<td>- Control resource allocation</td>
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<td>- Design a master plan to coordinate in-service activities for the district</td>
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In this section, six specific superintendent leadership responsibilities using studies Marzano and Waters (2006) used in their meta-analysis are presented in conjunction with additional research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superintendent Responsibilities</th>
<th>Average Gain</th>
<th>Practices Used to Carry Out the Responsibilities</th>
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</table>
| Defined autonomy; superintendent relationship with schools | .28          | - Develop a shared vision and understanding of “defined autonomy”  
- Use standards for content and instruction as basic design principles  
- Commit the district and schools to continuous improvement  
- Screen, interview, and select teachers with principals  
- Hire experienced teachers  
- Reward successful teachers and fire those that aren’t successful  
- Prioritize teacher evaluations for principals  
- Have principals discuss results with staff  
- Have agreed upon principles/values which direct actions of people  
- Make sure all schools have a clear mission that is focused on school performance  
- Ensure all schools have practices that provide opportunities for all students to learn  
- Include socializing functions in district meetings  
- Have high expectations for school performance  
- Expect principals to be instructional leaders  
- Direct personnel operations to assure a stable yet improving well-balanced work force  
- Ensure schools have an orderly climate  
- Promote innovation  
- Develop principal awareness of district goals and actions taken to meet those goals  
- Provide leadership of curriculum development  
- Make sure that homogenous groups do not take away from any group  
- Apply district sanctions for students who don’t meet academic expectations  
- Reward students beyond the honor rolls and assemblies for exceptional performance |

Marzano & Waters, 2006, pp. 15-16
Goal-Setting Process and Non-Negotiable Goals for Achievement and Instruction

An effective leader is one that has the ability to create a vision, communicate that vision in terms of mission and goals, and then evaluate and focus energy on accomplishing the vision (Asera, Johnson, & Ragland, 1999; Canole, 1999; Cook, 1990; Covey, 1989; Cuban, 1984; Edwards, 2006; Hoy & Ferguson, 1985; Hoerr, 2005; Jasparro, 2006; Kaufman & Grise, 1995; Lane, Bishop, & Wilson-Jones, 2005; Larking, 1984; Likert, 1961; Marzano & Waters, 2006; Morgan, 1990; Peterson, Murphy, & Hallinger, 1985; Romney, 1996; Sashkin, 1986a, 1986b; Schmoker, 1996; Wallace, 1985; Sheive & Schoenheit, 1987). Schmoker (1996) stated that one of the biggest mistakes educators can make in today’s educational climate is to attempt to take on more than our school systems can manage. Covey (1989) indicated that successful people start with the end in mind. In today’s era of accountability it is too easy to be distracted by the increasing demands placed up on superintendents. It is essential for them to maintain their focus on student achievement. Hoerr (2005) observed:

We simply cannot do all these things and do them well. Finite hours and energy mean that we must prioritize and focus our efforts. If we do not, we will wander here and there, Like Alice (in Wonderland), following whims and responding to spur-of-the-moment crises. Without a focus, we are likely to spend our time heading in two directions, both counterproductive. On the one hand, we may spread our energies too widely. When this happens, we cannot achieve enough progress in any one area to make a difference for our students or to generate a sense of satisfaction for ourselves. On the other hand, we may simply continue with the same behaviors and activities of previous years, regardless of their effectiveness. Doing this is a disservice to our students and teachers (and to ourselves). (p. 47)

Larking (1984), when describing student gains in a Northeastern school district, reported that the superintendent assumed the role of educational leader of the district by
setting major objectives and by tying his role of superintendent to achieving goals. The superintendent must be actively involved in establishing clearly defined curricular and instructional objectives (Larking, 1984). Effective leaders establish clearly stated goals as reported by Wallace (1985). Board priorities, as established by the district superintendent, have become the agenda for the school district, and, consequently, the focus and attention of the community and district personnel have been on student achievement. An organization’s success, especially school organizations, may be measured by the ability to achieve and maintain its goals. School goals must be established by knowledgeable people with the ultimate objective to increase student achievement. Schools are then guided by goals that educators and community understand. When goals are identified for the organization, it is assumed that the attainment of the goals can be evaluated by developing measures that are appropriate for what is needed (Hoy & Ferguson, 1985).

In the corporate world there have been a number of studies that emphasize the importance of the goal-setting process and the impact it plays into the organization. Bennis and Nanus (1985), Peters and Waterman (1982), and Horton (1986) studied CEOs and identified high performing leaders. They found that successful leaders established a vision and communicated their vision to others while inspiring and transforming followers to make the vision a reality through the goal-setting process. Once the plan was in place, the leader allowed room for autonomy for followers to reach the goals. Sheive and Schoenheit (1987) conducted a case study involving 12 New York superintendents and found that they all created a vision, made that vision a shared public vision, and developed strategies with their staff to achieve the vision. Burns (1978) called this type of leadership transformational leadership. Cuban (1984) noted that districts that have shown
effectiveness in instruction have reported “embracing” the mission of improving schools through goal setting and targeting academic aims. He recommended that superintendents create instructional goals that are stated in terms of outcomes, most likely improved test scores (Cuban, 1984).

As the superintendent, it is important to involve the school board and principals in the goal-setting process. Peterson, Murphy, and Hallinger (1985) and Morgan (1990) found that in effective school districts the district goals formed the basis of individual schools’ goals. Murphy and his associates noted that in effective school districts principals are influenced by a superintendent who clearly outlines tasks, processes, and behaviors.

Communicating the vision is vitally important to the goal-setting process. Marshall Sashkin (1986a) stated that effective visionary leaders have the ability to communicate the vision in a compelling fashion, which motivates and empowers all members to act and ultimately work on pursuing the goals of the vision. He identified three basic requisites that need to be considered if a vision is to be supported by the organization as a whole. The organization has to have an understanding that change is essential. Another requisite is to focus on how to involve and procure support for goals. Finally, it is important to have all parties play a role in bringing the vision to fruition.

There are many practices to assist leaders in the goal setting process. Likert (1961) surmised that an effective leader is one:

1. who is supportive, shows trust and confidence in subordinates, and is friendly and considerate. He will also acknowledge and appreciate ideas and contributions, while providing recognition and communication with everyone.
2. who uses group methods to supervise subordinates. In this practice leaders include subordinates in the decision making process. They communicate expectations, promote cooperation within the organization, and facilitate conflict resolution. The leader provides constructive criticism and has problem solving sessions with groups to help with attaining the goals.

3. who sets high performance goals that are attainable.

An effective leader understands a vision is required in any effective organization. Successful leaders are able to create a long-term vision for the organization, communicate that vision, build a culture to support the vision, and motivate others within the organization to pursue the vision as if it was their own.

Goals set by the superintendent and school board in collaboration with the principals and other administration should be non-negotiable goals in order to lead to effective instruction and ultimately to student achievement. As stated by Marzano and Waters (2006), the setting of non-negotiable goals is required in order to set specific achievement targets for the district, schools, and subpopulations in the district. Once established, these non-negotiable goals serve as a guideline so that all buildings are aware and plans can be created for these goals and targets. Asera, Johnson, and Ragland (1999) noted that goals should be written with the premise that there are to be no excuses in meeting the goals. The goals must have meaning for teachers, students, parents, principals, and community leaders. The goals should be written in order to inspire the school community and the community at large. Marvin Edwards (2006), who wrote *The Modern School Superintendent*, said:
The implementation plan should be very specific and provide details about annual progress evaluations. Furthermore, once a strategic plan is adopted, the district is actually saying to the staff and public, “This is how we are going to do business for the next five years.” To adopt such a position will leave little room for doubt about whether or not the plan will be funded. In the most basic interpretation, from adoption of the plan to the end of the five years, all activities that happen within the school district should reflect the plan. (p. 123)

In 1999, Asera et al. studied 10 school districts. They found it was the superintendent and other school district leaders who were directly responsible for increased academic achievement. The researchers claimed superintendents were able to have an effect on student achievement through several actions. Those actions were:

1. Creating a sense of urgency for the improvement of academic achievement.
2. Creating an environment in which academic achievement became top priority by creating shared decisions about academic achievement.
3. Establishing goals that are nonnegotiable.
4. Maintaining a clear focus.
5. Changing the focus of the central office from a managerial role to that of creating and support high expectations by ensuring the availability of resources and support.

The authors concluded that “academic improvement in the effective districts was not accidental, nor was it dependent upon good luck; it was planned” (Asera et al., 1999, p. 13).

Through the collaborative goal-setting process, the superintendent ensures the non-negotiable goals that all staff members must own and implement produce results. One way of ensuring district goals are, in fact, non-negotiable, is to implement them into
a strategic action plan. This ensures focus from the entire district for a considerable length of time, such as a five-year plan.

In the early 1990s the strategic planning process was established. It showed promise to educational institutions that the process would help the school district think and act strategically, develop effective strategies, clarify future directions, establish priorities, improve organizational performance, build teamwork and expertise, and deal effectively with the changing environment (Cook, 1990). Cook revealed that

Strategic planning is an effective culmination of both a process and discipline, which, if faithfully adhered to, produces a plan characterized by originality, vision, and realism. Both the discipline and the process are aimed at total concentration of the organization’s resources on mutually predetermined outcomes. (p. 47)

Kaufman and Grise (1995) concurred with Cook’s statement by saying, “Strategic plans tell us where to head, why to go, and what functions and resources it takes to get from here to there” (p. 27). In addition, Romney (1996) noted that the strategic plan not only refocuses all stakeholders’ sense of purpose but helps stimulate future thinking based on the created shared mission.

Canole (1999) found the strategic plan had several benefits. One of the major benefits was the way it positively impacted the change process by involving the whole community. She also discovered that “strategic thinking and activating emanate from strategic planning” (p. 104). Recently Lane, Bishop, and Wilson-Jones (2005) observed the strategic planning process had the following benefits:

A strategic plan establishes a vision, mission, and beliefs for the school district; the plan establishes the path to accomplish its desired future; the plan provides for a path which allows the community to work together to accomplish these goals, objectives, and activities that constitute the strategic plan; it allows for an understanding of how a school district
works, how finances are spent, and identifies the needs of the school district; and allows the school district to set specific data-driven priorities. (p. 2)

Jasparro (2006) surmised the strategic planning process was well worth the time, money, and effort of their respective school districts. He stated the main reason for strategic planning was to establish a focus and direction for future work in the district. In addition, the planning process allowed the leadership to establish clear and concise goals and objectives for teaching and learning.

An essential piece of the strategic planning process is ongoing communication. Dlugosh (1993) recommended that a neutral, third party facilitate the plan. This enables freer thinking among members of the strategic planning committee. The third party facilitator can consult, facilitate, and educate the organization without negatively influencing the planning process.

As noted, strategic plans, if properly implemented, are useful and powerful tools. Canole (1999) suggested that it is critical for the strategic planning process to have a commitment of all stakeholders who believe that change can and will occur. Romney added that “strategic planning is for those who are willing to be honest, who want to focus on revitalization, and who are committed to influencing and creating their future” (p. 17). Goodstein, Nolan, and Pfeifer (1993) stated, “The payoff of strategic planning is in its application, in the execution and implementation of the strategic plan” (p. 325). Conversely, Kaufman (1995) noted, “A strategic plan is futile if not used . . . and the planners grow frustrated seeing their product sit on shelves” (p. 23).
Board Alignment with and Support of District Goals

Marzano and Waters (2006) reported in their meta-analysis that the superintendent must effectively communicate the five researched-based superintendent responsibilities to the elected school board. By doing so, it is the board’s duty to use those responsibilities to further student achievements. The National School Board Association (NSBA) provides training, materials and information to support school boards. This organization believes that school boards are foundational to improve student achievements in school districts. In 2000, the NSBA published a book called The Key Work of School Boards (Gemberling, Smith, & Villani, 2000) based on Peter Senge’s systems thinking theory (Senge, 1990), which requires an understanding that everything in an organization is connected. This guidebook outlines eight key actions that would help the board navigate their way using a systems approach. These key actions are as follows:

1. Vision: creating a community consensus for the expectations and measures of student work.

2. Standards: using credible external sources to communicate expectations and measures of student work.

3. Assessments: tie in with standards with multiple ongoing assessments which are explained to the public.

4. Accountability: school board members are held accountable for assuring that all aspects of the school aid in student achievement.
5. Alignment: align resources with standards and involve the community with the budget and management process. Ensure that resources support parent involvement.

6. Learning Environment: create a "learning for all" environment and empower staff to meet the needs of all learners. Create an atmosphere of integrity and respect among the school board, superintendent and staff.

7. Collaborative Partnerships: build collaborative relationships with community businesses and political groups to form a consensus about student achievement, communicate with state and national officials, and model school board behaviors to gain trust of the community and form an atmosphere of shared accountability and teamwork.

8. Continuous Improvement: show a commitment toward continuous education and training leading to student achievement, set priorities for gaining resources for meeting these goals for achievement, and adjust plans according to the data and community input (Gemberling et al., 2000).

In conjunction with the guidebook noted above, there have been several studies linking the actions of the school board to the achievements of students in school districts. The Lighthouse Inquiry was a study that attempted to determine these connections. Results of the investigation revealed that attitudes expressed by the board correlated with the success of the students in the school districts (IASB, 2000). More specifically, high achieving schools had buildings and classrooms that could connect the work they were doing to what the administration was promoting (IASB, 2000).
School boards often fail to understand their role. At times boards become overly involved in the operational day-to-day details of a school system and forget their role as governing the district. This is often termed as "micromanagement" and this micromanagement can sometimes "bog" a school system down and make them forget the critical work they must do to ensure student achievement (Renchler, 2000; Todras, 1993; Villegas, 2003). The Lighthouse (IASB, 2000) study highlighted the importance of role understanding by the board. The study suggested that high achieving schools had boards and superintendents that understood the seven areas of school renewal. These seven areas of school renewal were based on reviews of research on what creates positive change in education. They were as follows: "emphasis on building a human organizational system, ability to create and sustain initiatives, support workplace for staff, staff development, support for school sites through data and information, community involvement, and integrated leadership" (IASB, 2000, p. 7). Board members who understood the seven areas also understood their role in supporting the renewal and there was a clear connection between the goals and what was done in the classroom (IASB, 2000).

Eugene Smoley (1999) completed the School Board Effectiveness Project. The project examined the relationship between board functioning and student achievement. This study identified six "actions" that boards could take to induce student achievement. These actions included making rational decisions, functioning cohesively as a group, exercising appropriate authority, connecting to the community, working toward board improvement, and acting strategically (Smoley, 1999). Working toward board improvement is imperative in creating student success. School boards are often under-prepared to address and understand the complex needs of a district (Howell, 2005;
Todras, 1993). Castallo (2003) avowed that board conflicts often result because the roles and responsibilities of the board members are misunderstood. Castallo also noted that responsibilities are not the problem, but the carrying out of the responsibilities is the problem. The key to a successful board is the resolution of problems with communication, micromanagement, relationships, or personal styles (Castallo, 2003).

Another study that supports the above findings was from Goodman, Fulbright, and Zimmerman (1997). They found that effective school boards focused on achievement and policy. Board members do not micromanage because they have mutual trust and have a collaborative relationship with one another as board members and with the superintendent. Effective school boards delegate the function of CEO and instructional leader to the superintendent. There is effective communication between the school board president, superintendent, and board members as well the community at large. School boards support the goals of the district by providing needed resources to the staff. The use of board retreats are used to establish goals and evaluate the success of them. There is ongoing professional development for board members and superintendents.

In a meta-analysis, Land (2002) identified four key characteristics of school boards that worked to improve student achievement. First, effective school boards have an appropriate overarching focus. The primary focus is on student achievement. School boards developed policies and support programs that have been proven to show increased achievement. Second, school boards lead by modeling and developing good relations with the superintendent, other board members, and the community. Third, school boards must be effective in policy making, leadership, and budgeting. Policies were focused, clear, and coherent. Leadership was provided by always striving to reach the district’s vision.
Boards were fiscally responsible while always maintaining student achievement as a top priority. Finally, school boards established an evaluation program and continue to learn as a group. An evaluation process of the board and what is done in the district were geared at improving their work. Board training to address areas of weakness was identified in the evaluation process. In addition, Land suggested that there were major differences between high-performing and low-performing districts. In high-achieving districts, the school board and superintendent believe that they can increase students’ academic achievement while in the low-performing districts they are quick to cite challenges that restrict their students from learning. In high-achieving districts, school board members display an understanding of quality school governance and support the district as they continue to strive for excellence while encouraging school improvement initiatives that support student achievement (Land, 2002).

Research on the actions of effective superintendents emphasized the importance of communication (Glass et al., 2000) and good board relationships (Hoyle, Bjork, Collier, & Glass, 2005). In a study conducted by the New England School Development Council, researchers found that school board members, if coached, trained, and supported by the superintendent, will in turn support the superintendent if they know their respective roles and responsibilities. Through time, trust, respect, and interdependence upon one another are created (Porch & Protheroe, 2003). Training board members is an essential step to ensure the success of the superintendent in his quest to raise student achievement (Marzano & Waters, 2006). Providing board members with the knowledge is more important because of the expectations placed upon school districts to prepare students for the real world as well as the complexity of district policy making. This is
why the superintendents need to be personally involved in the training of new board members (Hayes, 2001). A comprehensive orientation and board training provided to school board members assists in avoiding many common mistakes (Porch & Protheroe, 2003). Typical common mistakes made by boards include making political decisions, not establishing ground rules, responding to coercion, not connecting with the at-large community, neglecting improvement, and taking fragmented actions (Smoley, 1999). This training of school boards does not seem to take place often enough. Hess (2002) found in his study that only 48.8% of school boards have student achievement subcommittees to address student achievement issues. These boards have subcommittees for budget and finance, facilities, technology, personnel, and planning but seldom address the most important issue of student achievement. His findings in board member training were similar with training in student achievement being the least pursued (Hess, 2002).

The issue of relationship building and trust between the superintendent and the school board president is critical. The relationship should be more of a partnership and as a team rather than as individual strength (Richards, 1997). The school board president serves as the link between the school system as a whole as represented by the superintendent and the school board. Therefore, to build this relationship between the superintendent and the school board president is essential to develop support. The school board president serves as a person who is in a position to inform both the board and the superintendent on the amount of support on issues, who can develop compromises, and who is able to assure that there are no surprises in the working relationship (Smoley, 1999).
Marzano and Waters (2006) discovered in their meta-analysis that there are five responsibilities that need to be communicated from the superintendent to the elected board of education in order to bring the support needed for student achievement. The superintendent and the board must work together to develop non-negotiable goals for student achievement and student instruction. Finally, the board should be committed to allocating resources to implement and maintain the structures needed to gain success with these goals.

Monitoring Goals for Achievement and Instruction

Superintendents are a key factor not only in the setting and monitoring of goals. Murphy and Hallinger (1988) and Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2003) strongly suggested that the superintendent needs to be actively engaged in establishing and maintaining clearly defined curricular and instructional goals and objectives. Once curriculum and instruction goals are established, the superintendent must make a deliberate effort to maintain these goals and objectives (Aplin & Daresh, 1984; Brown & Hunter, 1986; Cuban, 1984; Marzano et al., 2003; McCurdy, 1983; Murphy & Hallinger, 1988; Owens, 1985; Peters, 1987; Wallace, 1985). Aplin and Daresh (1984) reported that superintendents who considered themselves instructional leaders placed a high importance and priority on the monitoring of all aspects surrounding the districts instructional program. Superintendents must make monitoring of district goals and objectives, instructional quality, teaching quality, and leadership quality first and foremost in their minds. As Tom Peters (1987) noted, “what gets measured gets done” or as modified by Grignon, “anything not monitored is optional.” Rob Olsen, an award-
The winning superintendent from Sturgis, Michigan, is quoted in the book *Learning from the Best Lessons from Award-Winning Superintendents*, saying, “remember the directive from Covey (1992): *the main thing is to keep the main thing, the main thing!*” As educators we are all proud when all our buildings receive very good passing grades and when all our buildings make AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress). But if we, for a moment, take our finger off the pulse of student achievement and fail to keep the main thing, the main thing—we will lose our momentum and struggle to stay on top of the learning game (Harris, 2009, p. 9).

Murphy and Hallinger (1988) suggested that effective superintendents not only established clear instructional goals, but they also monitored these goals in a regular and systematic variety of methods. These superintendents reported spending at least 10% of the work year with visitations and monitoring of the educational processes at school sites. Devising of a system in which to monitor the achievement of instructional and curricular goals and objectives of school districts was deemed a necessity by Brown and Hunter (1986).

One method that superintendents are able to monitor student achievement and goals made by the districts is that of looking at various test scores. Owens (1985) reported that 96% of the superintendents surveyed indicated that test scores were used to monitor and maintain school district goals and objectives. Superintendents stated they used student attendance, percent of student passing graduation requirements, student promotion/retention, student referrals for discipline, and student grade reports. Murphy and Hallinger (1986) noted superintendents especially using criterion referenced tests to monitor for progress in curriculum and instruction. Aplin and Daresh, (1984) studied the
behaviors of superintendents considered to be "educational and instructional leaders."

They discovered a high amount of emphasis was placed on the monitoring of the district's instructional program over which they presided. Both teachers and principals in those districts reported that: "The prevailing norm of the district was not merely maintaining excellent instruction, but maintaining it for all students" (Aplin & Daresh, 1984, p. 214). Principals in this study expressed the importance the superintendent placed on protecting and achieving the districts goals and missions (Aplin & Daresh, 1984).

A common practice found in studies is that successful superintendents visit schools on a regular basis as a means of maintaining and monitoring the district's goals. Murphy and Hallinger (1988) indicated that superintendents who visited schools were able to view first-hand the overall operation of the school. The visits allowed them to supervise personnel, examine programs and systems, and monitor the school climate. In addition, these visits assisted the superintendent in the evaluation process of the principals. Cuban (1984) added to the importance of symbolic visibility, stating that it "carries a lot of weight" (p. 147). By being highly visible in schools, the superintendent demonstrates a high regard to instruction. These visits indicate support and encouragement. Wallace (1985) suggested that due to the importance of the superintendent being visible throughout the district that he "must protect the daily calendar to insure that necessary time is available to visit schools" (p. 49).

Effective superintendents regularly and comprehensively evaluate principals and other administrators. There has been significant research that shows that building administration, i.e., principals, are primarily responsible for the effectiveness of the schools (Marzano et al., 2003). If this is true, we must assume that as the "leaders of the
leaders" the superintendent of the schools is the most influential figure in determining whether or not there is success with the curriculum and instruction (Cuban, 1984).

“Districts with excellent student achievement have superintendents who are personally involved in supervision and evaluation of principals” (Murphy, Hallingter, & Peterson, 1985, p. 79). “Frequent site visits and regular reviews of progress on school goals were key monitoring activities” (Murphy & Hallinger, 1986, p. 28). Superintendents spend countless hours in meetings with building principals to discuss matters dealing with the district. What makes a superintendent successful, as far as student achievement, is that he uses the majority of the meeting time with principals going over matters dealing with curriculum and instruction. Successful school districts included superintendents who evaluated their principals on their performance in reaching school goals (Murphy & Hallinger, 1986). Successful superintendents who evaluated their principals also provided structured feedback to the principals in order to improve their performance (Wallace, 1985). The effective superintendent can also use teacher and principal evaluation as influence over behavior. The superintendent can exercise control over what will be evaluated and how it will be evaluated to influence the focus of instruction and ultimately the principals’ instructional leadership. According to Cuban (1984), school districts engaged in the improvement process frequently revised the evaluations of principals and teachers in order to align them with district goals and the literature on effective schools.

Brown and Hunter (1986) concluded that

the superintendent should pursue to improve the quality of teaching and learning within the district . . . with those employees, who are closest to the management process of teaching and learning. These personnel are, of course, the building principals and are seen as the superintendent’s first line of supervision to provide
effective teaching and learning within the school district. (Brown & Hunter, 1986, p. 11)

McCurdy (1983) emphasized that a valid principal evaluation should show the achievement of a predetermined set of objectives that are “based mainly on achievement test results, student and teacher attendance, and how parents and students feel about the quality of schooling” (p. 62).

Use of Resources to Support Achievement and Instruction Goals

The use of resources is needed to support achievement and instructional goals in the district. Effective superintendents ensure that necessary resources, including time, money, personnel, and materials, are allocated to accomplish the district’s goals (Marzano & Waters, 2006). Marzano and Waters (2009) pointed out that “resources are the lifeblood of any reform effort” (p. 77). Knowing that school districts across America are faced with depleted resources, Asera et al. (1999) stated, “District leaders need to focus their limited resources on instruction” (p. 24). Berkey and Dufour (1995) reported the most significant contribution an administrator can make is to develop others in creating a supportive environment for adult learning. Superintendents can assist by providing time for professional collaboration within the school day, allocate resources necessary to implement the plan, and, finally, focus all staff development on student learning. Administrators need to play an active role in this process by being involved. This is accomplished by meeting with groups, conducting observations, and collecting and reviewing data (Killion, 2002).
There have been numerous studies on successful schools that found that student achievement rises with the number of resources made available to school districts. Duke (2007) in his meta-analysis identified the following characteristics of successful schools:

1. Timely student assistance.
2. Teacher collaboration to identify struggling students and provide assistance.
3. Use of data to make decisions on resource allocation, student needs, and teacher effectiveness.
4. Leadership sets the tone for school improvement and is used as a resource.
5. Ongoing teacher training.
6. School organizational structure adjusts for improvement.
7. Aligns tests to curriculum and instruction.
8. Assess regularly
9. Involves parents in learning process by providing opportunities to support and share student progress.
10. Establish schedules that increase academic work time.

In Duke’s study, there were a number of strategies used to support the above characteristics: timely small group support to help struggling learners, data usage to make larger school decisions addressing curriculum slippage, involvement of teachers in the decision-making process, maximization of instructional time by guarding against distractions, continuous learning as an organization by ongoing professional development, and the usage of instructional coaches to expose and educate staff on best instructional and curriculum practices.
Odden and Wallace (2007) reported similar findings when examining research supported by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education. They identified the following steps were used to increase student performance:

1. Analyze formative and summative assessments.
2. Review research on best practices.
3. Train staff utilizing instructional coaches and summer trainings.
4. Provide extra help to struggling students.
5. Have smaller class sizes in early elementary.
6. Guard instructional time.
7. Provide time for professional learning communities to collaborate and work together on a frequent and ongoing basis.
8. Establish lead teachers to help support others.
9. Bring in experts and address best practices with staff.
10. Fund best practice programs and strategies

DuFour, Eaker, DuFour, and Many (2006), Fullan (2005), Johnson (2002), and Schmoker (2006) observed that, to accomplish desired results, schools need to be on a continuous cycle of school improvement by using data to improve practice and monitoring and adjusting strategies to meet the goal of proficiency of all students.

DuFour, Eaker, and DuFour (2005) established recommendations for educators in creating a professional learning community, which included: plan, create, score and analyze assessments, read and discuss professional literature, and observe each other in the classroom using best practices. Kruse, Louis, and Byrk (1995), Louis and Marks (1998), and Schmoker (2004) found successful professional learning communities
incorporate the following elements: shared values, focus on student learning, collaboration, de-privatized practice, and reflective dialogue. Schmoker (2006) added, “the right kind of continuous structured collaboration improves the quality of teaching and pays big, and often provides immediate dividends in student learning and professional morale in virtually any setting” (p. 177). As noted above, Guskey (2007), DuFour et al. (2006), Fullan (2005), Hargreaves and Fink (2006), Reeves (2004), Schmoker (2003), and Stiggins (2005) advocated the use of ongoing formative assessments to gauge where students are at a given time and to provide feedback based on what the child knows and doesn’t know. This should be an essential tool used with all teachers while learning from one another. To that end, Guskey (2003) suggested that professional learning communities “enhance teachers content and pedagogy knowledge” through modeling high-quality instruction and building leadership capacity.

The single greatest predictor for student achievement is teachers (Sanders & Rivers, 1996; Marzano, 2003). In a 2005 meta-analysis, researchers Palmer, Stough, Burdenski, and Gonzales connected effective teaching to effective professional development. School districts must prepare and produce professional development that enhances the teacher’s ability to improve student achievement. Guskey (2002) indicated that professional development should change classroom practice, alter the teachers’ attitudes and beliefs, and alter the learning outcomes of students. Gordon (2005) revealed that teachers are motivated to learn when staff development impacts their current work. Participants should be involved in the planning, delivery, and evaluation of the training.

In their research, Killion (2002) and Garcia and Donmoyer (2005) found that school districts establish a comprehensive staff development. These researchers suggested
this plan begins by taking an in-depth look at the academic needs of the students and identifying the knowledge and skills that students are missing. Then a connection must be established between teacher skills and student needs. School personnel must answer the question of what teachers need to know and be able to do to support student goals. Effective plans need to be developed around the teacher skills that are needed to assist the students. Staff development teams should investigate possible interventions that could lead to the desired outcomes. This comprehensive review should match interventions and resources with the needs of the school. The school must develop an evaluation that provides verification or program implementation. This process should be completed prior to initiating any new staff development projects.

Kovaleski and Glew (2006) identified several critical points that need to be in place for a collaborative staff development model to be developed. Administration has to be actively involved throughout the process. They must understand the training and support the improvement. A well-established method of program assessment needs to be established that will continually monitor by collecting and analyzing data. The study found schools that demonstrated effective skills around the administrative roles and data collection also demonstrated significant progress toward desired outcomes.

Sufficient time and other resources are essential in establishing effective professional development and establishing a professional learning community (DuFour et al., 2006; Guskey, 2003). There are a number of ways school districts can provide time. Districts can provide common planning time (Berends, Bodilly, & Kirby, 2002), use parallel scheduling; adjust start and end times; share classes; schedule group activities, events, and testing; bank time; and use in-service and faculty meetings to get professional
development time. On this same topic, Marzano, Waters and McNulty (2003) indicated that it is imperative to commit adequate time for programs to work before pulling the plug.

A best practice relating to school improvement and using staff as resources is the use of coaching to support staff in helping students succeed. Ross (1992) noted that those teachers that used coaches on an ongoing basis “demonstrated greater student achievement gains relative to students of teachers with less coaching experiences” (Ross, 1992, as cited in Wells, Pearson, & Sousa, 2006, p. 16). Wells, Pearson, and Sousa found “coaching was determined to be the most critical component in long-term use and application of their professional development training” (p. 17). Linda Lambert (1998) emphasized sustaining program growth by expanding leadership capacity. The obvious choice for an expanded leadership role is an instructional coach. Feger, Woleck, and Hickman (2004) defined an instructional coach as one that is seen as a master teacher who develops trust with teachers and helps teachers identify solutions through reflective practice. The instructional coach expands the skills teachers need and keeps the vision of improved student achievement strong. This model improves practice and increases reflection.

Additional resources can be found outside the walls of the schools by collaborating and building partnerships with parents and community agencies. Riggio and Orr (2004) recommended that school leaders find partners and alliances to help address their crucial issues and needs. Foundations also want to become involved in school improvement. In addition, many community members and groups want to make a difference in the educational system. Henderson and Mapp’s (2002) meta-analysis studies
examined parent and community involvement and their roles in impacting student achievement. They reported that high-performing schools embraced the philosophy of partnerships with their community. They further suggested that the school leaders responded to the communities’ concerns and developed positive relationships that help improve student achievement.

Hedges, Laine, and Greenwald (1994) concluded that there was a positive impact on financial resources relating to student achievement. Their study showed that with an increase of $500 per pupil, a 15% increase in student achievement would be the outcome. To put this in perspective, if a student was at the 50th percentile in overall achievement and the district increased the per pupil expenditure $500, one could predict that the student’s achievement will increase to about the 56th percentile.

In conclusion, it is the responsibility of administration to create a climate where proven best practices can be implemented, monitored, and aligned to increase student achievement. A system needs to be established to provide professional development so teachers can collaborate and learn effective ways to reach all students. Decisions need to be made to adequately provide necessary time, personnel, and professional development to ensure all students succeed. Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, and Yoon (2001) asserted that professional development requires intensive resources and school districts must be creative in order to properly allocate resources that support these endeavors.

Defined Autonomy

Marzano and Waters (2006) reported that defined autonomy was a “surprising and perplexing finding” in their meta-analysis. They noted an effective superintendent creates
the conditions of "defined autonomy" with their principals. The review of literature indicates that there has been a significant change in the way superintendents lead districts.

Marzano and Waters (2006) defined the concept of "autonomy" as the relationship between superintendents and principals that allows for creating non-negotiable goals by the two, but for follow-through responsibilities to be given to the building principals. It is the responsibility of the building administration and personnel to ensure goals are met for the district for their individual buildings. Marzano stated:

> While it is true that schools are unique and must operate in such a way as to address their unique needs, it is also true that each school must operate as a functional component of a larger system. It is the larger system—the district—that establishes the common work of schools within the district, and it is that common work that becomes the "glue" holding the district together. (Marzano & Waters, 2009, pp. 89-90)

One important aspect related to this autonomy placed upon the buildings is that of the building's ability to form professional learning communities. Autonomy is absolutely necessary to establish, grow, and develop such communities within schools (Lee & Smith, 2001; Newmann, 1996; Seashore-Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996). This creation of learning communities is vital to the improvement of teaching and learning in a school district. Research revealed that schools with strong professional learning communities are able to demonstrate important outcomes for both the students and professionals involved (Crow, Hausman, & Scribner, 2002). Sergiovanni (2001) affirmed that building a learning community within the school is the most important way to create and maintain school improvement. He asserted that placing the role of "authority" on the quality of ideas rather than on a position or role is important toward developing this community. This provides for a sharing of ideas and commitments so that leadership, teachers, parents, and
students all share responsibility for school development and change. The role of the principal is pivotal in development of the professional learning community. DuFour and Eaker (1998) stated that the principal must do certain things in order to accomplish leadership of one such community. These tasks included: (1) Lead through shared vision and values rather than through rules and procedures; (2) Involve faculty members in the school's decision making process and empower individuals to act; (3) Provide staff with information, training, and parameters they need to make good decisions; (4) Establish credibility by modeling behavior that is congruent with the vision and values of their schools; and (5) Be results-oriented.

School districts with building level autonomy also had an easier time working toward district goals. Leaders of those districts were better able to manage the instructional programs needed to improve student learning. Studies have demonstrated that, when schools are given control over how work toward goals is implemented, those schools are better able to determine curriculum that is beneficial for all students in that district. In other words, individual school leaders are better equipped to understand which practices are most beneficial for their student populations. They also have better knowledge as to who the personnel are who are most equipped and have the most knowledge about the educational needs of the children in that particular population. This goes for not only control over specific instructional strategies, but for intervention strategies, extended instructional time, and for specialized teaching methods which may be necessary for a unique population (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Many school leaders have noted that flexibility and focused autonomy benefits their school districts. In South Carolina, school principals reported they were better able to be innovative in their
adaptations used to help meet student needs and had an effect on their ability to use their professional expertise to improve curriculum, instruction, and structure of their schools. Strategies used to do this were restructuring the school day to allow longer blocks of time for class periods, combining multi-age groups, implementing new instructional strategies such as cooperative learning, and writing across the curriculum (Murphy & Adams, 1998). Studies also revealed that by involving school building personnel more directly in the school-level decision making, it provided for more teacher empowerment which has a strong indirect impact on the pedagogical quality and student achievement and performance (Marks & Seashore-Louis, 1997). Principal control over curriculum, personnel, budget, school day schedule, and other aspects of school positively impacted student achievement. This is true so long as the principal had the training and expertise necessary to make effective changes. The principal must see himself in his capacity as essential to school improvement, as well as his role in involving teachers in this process (Harris, 2002).

Autonomy also has a positive effect on professional development opportunities and effectiveness in school districts. Giving principals autonomy lends to a greater ability for the individual school organizations to identify and enlist the help of “master teachers” to coach and provide feedback to the staff and help with professional development. This helps schools develop a climate of shared leadership and a cultivation of the capacities of the group as a whole, and leads to an increase of the expertise of the organization and gives them a capacity to solve problems and improve practice (Sergiovanni, 2005). When schools are allowed to determine details of professional development such as who and when, the responsiveness and effectiveness of training is enhanced. Building personnel
are better equipped to assess areas of need for improvement and then select appropriate practices to implement and personnel to train (Allington & Cunningham, 1996; Vacca & Genzen, 1995). Providing principals autonomy in today’s educational climate lends itself to increasing the building’s ability to gain access to all the benefits that can be derived from professional development opportunities. This is increasingly important in this era of school accountability and financial hardship.

Principals with the autonomy over hiring of personnel resulted in improved building effectiveness and increased student achievement. This applies to decision making over their budgets and other operational procedures. When both budgets and hiring are controlled by principals, they are better able to make decisions regarding those two areas which can positively affect student achievement (Kedro, 2003). Since people are the most important resource schools have, giving school leaders the autonomy to “develop people” is imperative to developing and maintaining a school culture where norms are shared and cohesiveness is maintained (Seashore-Louis et al., 1996). Principals able to strengthen their faculty by recruiting their own teachers to best develop staff and who are able to target professional opportunities with their budgetary decisions are better able to make changes in their organizations to promote best practices (Sebring & Byrk, 2000). This goes for not only hiring school personnel, but for removing teachers who are not performing up to school standards. Schools need the autonomy to do three things: Hire better teachers, improve teachers they have, and remove teachers who are not improving after remediation efforts. Poor performing teachers have a negative effect on the students in their classroom and can quickly poison the climate of a school. Removal of these teachers and hiring and improving good teachers not only improves the climate
and performance of a school, but it boosts the morale and helps create a climate of a self-disciplined school culture (Fullan, 2003).

Marzano and Waters’ (2006) meta-analysis identified 22 common strategies the superintendent can employ that grant principals and their staff autonomy to improve student achievement.

Challenges Facing Superintendents

Challenges facing today’s superintendents are unique and as high stakes as they have ever been in history. Among these challenges to be outlined are: accountability of the school districts, dealing with financial matters, leading a more diversified public school system, communication as it has to do with board relations and politics, and the evolution of the superintendency as it moves from a managerial position to more of an instructional leader (Glass et al., 2000).

Accountability is one of the most significant challenges that superintendents face. When President Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB; U.S. Department of Education, 2002), the superintendent’s role to identify more with curriculum, teaching, learning, and increasing student performance on mandated standardized tests was changed (Glass et al., 2000). This act essentially called for a “raising of the bar” for students and for the school districts from which they learn. NCLB required states to set more rigorous improvement goals and called for improvement and creation of standardized tests to assess the depth of knowledge students achieve towards state set standards for math, reading, and other areas. These tests are designed and redesigned to demonstrate student achievement and improvement and ultimately make
districts accountable for such achievement and improvement through funding or lack of funding (Goertz & Duffy, 2003). In a 2000 study of the American School Superintendency, which included samples from 5,336 superintendents drawn from a population of 12,604 in the United States, it was reported that accountability was the third ranking factor that inhibited the effectiveness of superintendents (Glass et al., 2000).

Principals are increasingly being asked to be more knowledgeable of instructional strategies and programs, coaching techniques, using data to guide decision making about instruction, and using procedures to hold others accountable for student achievement (Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000; Johnson, 1996; Nestor-Baker & Hoy, 2001). Superintendents are ultimately accountable for achievement of students in their respective districts. In the majority of school districts, this increasing accountability means a fundamental change in the functioning of the educational system, which is, again, the ultimate responsibility of the superintendent (Johnson, 1996). Superintendents are being asked to be accountable for implementing change—to look at the data, be accountable for it, and prove or disprove the effectiveness of an initiative and prove its long-term benefits (Bredeson, 1996; Collins & Porras, 2002; Covey, 1991; Drucker, 2001; Jenkins, 1997).

Financing of schools was the greatest concern cited in the American Association of School Administrator’s study (Glass et al., 2000). More than 96% of those responding to the survey cited school finance as the number one problem superintendents and their school boards face (Glass et al., 2000). School funding is the number one reason for superintendents to lose their jobs. It is now also the number one reason many superintendents choose to leave the field. In a study conducted by the AASA between 1982 and 1992, superintendents cited personal attacks, labor negotiations, and strikes as
top reasons to leave their field. According to the 2000 study, inadequate school funding was the number one reason for school superintendents to leave their position. Decreased state funding is an ongoing issue faced by superintendents. Public education systems rely on money appropriated from various taxes. When taxes are reduced, availability for public education is reduced (Edwards, 2006). Property tax computations are complex with many variables. Relying on appropriations is a necessity; however, it is extremely difficult at times to make predictions or control this revenue (Edwards, 2006). This is in direct conflict with the expectation of perfection the communities often expect from their superintendents (Edwards, 2006).

Superintendents are often caught in the middle between reduced tax money from various sources and increasing demand for higher wages from employees along with higher costs to operate school districts. Issues such as the slow economy, state revenue reductions, lower property evaluations, and specific local demands of districts to “do more with less” puts the superintendent in a position where he or she becomes a scapegoat for many of the district’s problems that have to do with financing. The result of inadequate funding for schools creates stress for superintendents to deal with the public demands while having to streamline schools to balance budgets (Edwards, 2006).

Along with decreased state funding for education, school superintendents under NCLB are required to be responsible for their school districts to make “adequate yearly progress” or AYP. Schools who fail to make AYP for three consecutive years will be required to provide funding to parents who seek supplemental education services for their children (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).
Communication, board relations, and maintaining positive politics is another challenge school superintendents face. With the heightened level of responsibility that NCLB has placed on school districts, it is important the superintendent have good communication skills and public relations to coordinate all internal and external constituents to achieve common goals and outcomes. Board relations are important, but are very complex to manage successfully. One of the reasons this relationship is so difficult is because of the differences between the board members and the superintendent. The superintendent of today is a well credentialed chief executive who brings expertise to the job. He or she is selected because of the ability he or she holds to do the job. The board members of today’s schools are more representative of the community in that they are essentially “lay people” who come to the job with no required credentials or formal training (Kowalski, 1999). At times, this difference in background can be a detriment to superintendents who are not politically savvy or who are not able to communicate effectively to such board members. Even with the expertise of the superintendent, if the board members do not perceive the superintendent as being effective, then he or she is not (Carter & Cunningham, 1997). Some factors that may deter superintendents and board members from interacting successfully are role confusion, communication problems, and personal agendas (Carter & Cunningham, 1997).

Even though the superintendent spends most of his or her time with school board members and administrators, the superintendent’s success depends on maintaining a satisfactory level of trust and support from various stakeholders in the district (Hayes, 2001). Superintendents must reach outside of the school realm to build relationships and alliances with a broader community in order to be successful in their careers these days.
Skills are required to create a network that acknowledges relationships with city and state interests (Johnson, 1996). Johnson affirmed:

Districts are not freestanding, self-sufficient organizations. The interests and practices of public education are entwined with those of government, business, community groups, and social agencies. This interdependence, unprecedented in the U.S. education, demands superintendents’ attention and response, for it brings both obligations and opportunities. (Johnson, 1996, p. 273)

The superintendency is often the most visible position in town. School systems are often the largest employer in the community and the superintendent is often the highest paid public official in the community.

Many people confuse the position of the superintendent with the elected officials of the school board and thus a “politician.” This puts superintendents in an awkward position. They are generally advised not to take part in political activities, yet they are almost “forced” to interact with elected officials in order to respond to matters which call upon their expertise or which might be deemed healthy for public schooling as a whole. This interaction between being politically savvy and working with the politics without actually getting into the “fray” is an extremely difficult balancing act for most superintendents.

Changing demographics was a factor listed as one that inhibits effectiveness of superintendents and was included in the 2000 study from the American Association of School Administrators (Glass et al., 2000). Rapid student population increases along with increasing diversity of students are additional challenges for superintendents (Glass et al., 2000). Special programs are needed for the learners in a more diverse education setting. Changing demographics has an effect on how effective a superintendent can be in his or her charge of a school system. These changes can create unique combinations of
language, health, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, gender, family support, hope, race
courage, birth order, and aspirations in the classroom, and ultimately arrive on the
front steps of the superintendent (Tomlinson, 1999). The issue of closing the achievement
gap between high- and low-performing students has been brought to the forefront with the
NCLB legislation. Annual academic progress will now be based on the progress of
specific subgroups, such as economically disadvantaged students, students with
disabilities, racial or ethnic groups exceeding the 5% of the total student population in the
state, and students with limited English proficiency (Institute for Educational Leadership,
2001). Implementation of programs to effectively teach these special populations is a
challenge for superintendents as well as putting systems into play which effectively
monitor the growth of these students. Superintendents are continually faced with trying to
improve in this area to meet changing state and federal mandates (Glass et al., 2000).

The role of the superintendent is constantly changing. This role has evolved from
a managerial position to an instructional leader (Glass et al., 2000). This role change has
occurred without taking away the managerial duties commonly associated with the
superintendency (Glass et al., 2000). Contemporary superintendents cite curriculum,
teaching, learning, and student performance on mandated standards-based tests as the new
top priorities in their jobs today (Glass et al., 2000). The school superintendency has
become one of the most influential positions in our society today and plays a huge impact
on the development of our society (Glass et al., 2000). It is possible that society may have
made the job of superintendent into a job that is too large, with duties too widespread, to
be managed by one person (Sharp & Walter, 2004). The superintendent’s job has
increasing political pressures. Superintendents are now asked to make many changes in
the public school system, from implementing policies for more effective instruction, to
putting systems into place for increased accountability. In contrast, researchers from a
2000 study of the American School Superintendency found that only 2.8% of the
superintendents reported that they felt their boards wanted them to be a leader of reform
(Glass et al., 2000).

Summary

This review of the literature examined and emphasized the findings of Marzano
and Waters’ (2006) meta-analysis research on superintendents that have successfully led
their school districts by displaying high student achievement. It was found that there are
six common threads that they define as responsibilities outlined in their study: goal-
setting process, non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction, board alignment
with support of district goals, monitoring goals for achievement and instruction, use of
resources to support goals for achievement and instruction, and defined autonomy.
Underneath each of the responsibilities, Marzano and Waters found specific practices that
abet superintendents as they carry out the specific responsibilities. This researcher
presented the findings of the Marzano and Waters study while also adding additional
research that was found to support the meta-analysis findings.

It was also found that there were many challenges that superintendents face in
leading today’s schools. Those challenges outlined in this chapter included the
accountability of the school districts, dealings with financial matters, leadership of a more
diversified public school system, communication as it has to do with board relations and
politics, and the evolution of the superintendency as it moves from a managerial position
to more of an instructional leader. Chapter III reviews the methodology of the study. In Chapter IV, the findings of the study are detailed, and the last chapter summarizes the findings.
The purpose of the study was to determine how effective superintendents use the research-based leadership to support and improve student achievement. A second purpose of this research, as stated earlier in Chapter I, was to discover the exemplary leadership responsibilities/practices of effective superintendents. There have been a plethora of studies on superintendent responsibilities/practices that show how strong superintendent leadership is essential to student achievement. There has been little research on how superintendents best utilize the specific research-based responsibilities/practices. This researcher also delved into the areas that inhibit superintendents and how they have implemented best practices to overcome these obstacles.

This chapter provides an overview of the methodology used to conduct this investigation. The research employed a qualitative multi-site case study using purposeful sampling interviewing effective superintendents in the state of Michigan. A cross-case synthesis was used to analyze and interpret the data.

This chapter is divided into seven sections which include: (1) problem statement and research questions; (2) an overview of the research design and the criteria for selecting the participants; (3) methods and data collection procedures; (4) the sampling process; and (5) researcher background, experiences, and the influence of the
investigation. The final two sections address the timeline of the study and limitation/delimitations.

Problem Statement

Leadership is inextricably tied to the success of any school district. The portrait of the superintendency as an impossible or undesirable profession damages the aspirations of those who would like to take on this very important position (Edwards, 2006; Hayes, 2006). In order to meet the high demands of leading a successful school system, successful superintendents need to lead the charge. The problem statement is captured in the following statement: There is no evidence on how superintendents’ actions as related to methods, philosophies, and other practices positively impact student achievement.

Current research has shown specific leadership responsibilities and practices that positively impact student achievement (Marzano & Waters, 2006). The researcher examined these findings, which have yet to be examined against actual systems that contribute to exemplary practice in the superintendency, to see to what extent, if any, these practices are employed by highly effective Michigan superintendents. Most importantly, if specific responsibilities and practices were found, the researcher determined how the superintendent carries out those responsibilities and practices that lead to student achievement.

Research Questions

The study attempts to answer the following two research questions:
1. Do effective superintendents exhibit behaviors and actions that support current exemplary leadership research on responsibilities/practices? If so, how?

2. What are the factors that detract superintendents from successfully carrying out their responsibilities/practices? How do they overcome those barriers?

Research Design

A qualitative research design was selected for this study. Denzin and Lincoln (as cited in Cresswell, 2007) defined qualitative research as:

a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (p. 36)

Strauss and Corbin (1990) defined qualitative research as “any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification” (p. 17). In addition, the authors stated that a qualitative study is one that is “nonmathematical analytic procedure that results in findings derived from data gathered by a variety of means” (p. 18).

Howe and Eisenhart (1990) suggested that qualitative research has the following five standards: (1) research questions should drive data collection and analysis; (2) analysis techniques must be competently applied and developed in response to changing work contexts (Strauss, 1987); (3) studies must be judged based on existing literature; (4) conclusions of educational research must be easily understandable and
accessible to the general educational community; and (5) research data must reflect strong ethical values as evidenced by "confidentiality, privacy, and truth telling" (p. 8).

Miles and Huberman (1984) indicated the study of human behavior requires a data source that provides "well grounded, rich descriptions and explanations occurring in local contexts" (p. 15). For that reason, the primary source of data collection for this study was interviews conducted with the effective superintendents. Strauss and Corbin (1990) noted that qualitative studies need a wide range of research techniques for effective analysis of data. Consequently, data were collected by Internet and district literature (e.g., annual report, strategic plan, and board minutes), and observations of the superintendents in their daily work.

Data Collection Methods

Sample Selection

To ascertain the relationship between existing research on leadership responsibilities and effective superintendents, a qualitative multi-case study was used for this study. The sampling for this study is purposeful. Patton (1990) describes that the "logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research" (p. 169). One strength of using this sampling approach lies in choosing cases where rich data are available through the investigation process. The application of this sampling strategy is described in the subsection called Interviews, below. For purposes of field testing the interview portion of
this study, the sampling was narrowed to only two retired members of the broader sample identified above.

Five superintendents in southwest Michigan who have demonstrated excellence in leading their respective school districts towards high achievement on the Ed Yes Report Card were interviewed. The following criteria was established to identify possible candidates: (1) All candidates had to be a current superintendent who had been in their current position for more than five years; (2) Candidates' districts needed to achieve an A on the Ed Yes Report Card since the inception of the program in 2005 (the researcher used the Michigan Department of Education website to view grades of districts); (3) Districts under these superintendents also needed to make adequate yearly progress in all schools and in all categories (i.e., ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, special needs); (4) Districts used in this study had to be from the southwest area of Michigan; and (5) Districts in the study also had to have populations between 2,500 to 3,700 students (the researcher used the MASA directory and website to view school district size). Only five superintendents and their districts within a 100 mile radius met these criteria. All five superintendents agreed to participate in this study.

All five of the superintendents interviewed were Caucasian, ranging from 50 to 65 years old. All superintendents were male, with the exception of one female. The female was the only superintendent hired from outside the district. All other superintendents received a promotion to their position from a previous administrative position. Three of the four administrators were promoted from the assistant superintendent position, while the other was previously a principal.
Superintendents who agreed to participate in this study were contacted by phone and the study was explained. Informed Consent forms were mailed out to all participants. Upon receipt of the requisite consent form, participants were contacted to schedule the initial interview.

*Interviews*

An interview protocol was established and followed in all interviews. Within a two-week period, each survey was coded by the researcher and kept confidential.

The interview attempted to address the two research questions by determining the superintendent’s self-described leadership strategies and actions. These descriptions were analyzed to determine how the superintendents implement research-based superintendent leadership responsibilities in their respective positions and how they carry out those responsibilities. Specifically, this study examined the alignment between superintendents’ self-described leadership work and the elements of superintendent work that previous research has correlated with positive change in student achievement. Additionally, the interviewer probed into the challenges and roadblocks superintendents face as they try to focus their leadership work on factors related to student achievement. Finally, the interview elicited superintendents’ descriptions of the strategies they use to counter the challenges and issues that detract from focusing on student achievement.

Interviews were held at a private, mutually agreed-upon place and time so the participants could focus on answering the questions carefully without any unnecessary distractions or interruptions. The questions emerged from an interview protocol using a semi-structured format. This approach provided consistency and focus to all the
interviews, while also allowing freedom to the participant in answering the questions. The interviewer focused on getting the superintendents to talk naturally about their work, priorities, challenges, and strategies.

Permission to audiotape all interviews was asked of all participants. Notes served as a cross check to the audio taping. The interviews were transcribed verbatim with identifying information omitted. The researcher employed the technique of member checking, which means copies of the transcripts were sent to participants and reviewed for accuracy. The interview data from the transcripts were analyzed and both a within-case and cross-case analysis were used to find any common themes or characteristics that are shared among those superintendents interviewed.

Valuable information was gained by interviewing these individuals. This type of interviewing is referred to "elite" interviewing (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). Interviewing "elites" is oftentimes challenging in that it may be hard to gain access to them. Typically, they are very busy individuals running their respective school districts. Patton (as cited in Merriam, 1988) explains:

We interview people to find from them those things we cannot directly observe. . . . We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe situations that preclude the presence of an observer. We cannot observe how people organize the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world—we have to ask people questions about those things. The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into other person's perspective. (p. 72)

Interview questions were crafted to relate to the research questions. The researcher employed a semi-structured interview. Merriam (1988) explained that in this type of interview the researcher attempts to use prompts or probing questions that will give structure to the interview while allowing the participant to use his voice in relating his
own leadership responsibilities and experiences. McMillan (2000) agreed with Merriam and stated that this type of interview is most common in educational research.

Yin (1984) recommended that in case study procedures a researcher should develop and field test all instruments. A proposal was produced in concert with a qualitative studies course and dissertation seminar course. The researcher gained experience and practiced interviewing two retired superintendents using the questions that are included in this study. Some of the questions used by this researcher in this field test lacked specificity and focus. The researcher narrowed the question base in order to make accessing the information more efficient. All interviews were taped, transcribed, and categorized. Input from two professors assisted with this process.

**Observations**

Observations of each effective superintendent began after the conclusion of the initial interview process. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), direct observation allows the inquirer to see the world as his subjects see it in depth. The observation included a typical day of the superintendent, an administrative team meeting, a school board meeting, and other jobs that occur during the scheduled observation. Every attempt was made to make the observations as unobtrusive as possible.

The researcher summarized and reflected upon the field notes taken during the observations to again attempt to find patterns of the specific leadership responsibilities that have proven to raise student achievement in action.
Data Collection

The first collection of data involved investigating which school districts meet the enrollment criteria for this investigation. This was accomplished using the MAS A directory and website. Further research established the list of school districts that had met adequate yearly progress since 2005 and have achieved 90% (an A) on their Ed Yes report card. The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) website was used to validate this information. Other information regarding the superintendents’ school districts and contact information was verified via the Internet. The superintendents were asked during the interview to share any documents that may assist in showing the specific superintendent leadership responsibilities that have been portrayed through documents. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described documents useful in that they are typically rich and stable information that do not cost the researcher any or little money. Examples of documents used in this study were strategic plans, reports, newsletters, meeting agendas, state accountability reports, annual reports, and other relevant district publications.

Data Analysis

In order to make sense of the data collected so the researcher can present the findings and draw specific conclusions, one must start with a general analytical strategy (Yin, 1994). The researcher, in case studies, must provide a system by which he can set priorities for what it is that needs to be analyzed and why. For this study the researcher analyzed information gleaned from the interviews and the meetings attended; he also reviewed support documentation provided (i.e., annual reports, brochures, strategic plans)
and observation notes. Utilizing multiple sources of evidence (i.e., triangulation) adds to the study’s validity (Yin, 1994). This topic will be discussed later in the validity section.

Miles and Huberman (1994) defined data analysis “as consisting of three concurrent flows of activity: 1) Data reduction, 2) Data display, and 3) Conclusion drawing/verification” (p. 10). The three stages for qualitative data analysis are as follows: Data Reduction—helps to sort, focus, discard, and organize the data; Data Display—means taking the reduced data and displaying it in an organized, compacted way so conclusions can be easily drawn; Conclusion Drawing/Verification—is the final analytical activity, which looks at similarities and differences as well as explanations.

For both research questions, five separate case reports were prepared for this study (one from each superintendent). Yin (1994) stated, “The evidence from multiple cases is often considered more compelling, and the overall study is therefore regarded as being more robust” (p. 45).

Both a within-case and cross-case analysis were used to analyze the data. In a within-case analysis, data are compared to the conceptualization or frame of reference used for the study (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Yin, 1994). For research question 1, a within-case analysis was used to compare the data against the existing Marzano and Waters (2006) conceptual model. In this instance, the findings were compared to the specific responsibilities and practices that positively impact student achievement. In each case, a matrix was developed that included the specific research-based superintendent responsibilities and practices. The individual case report supplied evidence to answer the research question. Specifically, the researcher gained an understanding of “how” each superintendent carried out the research-based superintendent responsibilities/practices.
For the second research question, specific challenges/obstacles were found as it related to the research-based superintendent responsibilities/practices. Following the conclusion of the individual case reports for both research questions, the individual matrices and the transcripts were reviewed and examined to analyze findings across cases. In a cross-case analysis, the data in one case are compared to the data in the other cases (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Yin, 1994). This helps make the study richer and more generalizable. A cross-case matrix was developed as in the same case as the within-case analysis. These matrices allowed a quick analysis down rows and across columns to see what becomes apparent (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this way, it is possible to compare data from the five cases and to discern patterns or themes.

This study used the participants’ personal experiences and views in analyzing and categorizing the data. After the data was analyzed in its natural form, the themes were cross-referenced to superintendent leadership factors that researchers have found to correlate with improving student achievement. The findings included direct quotes from the participants to illustrate themes that emerge from the data.

As the researcher performed a reduction and analysis of data, the “big ideas” or themes emerged. These themes were established in Marzano and Waters’ (2006) superintendent leadership meta-analysis and are restated and explained in Chapter IV. As Crabtree and Miller (1992) illustrate, these themes or “key codes” can be “determined from prior research . . . [which] serve as a template . . . remaining flexible as the data analysis proceed[s].” The researcher used the following criteria to establish themes:

emerging themes—three of the five superintendents addressed the particular superintendent practice; an established theme—at least four superintendents addressed
the particular superintendent practice. If fewer than three superintendents addressed a particular superintendent practice, then the theme was non-existent.

Researcher’s Background

Interpretation of the data is influenced by 12 years of educational experience: three as a teacher, four as assistant principal, and five as a principal. This provides a heightened sense of awareness and ability to detect relationships and patterns and research bias. This potential bias was mitigated by having all participants review the transcripts to ensure accuracy.

In 1996, the researcher began teaching alternative education at the middle level in a rural town in southwest Michigan. After teaching three years and having that program be recognized as a Michigan Education Association Exemplary Program, and after receiving a Master’s degree in Educational Leadership, he was hired within the district to replace the assistant principal. After two years of experience as the assistant principal, he left to become the assistant principal at the junior/senior high school of his alma mater. Two years into that position he was asked to be the principal of that building. Three years passed and a position opened in a bigger district in southwest Michigan and the researcher took on that position. He is currently in his fourth year as the high school principal.

A personal reflection journal was maintained to clarify personal bias. Potential biases were considered and attempts to counteract them were discussed with colleagues in active administrative roles and with the dissertation committee.
Activities and Timeline

As noted above, the researcher followed all procedures relating to the collection and analysis of study. The Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) process was approved during the first few months in 2009. Superintendents were contacted no later than the end of February. Those superintendents participating in the study signed off on the HSIRB process and an initial interview was established no later than March. Initial interviews, collection of all artifacts, and observations took place in April through June. The dissertation process was completed by early 2010.

Validity and Generalizability

The credibility of a research study is based on validity and reliability. McMillan (2000) noted that it is important to show that the data, data analysis, and conclusion are believable and trustworthy. Maxwell (1996) addressed four main types of understanding in qualitative studies: description, interpretation, theory, and generalization. Descriptive validity refers to the accuracy of the reporting. The data taken from all interviews were taken from the transcriptions of the interviews. Demographic data were obtained from the districts’ annual reports and Ed Yes reports. Interpretive validity refers to understanding the viewpoint of the participants in the study and the significance they bring to the data.

This study sought the self-described practices and experiences of highly effective superintendents regarding how they implement superintendent leadership responsibilities. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in such a way as to elicit natural descriptions from the participants without those descriptions being influenced by any
external frame for describing their work. Theoretical validity refers to the understanding of the phenomena being studied. Using the meta-analysis of Marzano and Waters' (2006) research as a conceptual framework aided in examining the data after it were analyzed in its natural form. In addition, a peer check was used to discuss the findings with colleagues so that they could search for problems within the study.

According to Maxwell (1996), generalization in qualitative research falls into two categories: internal and external generalizability. Internal refers to the conclusions drawn within the group studied, while external refers to outside of the group. Merriam (1998) suggested that there are many assumptions that are related to a qualitative study. Qualitative research is not without limitations. Qualitative research typically places a heavy emphasis on developing rich descriptions of situations or structural components of organizations. In general, qualitative methods focus on single situations and organizations with limited sample size.

Given the purposive sample and the small number of individuals participating in the study, there is limited generalizability. With that stated, Merriam (1998) noted that there are strategies that can ensure internal validity. These include triangulation, member checks, observations at research site, and consideration of research bias. Triangulating the data was employed in using interviews, observations, and collecting artifacts. Member checks occurred after the transcriptions of the interview were completed. Observations and consideration of the researcher's bias were also used for this study. An attempt to enhance the external validity of this study included providing rich, thick descriptions so the study could possibly be transferred to other situations or studies.
Summary

Chapter III has described the research methodology for this multi-case study. Qualitative research techniques were employed to gather and analyze data based on the methods of Miles and Huberman, (1984) and Yin (1994). The results of the study follow in Chapter IV. Summary, conclusion, and recommendations for future research are included in Chapter V.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Overview

The purpose of the study was to determine how superintendents who lead high-achieving school districts implement specific research-based instructional leadership responsibilities/practices. A second purpose of the study was to identify obstacles superintendents encounter when implementing research-based instructional leadership responsibilities/practices and how they overcome these challenges.

This chapter presents the findings that resulted from the interviews, meetings, and artifacts. Themes were identified in each of the research-based superintendent responsibilities. While most of the best practices identified in Marzano and Waters' (2006) meta-analysis were found to be themes in this study, it is apparent that each superintendent carried out those practices in different ways. These differences in utilizing the themes among the districts are addressed after each research-based superintendent responsibility noted. Before the research questions are reviewed and findings are presented, information is given describing the superintendents and their respective school districts.
Description of Participants

Procedures outlined in the previous chapter led to interviews with five successful superintendents who met the criteria of the study, demonstrated by the success of their school districts. All of the superintendents interviewed were Caucasian, ranging from 50 to 65 years old. Four of the superintendents were male; one was female. The female was the only superintendent that was hired as superintendent coming from outside the district. The rest were hired from within the district, receiving promotions from their prior administrative position. Three of the four administrators were promoted from the assistant superintendent position, while the other was previously a principal. These five superintendents are referred to as Superintendent A, Superintendent B, Superintendent C, Superintendent D, and Superintendent E. Their respective school districts, which are defined as serving rural communities ranging in size from roughly 2,500 students to 3,700 students, are referred to as District A, District B, District C, District D, and District E (see Table 2).

District A

District A is in a quaint, small, rural setting that acts as a bedroom community for many who work in bigger cities, often across the state line. The school district is approximately 63 square miles and has three elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. The district serves more than 2,500 students, with rising enrollment. The district takes part in the school-of-choice program and has profited from it by enrolling students from neighboring districts.
Table 2

Description of Superintendents and Districts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superintendent and District</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age Bracket</th>
<th>Years as Superintendent (in district)</th>
<th>Prior Experiences</th>
<th>Number of Students in District</th>
<th>Demographics of School District</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>55-60</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>- Assistant Superintendent and Principal (totaling 8 years) - Worked at college level as coach and Dean of Students for 2 years - Taught and coached at the high school level for 9 years</td>
<td>2,594</td>
<td>95% Caucasian and 31% free and reduced rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>55-60</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>- Asst. Superintendent for 18 years - Elementary principal for 7 years - Elementary teacher for 5 years</td>
<td>2,904</td>
<td>90% Caucasian, 5% African-American, 3% Hispanic and 13% free and reduced rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>55-60</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>- Asst. Superintendent for 8.5 years - Department of Education for 7 years</td>
<td>2,594</td>
<td>94% Caucasian, 3% Hispanic and 16% free and reduced rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>65-70</td>
<td>31 years</td>
<td>- 9 years Elementary Principals - 7 years elementary teacher</td>
<td>3,726</td>
<td>92% Caucasian and 9% free and reduced rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>55-60</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>- 21 years as a Principal (all levels) - Elementary teacher</td>
<td>2,715</td>
<td>97% Caucasian and 16% free and reduced rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AVERAGE</td>
<td></td>
<td>55-60</td>
<td>13 years</td>
<td></td>
<td>2,500–3,700 students</td>
<td>Over 90% of students being served in the above districts are Caucasian and the free and reduced rate ranges from 9% to 31%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Each of District A’s schools is fully accredited by the North Central Association of Schools and Colleges. The school district is one of only a few districts in southwest Michigan that have a K-12 accreditation status through NCA. In addition, the district received recognition by the Michigan Department of Education for being the first and only school district in the state to achieve Blue Ribbon status for all its buildings. The high school was recognized as one of the 300 high schools (out of 16,000 nationally) that qualify as a “Model School” by the International Center for Leadership in Education. They were also accepted into their “Successful Practices Network” led by Dr. Willard Daggett. District standardized test scores have always been well above the state average at all grade levels.

District A spends roughly $19 million annually to service its students. It is financially sound with over 30% fund equity. Recent improvements have been made to all buildings. In 1998, the community voters approved an almost $16 million bond to build another elementary school, which helped the reconfigure the district by offering a Pre K-1 building, a 2-3 building, and a 4-5 building. In 2004, the voters passed a bond to finance a district auditorium and gymnasium. In addition, in 2002, an administrative office was built without going to the taxpayers.

Superintendent A has been an administrator in the district for the past 23 years, the last 15 as superintendent. Prior to his tenure in District A, he was a local college dean of students and coach. His career started in education by teaching and coaching at the high school level.
District B

District B is located along the sunset shores of Lake Michigan in Berrien County, Michigan. The school district serves two communities and has over 2,900 students enrolled. Its demographics are 90% Caucasian, 5% African-American, 3% Hispanic, and 2% Asian, with 13% of the student population receiving free/reduced lunch. There are three elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. The school district has an annual budget that exceeds $23 million. It currently has 13% fund equity. Sixty-six percent of the staff holds an advanced degree.

The superintendent in District B has been in education for 36 years with the last 6 as superintendent. He was a teacher for 5 years and an elementary principal for 7 years, and then was promoted to assistant superintendent in 1993.

District C

District C is the county seat in a southwest Michigan county. This close-knit community is known as one of the nation’s largest National Historic Districts. There are just over 2,500 students being served in this district. Demographics revealed that most students are Caucasian at 94%, with a small population of Hispanic at 3%, and an even smaller population of African-Americans, Asians, and American Indian, all totaling 3%. Just over 400 students (16%) district-wide receive free/reduced lunch. The school district is running a $21 million business. Currently, it has 5% of its annual budget in savings. The district has lost over 100 students in five years.
The superintendent in District C is the only female in this study. She has been working in her capacity in this district for the last 6 years. At the conclusion of this school year, she will retire from education. Prior to this position, she was the Assistant Superintendent in an Indiana school district for over 8 years. She has also spent 7 years working for the Indiana Department of Education. She holds an Ed.D. in educational leadership.

District D

District D is located in Van Buren County in southwest Michigan. It is the largest school district in this study, serving more than 3,700 students district-wide. The district has grown in the last 20 years by 1,400 students. The advantage of this rural setting is that it is a bedroom community for those who work in nearby cities like Kalamazoo. The district has two elementary schools (one early elementary and one upper elementary), one middle school, and one high school. All the schools are conveniently located on one 128-acre campus. The campus is located on the outskirts of town, which forces about 90% of the students to be bused to campus. The school district was recognized as one of the top metropolitan area public school districts in the United States by Expansion Management Magazine and has also been honored as a Gold Medal Energy award winner. The school district has an annual budget of $28.5 million. Its fund balance currently is at 10% of the annual budget. The school district employs over 400 employees. The student demographics of the district are as follows: 92% Caucasian, 2% Hispanic, 2% African-American, and 3% combination of American Indians and Asians. Nine percent of the student population receives free/reduced.
District D's superintendent has been in education for over 40 years, with the past 31 years acting as the superintendent of this school district. At the end of this school year, he will be retiring. He came into the school year as an elementary principal.

District E

District E is located in Kalamazoo County, which is in southwest Michigan. The district encompasses over 110 square miles of rural, suburban, and small town geography, including two villages and eight townships. The residents of this community have small town advantages with major metropolitan benefits just a few minutes away. This school district serves over 2,700 students, with 97% of the population being Caucasian and the other 3% being African-American, American Indian, Hispanic, and Asian. The free/reduced rate for the district is just above 16%. In the past two years, the school district has lost over 150 students. The average teaching years of experience in the district is over 14 years, with over 70% of the staff having advanced degrees. There are three elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. School district E has 11% fund equity with an annual budget of $21 million.

Superintendent E has been in the district for 25 years. He has been an administrator at all levels and has been the superintendent the last 5 years. He started his career teaching at the elementary level. He was recognized as a Golden Apple Award winner from his alma mater, where he received his undergraduate and graduate degree.

Below, in Table 3, are the 2008-09 state high-stake test results of each of the five districts in this study. As shown, the five school districts significantly exceed the state average in all test areas and grade levels.
Table 3

2008-09 State Scores on Standardized Test for Districts in Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>ELA</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Writing</th>
<th>Math</th>
<th>Science</th>
<th>Soc. St.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>District A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd grade</td>
<td>93.3</td>
<td>93.8</td>
<td>71.8</td>
<td>99.5</td>
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<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th grade</td>
<td>84.8</td>
<td>90.9</td>
<td>48.2</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th grade</td>
<td>88.2</td>
<td>91.1</td>
<td>75.4</td>
<td>90.8</td>
<td>95.2</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th grade</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>88.6</td>
<td>88.7</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>85.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th grade</td>
<td>86.4</td>
<td>85.9</td>
<td>79.3</td>
<td>89.7</td>
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<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th grade</td>
<td>82.5</td>
<td>82.3</td>
<td>77.7</td>
<td>89.5</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9th grade</td>
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<td>--------</td>
<td></td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>80.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>11th grade</td>
<td>59.6</td>
<td>68.6</td>
<td>45.5</td>
<td>52.6</td>
<td>63.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>3rd grade</td>
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<td>91.6</td>
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<td>--------</td>
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<td>50.7</td>
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<td>5th grade</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>92</td>
<td>68.6</td>
<td>97.2</td>
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Table 3—Continued

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<td>91.3</td>
<td>59.4</td>
<td>95.4</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th grade</td>
<td>90.6</td>
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<td>79.4</td>
<td>88.9</td>
<td>94.4</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th grade</td>
<td>89.3</td>
<td>89.3</td>
<td>87.6</td>
<td>89.3</td>
<td>79.8</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th grade</td>
<td>91.6</td>
<td>92.6</td>
<td>83.7</td>
<td>92.6</td>
<td>--------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th grade</td>
<td>90.2</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>90.7</td>
<td>89.1</td>
<td>92.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>9th grade</td>
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<td>86.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11th grade</td>
<td>61.4</td>
<td>71.9</td>
<td>51.2</td>
<td>54.2</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>92.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>3rd grade</td>
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<td>86.4</td>
<td>61.1</td>
<td>91.3</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th grade</td>
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<td>82.8</td>
<td>44.4</td>
<td>87.9</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th grade</td>
<td>78.2</td>
<td>81.5</td>
<td>63.4</td>
<td>76.8</td>
<td>83.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>6th grade</td>
<td>79.5</td>
<td>80.5</td>
<td>75.7</td>
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<td>7th grade</td>
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<td>8th grade</td>
<td>76.7</td>
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<td>9th grade</td>
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<td>72.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11th grade</td>
<td>52.3</td>
<td>61.9</td>
<td>41.1</td>
<td>46.2</td>
<td>56.6</td>
<td>79.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings Related to Research Question 1: Do effective superintendents exhibit behaviors and actions that support current exemplary leadership research on responsibilities/practices? If so, how?

As part of the research, the interviewer asked an open-ended question per the six themes (see Appendix D) that Marzano and Waters (2006) identified in their work: goal-setting process, non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction, board alignment with and support of district goals, monitoring goals for achievement, use of resources to support the goals, and defined autonomy. In addition, the researcher observed a meeting that each superintendent convened. The researcher also examined district artifacts in order to respond to the research question. Findings from researching the five school
districts are reported in accordance to the current work of Marzano and Waters relating to superintendent responsibilities and practices.

**Goal-Setting Process**

All five school superintendents fully implement all the best practices as stated by the research. Themes were established by four or five of the superintendents using the research-based responsibilities. "Emerging themes" are identified by three of the five superintendents using the research-based responsibilities. The themes that are established for the goal-setting process are supported in detail below using quotes and other pertinent information gathered from the study. The themes established were: (1) shared vision, (2) goal setting with shareholders, (3) academically focused goals, and (4) consistent communications of expectations to administrators. Implementation was extensive, ranging from board practices all the way down to school PLCs (Professional Learning Communities composed of teaching staff and other professionals).

**Developing a Shared Vision**

All five school districts under the care of the superintendents studied have clear and well communicated missions, visions, and belief statements. District C superintendent communicated her idea of keeping a vision statement in that "The vision directs our efforts, keeping us on a path to reach our district’s goals and keeping us focused on our student’s futures.” Each mission statement also included words to the effect of “all students can learn.” District B integrates the mottos “Good to Great” and “Every Child Every Day” into daily practices ranging from letterheads to student reward
systems. District B’s superintendent states, “We know that we cannot be satisfied with being just ‘good enough’ but rather we must strive on a daily basis to reach new heights. As Jim Collins noted in his book *Good to Great*, ‘Good’ is the enemy of ‘great.’” He also stated that, “We know that before students can do their best they must know that there are adults who care about them as individuals. We are working constantly to demonstrate to students that we care.”

Districts A and D both had extensive five-year strategic plans established that involved all stakeholders and addressed specific needs of their respective districts. An outside expert was brought in to facilitate this process. District A’s superintendent stated, “There was a huge acceptance of (their) strategic plan. Everyone in the school family owned it knowing that there had been so many stakeholders involved.” District D had just finished developing their first strategic plan. It involved using the “District Mission” (What do we do, and why do we exist?) to create a “Future Vision” (Where are we going?). In doing this they agreed to incorporate “Values, beliefs, and guiding principles” (This is who we are and how we will work together to achieve our vision). They set strategic goals as the means by which they would grow and evolve and stay true to the values and beliefs. They decided what their definitions of success would be and developed a set of systems and processes by which to align, coordinate, leverage, and build their capacity to fulfill the mission and vision. Implementation was based on priorities and specific targets. Plans were also made for the need to “Monitor, Adjust, and Evaluate,” which included a benchmarking progress, making mid-course corrections, and continuously updating the “Strategic System” for continuous improvement. Both
superintendents indicated the strategic plan is always front and center when district committees meet and is also widely embedded into daily practices.

**Setting Goals Developed Jointly**

When it comes to involving the school board with the goal-setting process, each of the school districts varies on its approach. While four of the five school districts involve the board throughout the process, one school board doesn’t become involved in the process of defining specific academic goals. The superintendent of that district, in concurrence with the school board, holds the belief that academic goal-setting is best left to the educators. Data retreats are used in three of the school districts in different capacities. The superintendent in District E said, “We have annual board retreats to help educate and keep our members in the loop. This helps give an understanding where our priorities are and helps focus and show them how it all fits in.” In District C, they meet as administrators to gather data and go over it. District C’s superintendent said, “We go to the board and go over it in board/administrative workshops.” District A’s superintendent said, “The board asks for specific data regarding what is perceived as the district’s needs and then involves the administrators and committees in meeting those needs.” District E used the retreats for these goal-setting processes, while Districts A and C use it as a means of reporting.

**Goals Are Academically Focused**

While Districts B, C, and E haven’t established strategic plans for their districts, they, along with the others, have their individual schools establish goals on their
academic needs in all core areas. These goals are made public through the district and individual school improvement plans. As District C’s superintendent said, “We look broadly across the landscape and at all the variables and set goals that are attainable from there.” District C’s superintendent also stated that goals need to be relevant and obtainable and that “We have to set goals that become a reality and not just sit on a shelf.” Superintendent E reported that, “Each building has its own personality and needs, but must also fit (those goals) into the district initiative.” Superintendent E also noted that improvement is always a goal. He said that “It is difficult to improve or ask for improvement when the scores are good, but there is always improvement if you aren’t at 100%.” District C’s superintendent quoted Peter Senge, saying that, “All goals need to be pointed in the same direction.”

It was found that all goal-setting processes followed the S.M.A.R.T. (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-Bound) format for setting goals. Superintendent D quoted DuFour’s work regarding the SMART goal process by saying, “SMART goals help to focus the team on one goal which the whole team is accountable for achieving.” He revealed his teams are continuously asking three questions: “(1) What do we want our students to learn? (2) How will we know if they learn it? and (3) What will we do if they don’t learn it?” An example of this process can be best illustrated using an excerpt from District B’s annual report:

The school improvement plan is reviewed annually with respect to student achievement. Our plan is designed to maximize the effectiveness of time, energy, and resources that are directed towards achieving the school improvement goals. Our school improvement plan is based on effective research based on strategies in assessment, curriculum, and instruction as determined by a needs inventory. A plan is developed in each of the five core areas of math, science, reading, writing, and social studies, and involves at least two action strategies in each core area.
Each action strategy includes the following: resources needed, timeline, staff development needs, and monitoring indicators.

Communicate Expectations

In all the school districts, superintendents communicate the vision, mission, values, and goals through many channels. All have a district council that meet regularly to establish and report out on goals. In addition, all superintendents meet throughout the year with their principals individually to address the goals. Principals are asked to explicitly and implicitly support the district initiatives. They do this by forming committees and working through their school improvement teams and department chairs. Four of the five superintendents stated they all have PLCs (Professional Learning Communities) in place in all of their buildings. District A takes things one step further by providing time for articulation of curriculum, assessment, and goals in all core areas. All teachers (K-12) meet five times a year to address these topics. Table 4 provides results of how the superintendents in this study used the research-based best practice of goal-setting to effectively lead their school districts.

Table 4

Occurrence of Best Practices (Goal-Setting Process) Used by Effective Superintendents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal-setting Process</th>
<th>Practices Used by Superintendent</th>
<th>Superintendents Using Best Practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Developing share vision</td>
<td>Superintendent A, B, C, D, E</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set goals developed jointly by board and administration</td>
<td>Superintendent A, B, C, D, E</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals are academically focused rather than maintenance</td>
<td>Superintendent A, B, C, D, E</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating expectations to other administrators</td>
<td>Superintendent A, B, C, D, E</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Non-Negotiable Goals for Achievement and Instruction

Most of the best practices under the non-negotiable goals theme were fully implemented in the school districts in this study. Themes, again, were established by four or five of the superintendents establishing non-negotiable goals in their respective school districts. Emerging themes are identified by three of the five superintendents using this research-based responsibility. The themes established under non-negotiable goals were as follows: (1) modeling instructional design, (2) establishing clear priorities, (3) adopting curriculum-based methodologies, (4) using diverse instructional methodologies, and (5) ensuring adoption and implementation of instructional programs. The only non-emergent theme was the five-year non-negotiable goal, as there were only two districts (A and D) that had five-year goals. Below in Table 5 are the results of how the superintendents used the research-based best practice of setting non-negotiable goals for student achievement. Furthermore, the themes that are established for this research-based responsibility are supported in detail below using quotes and other pertinent information gathered from the study.

Ensuring a Preferred Instructional Program

All school districts have set curriculums used by their staffs. These curriculums include pacing and lesson guides, key terms, specific objectives, resources, and assessment tools. These curriculum guides serve as a reference to all educators. They are working documents that are revisited often to modify and adjust when needed, based on student results. All of the school districts are in a curriculum review cycle—every five to
six years the curriculum and its resources are revisited in depth and additional resources are purchased to help with any gaps in the curriculum. It was also found that District E is using the UBD model (Understanding by Design) by Grant Wiggins in order to help their educators with how to gain a better grasp on the final outcomes expected from their students and how to shape lessons and instruction around those expectations in a more holistic manner. Two superintendents stated that they found it very important to train “new” staff in this method, especially given the opportunity they had with the mentoring process. In quoting Superintendent E, “Training the teachers with other teachers . . . you get ownership.”

Table 5

*Occurrence of Best Practices (Non-Negotiable Goals) Used by Effective Superintendents*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-Negotiable Goals for Achievement and Instruction</th>
<th>Practices Used by Superintendent</th>
<th>Superintendents Using Best Practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Modeling understanding of instructional design</td>
<td>Superintendent A, B, C, D, E</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear priorities are established in district goals and objectives</td>
<td>Superintendent A, B, C, D, E</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adopting instructional methodologies that facilitate efficient delivery of district curriculum</td>
<td>Superintendent A, B, C, D, E</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using diverse instructional methodologies teaching the different learning styles</td>
<td>Superintendent A, B, C, D, E</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adopting five-year non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction</td>
<td>Superintendent A, D</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensuring a preferred instructional program is adopted and implemented</td>
<td>Superintendent A, B, C, D, E</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Modeling Understanding of Instructional Design and Adopting Instructional Methodologies for Implementing District Curriculum

All districts have some form of a coaching concept. The ranges of support included master teachers teaching a lesson and helping others, to directors in each building assisting the teachers as the “Director of Teaching and Learning.” As District D’s superintendent put it:

Our Directors of Teaching and Learning (DTL’s) are in the trenches with the teachers assisting them in growing as educators. They modeled lessons, observed and provided constructive feedback, and provided support in finding resources for our teachers. This is a great way to assist educators in a non-threatening manner.

District E’s superintendent noted, “A support person at every grade level in the elementary school helps support the best practice.” He added, “This additional support gives information on what needs to happen.” This model is not fully implemented in his district because of funding. He said, “We do not have the level of support at the high school level. Budget cuts eliminated that support so resource pieces are missing.” The coordinator trains teachers and also spends a lot of time training administrators. In District E the principal is asked to be the instructional leader and visits the classrooms on a daily basis, either doing formal observations or classroom walk-throughs. With increasing diversity in the classroom and increasing rigor from the curriculum, side-by-side support has been shown to be increasingly effective in showing teachers how to incorporate more effective instructional strategies and practices in their classroom routines (Brewster & Klump, 2005).

All districts incorporated some sort of methodology to check for correct use and effectiveness of their programs being implemented. All school districts put a heavy
emphasis into ensuring this effectiveness through RTI and various assessment methods. Increased use into the RTI (Response to Intervention) model has schools developing systems for identifying, tracking, and using interventions to best help all students in the district. District A's superintendent said, “Using data and looking at data to improve instruction is a struggle. We have started to incorporate ongoing local formative assessments.” In addition, their annual report states that one of their goals is to ensure quality education for all. Their strategies include differentiating instruction, utilizing best instructional strategies, and incorporating a parent education plan. It was revealed in District B’s annual report that intervention plans are created for individual students who have not met the proficient level at monthly meetings. Continual monitoring and interventions are used until students are proficient. District C’s superintendent expressed a renewed interest in looking at the data gained from these new models to answer the question of “Where does the data support this?” for any needs the school district finds or to navigate where the school district needs to go next. In that same district, they are emphasizing a push to develop a set of formative assessments to make the data gathered more current and relevant to what is being taught and learned. This provides more help with at-risk students.

District D’s superintendent also mentioned ongoing formative assessments and incorporating an RTI intervention plan in their district’s strategic plan. District E’s superintendent commented:

The whole issue is formative at this stage. We are constantly working on improving our tools, developing and gathering more common assessments, and getting more information on a more frequent basis. We ask ourselves: How are kids doing? Where are they not doing well? and What can we do to help those that don’t get it learn?”
All five school districts had extensive training in multiple intelligences, brain research, and use of best practices. Each school district is at a different level in its process in working through these teaching methods and practices. District E’s superintendent said, “Teachers must learn to teach in ways that are brain friendly, to help students cement understanding.” District A’s superintendent said, “When reviewing curriculum at the district level, the teachers from all the buildings view best practice research.” District C’s superintendent stated, “Within the school system when we look at instruction, it must be best practices.” She added, “Professional development is helping with this process. Letting one teacher help the next.” In reviewing all of the school districts’ school improvement plans, they included professional development in implementing best practices. Most school districts viewed training and work in these as useful “tools” for their “toolbox of best practices.” District E, however, made learning and implementation of the practices very intentional. For example, what is taught in one particular class at a grade level is taught in every classroom in that subject at that level in the same manner.

Each of the five districts was found to be continually striving to find the best researched practices to meet the needs of their particular group of students. As an example of this, in looking at District A’s annual report, they are offering multi-age rooms, looping, and specific gender classes in different areas in order to find the right combination of practices that will meet the diverse needs of their specific group of students. Another example of this practice was viewed in a district letter in District B. At
the high school level they have implemented an “academic achievement center” which is
designed

for high school students are who are in need of credit recovery in order to graduate
on-time, and remedial instruction in order to meet graduation requirements, and
students who need special assistance due to medical or other conditions
preventing the student from being successful in the traditional school setting.

District C’s superintendent said:

We found that the achievement was uneven across all grade levels. There were
areas where the achievements were not strong, and we had uneven patterns of
excellence. We needed to focus on what we were teaching and how we could
teach to create a better alignment in our curriculum. We are a participating partner
in the Promise Program to improve teaching Math and Science—a training only
PDP program.

In viewing District D’s school improvement plan, they are working on employing a
spectrum of interventions through the Response to Intervention (RTI) system as well as
realigning special education services to increase a least restrictive environment. District E
is also spending additional monies to address their at-risk population. In reviewing their
annual report, it states the following: “Schools provide At-Risk services through
Instructional Consultants and certified instructional assistants.”

With this said, all five superintendents noted the extreme importance of meeting
the needs of all students with the mandates from “No Child Left Behind” being at the
forefront of education legislation. Superintendent A indicated:

The challenge is standards for all, high school graduation requirements, and the
accountability piece with the state through Ed Yes. . . . It is very difficult to keep
up with all the mandates and change. You have to bring people along. You have to
force some as well because of the timeline of the mandates.

Superintendent B said, “The No Child Left Behind legislation is our primary goal. The
challenge is how we best service these students who are failing. It all comes down to what
we can do in the classroom, to help these students.” District C’s superintendent said, “We look to gain some direction from the state and its mandates.” She adds:

I communicate the information to all stakeholders on what is coming from the various schools and what is coming down from the State, and the Federal level, and what is coming to us from research about best practices and the right way of doing things.

District D discussed, in their strategic plan that they are adopting, a comprehensive curriculum model to address the specific mandates of No Child Left Behind. Although District E’s superintendent didn’t note NCLB, he stated, “Teachers are responsible not to just to teach to the upper groups but all levels of students.” He also noted that when making decisions, “when looking at changes the principal needs to propose why what you are proposing is best for all kids.” All five superintendents are continually striving through differentiation of instruction to Response to Interventions, to work to achieve both student achievement and preparation for productive adulthood. All school districts are also trying also incorporate varying levels of technology into these methods in order to help the students not only become more adept at technology, but to also offer a sort of “hook” into implementation of some of these best practices to make lessons more relevant to today’s world.

Clear Priorities Are Established in District Goals

As noted in the previous section (Goal-Setting Process) all districts have an in-depth process in developing and assessing their student achievement and instructional goals. In reviewing all districts’ annual reports, goal-setting was evident. The school boards and superintendents had clearly defined goals and prioritized action items.
Districts B and C not only have goals for all their buildings; they have a plan for implementing individual student goals for instruction and achievement.

In conclusion, it was quite apparent that the districts in this study adopted a broad but common framework for instructional design and planning, common vocabulary and key terms, and consistent use and professional development using research-based best instructional practices.

**Board Alignment with and Support of District Goals**

In order to be an effective school district, it is important to have the support from the school board. Board members need to be knowledgeable and understand the inner-workings of education. All five superintendents in the study revealed they had very supportive and educated school boards. Themes, again, were established by four or five of the superintendents having school board alignment with and support of the district goals. Emerging themes are identified by three of the five superintendents using this research-based responsibility. The themes established in regard to board alignment and support included: (1) board president agrees with district goals, (2) board president agrees with type and nature of conflict, (3) board president agrees with the political climate of district, and (4) board president agrees with teaching and learning strategies. There were two emerging themes: (1) professional development provided for school board, and (2) board president agrees on effectiveness of board training. Below, Table 6 will show the findings on how the school boards in each district are aligned in supporting the district goals. The researcher will then go in depth in explaining the findings. Also, the themes that are
established for this research-based responsibility are supported in detail below using quotes and other pertinent information gathered from the study.

Table 6

*Occurrence of Best Practices (Board Alignment of Goals) Used by Effective Superintendents*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Board Alignment with and Support of District Goals</th>
<th>Practices Used by Superintendent</th>
<th>Superintendents Using Best Practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ways of Establishing Agreement with Board President on District Goals</td>
<td>Superintendent A, B, C, D, E</td>
<td>Superintendent A, B, C, D, E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing agreements with board president on type and nature of conflict in district</td>
<td>Superintendent A, B, C, D, E</td>
<td>Superintendent A, B, C, D, E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Along with board president, remaining situationally aware, agreeing on the political climate of the district</td>
<td>Superintendent A, B, C, D, E</td>
<td>Superintendent A, B, C, D, E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing agreement with the board president on the nature of teaching/learning strategies to be used in the district</td>
<td>Superintendent A, B, C, D, E</td>
<td>Superintendent A, B, C, D, E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing professional development for the school board</td>
<td>Superintendent A, C, E</td>
<td>Superintendent A, C, E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing agreement with the board president on the effectiveness of board training</td>
<td>Superintendent A, C, E</td>
<td>Superintendent A, C, E</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Professional Development for School Board and Board Training*

District A’s superintendent said that the latter statement is essential for the success of the school district. District C’s superintendent said, “You have to educate the board on the matters at stake while also working toward common goals.” Districts A and E both organize annual board retreats in order to help educate and keep board members in the loop on matters and stay on the same page with district priorities. District E’s superintendent stated:
These retreats are essential to focus and help members see how all the puzzle pieces fit together. Board members need to be well informed of the issues leading up to the decisions we make for district goals and we all need to be on the same page and keep working on approaching this in a unified manner.

District E summarized the situation of working with boards on common goals. He said:

We have a veteran board that knows how to stay on task. They all come from the ranks, being involved in different areas in the school district. Some are from study teams, some booster organizations, and some are PTA members. Each member has their own areas of interest. Some are knowledgeable in gifted and talented, some are into performing arts, some athletics, some at-risk students, but they all work as a whole. They maintain the big picture.

Districts A and D also have similar situations as District E in that their boards are comprised of veteran members as well. District C brings in outside sources to educate its board members on various educational matters. As noted above, Districts A and D already involve outside expertise to educate and inform their board members during the goal-setting process. In fact, in District D, the researcher personally observed the board president playing an active role in a strategic planning meeting where he voiced his pleasure in the administration and committee members who played a role in establishing the strategic plan.

Although all five districts or superintendents noted that an educated and informed board is important, only Districts A, C, and E mentioned making a concentrated effort to provide professional development opportunities for their boards. Superintendents B and D made no mention of concurring with the board president on offering professional development for their board.

Four of the five school districts seek to become more informed on various topics through forming committees with the school board members, who then report back to
inform the group as a whole. As Superintendent B noted, he relies on committees to research topics and submit their findings over to the board for final approval. He also stated, “The more you do in committees, the less you have to do in a board meeting.” Instead of forming committees, Superintendent D prefers to work on various issues with the board as a whole in order to ensure accurate communication and information. He commented, “We have work sessions of the whole board because I don’t trust that information is communicated accurately.”

Situationally Aware Agreeing on Political Climate of District

Effective communication is essential to working with the school board. District A’s superintendent said he has daily contact with board members discussing progress of goals and address issues/concerns. District E’s superintendent had those same sentiments but added, “I share all information with the board. It helps me make an informed decision on certain topics.” Superintendent E, the most tenured superintendent, added, “If you are going to operate without conflict there should be no surprises. Take time to inform the board.” For all school districts in this study, the boards received written reports from the superintendent prior to each meeting with the board. In addition, in each school district the superintendent provides frequent (at least weekly) written progress reports to the school board.

A few of the superintendents discussed the importance of developing trust with the school board. District A’s superintendent stated, “You have to be very honest and have an open relationship with your school board. It is through this type of relationship that the superintendent gains a pulse of the community and individual agendas of each
board member.” Superintendent B noted, “I am in constant contact with the board emailing them. Emails help keep them informed of parental concerns and what is happening in the community,” while District C’s superintendent said:

I walked into a district that had a great division and that division carried over to the board. I spent a lot of my time going along trying to educate the board members to earn their trust and confidence through personal meetings and telephone conversation.

In reviewing the board minutes, it was found that boards voted in support of all agenda items. District D’s superintendent said, “I have been a superintendent for 31 years and have only had four times that the board has not unanimously voted on an issue.” Board cohesion was a similarity with all five school districts studied.

Monitoring Goals for Achievement and Instruction

The pressures of accountability require that superintendents and their subordinates monitor the status of meeting district goals. Themes were established by four or five of the superintendents monitoring their district’s achievement and instructional goals. Emerging themes is identified by three of the five superintendents using this research-based responsibility. The themes established for monitoring goals included: (1) uses evaluation to address district’s instructional program, (2) monitors student achievement through feedback, (3) uses system to manage district change, (4) evaluates principals annually, (5) reports student data to board regularly, (6) ensures curricular needs are met, and (7) coordinates efforts to organize and increase reliability. Only one theme was not established and was used only by District C. That theme was: observes classrooms on district visits. Table 7 summarizes best practices used by superintendents in monitoring
achievement and instruction. In addition, the themes that are established in this topic are supported in detail below using quotes and other pertinent information gathered from the study.

Table 7

*Occurrence of Best Practices (Monitoring of Goals) Used by Effective Superintendents*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monitoring Goals for Achievement and Instruction</th>
<th>Practices Used by Superintendent</th>
<th>Superintendents Using Best Practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Using an instructional evaluation program that accurately monitors implementation of the district's instructional program</td>
<td>Superintendent A, B, C, D, E</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring student achievement through feedback from the instructional evaluation process</td>
<td>Superintendent A, B, C, D, E</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using a system to manage instructional change</td>
<td>Superintendent A, B, C, D, E</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annually evaluating principals</td>
<td>Superintendent A, B, C, D, E</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reporting student achievement data to the board on a regular basis</td>
<td>Superintendent A, B, C, D, E</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensuring that the curricular needs of all student populations are met</td>
<td>Superintendent A, B, C, D, E</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observing classrooms during school visits</td>
<td>Superintendent C</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordinating efforts of individuals and groups with the organization to increase reliability of the system, with adjustments by individuals to quickly respond to system failures</td>
<td>Superintendent A, B, C, D, E</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Using an Instructional Evaluation Program and Monitoring Student Achievement*

District B’s superintendent extensively addressed the NCLB legislation, referring to it as a good thing, forcing educators to not only teach to the top and middle levels, but to all students. With the pressures of NCLB and state mandates, the superintendent needs to monitor and evaluate its district’s instructional programs. District C’s superintendent
stated, "You have to inspect what you expect." This was a common theme from all superintendents. Another finding was that superintendents left a significant amount of monitoring to the building principals. District B’s superintendent stated:

I rely on my principals to work with their staff to go over the data and make the necessary changes. My job is to support the principals and their staffs by asking key questions: Why is this score where it is? Where do we go now to improve this? What is the problem and what are your thoughts on how we can fix it?

District C’s superintendent also related that she listens and asks a lot of questions. This method was observed firsthand at an elementary principal meeting. The superintendent commented, "What data supports this decision?" These types of questions force reflection of practices, data analysis, and research of best practices.

Evaluating Principals and Observing Classrooms

Each of the five superintendents conducted annual evaluations of their administrators. It was interesting to find that District E has a merit pay system for their administrators based on goals achieved. All superintendents expected their principals to be instructional leaders. While only Superintendent C revealed that she visits classrooms regularly, all expect the principal to be in the classrooms. Superintendents C, D, and E all discussed the importance of their administrators to do frequent classroom walk-throughs. Superintendent C stated, "The principals have to be teacher leaders and visit classrooms to monitor teachers’ implementation of best practices." The Superintendent in District D noted, "You can see the evolution of principals involved in the day to day instruction. He added, "One does not go into leadership now if they do not know instruction and best practices. My principals need to be in the classrooms teaching teachers." Superintendent
E said, "The principal does walk-throughs to see how teachers are meeting the district expectations." They indicated that their administrators have had extensive training to do so. The researcher personally observed District C's superintendent do classroom walk-throughs of four fifth-grade classrooms during his visit. Any observer could see that this was a normal thing for the superintendent to do.

All principals were required to evaluate their staff per state requirements and following teacher contract language. District A's superintendent stated, "Building principals are accountable for meeting the goals of the building. They work collaboratively with their teachers to achieve the school and district goals and evaluate personnel related to those goals." The evaluation template in District C has a component in it relating to the individual/school/district goals and how it is being met by the individual. Targets are pre-established and addressed throughout the evaluation process. All the superintendents stated that the job of the principal is to discuss and evaluate teachers by using data. District D's superintendent stated, "No longer can we evaluate based on what we see in the classroom during the formal observation. Teachers need to work on meeting the district and building targets and student achievement is what matters." District E superintendent indicated, "Goals are addressed in the teacher and principal evaluations."

*Communicating to School Board*

All schools within the five districts were continually reporting to the school board their student progress. This is accomplished through reports on state testing, local assessments, goals, and more individualized achievements (i.e., celebrations of success).
In addition, the superintendents provide ongoing data to the board of the progress made in the school district as a whole.

*Instructional Change*

All school districts in this study evaluate their instructional programs and student achievement mainly through formative assessments, summative assessments, district administration meetings, and through NCA accreditation methods. Superintendent A stated, "Once the curriculum is developed at the district level it is placed in the classrooms and the principals and teachers are monitoring it through observation and assessments and test scores (both formative and summative)." In looking at the annual report of District A, they also use the NCA accreditation process to evaluate their schools as well. The superintendent in District B stated, "I rely on the principals to work with their staff and go over data. The Assistant Superintendent deals with the building principals helping them look at data as it comes back." He added later, "We ask the following questions: Why is this score where it is? Where can we go now to improve?" Superintendent C commented, "We continually look at the results of our assessments when looking at meeting our goals. The areas where the students are not achieving must be the goal." In District D’s strategic plan, it addresses that each school measures success by the use of local assessments and also state and national tests. They define success by looking at trends from year to year and state and national averages. District E’s superintendent was very specific addressing this topic:

We have some data tools now that we use along with more continual data of our own. We look at how kids are doing and where they are not proficient. We look at
this data as an administrative team to keep all schools in the district on the same page with what's happening in the organization.

It was quite evident that common formative assessments were the hot topic. District E’s superintendent stated, “The whole issue of data is formative at this stage. This helps us by constantly improving our tools, developing and gathering more common assessments and getting more information on a more frequent basis.” District C indicated that using a system to collect formative data helps those in charge of monitoring for program effectiveness and student achievement get data that is more current, relevant, and useful for re-teaching students. She stated, “Instead of waiting for results of summative data, we can look at the results of what we are doing now and make necessary changes to be effective in a more timely manner.” This issue of more timely data collection and response to the data leads to the districts using various ways of implementing RTI (Response to Intervention) models. All districts used the RTI model in one form or another to differing degrees. District B implements it heavily in its elementary schools. Intervention plans are created for individual students at monthly meetings where data are looked at and strategies are brainstormed to formulate a specific plan for success for each student considered at-risk by their standards. Using the RTI models also helps to increase the reliability of the system so that those who are working the closest to the students can make changes in programming that are timely and relevant. Programs such as the “Plan, Do, Check, Act” program also aid in this effort to respond to ineffectiveness or failure in the most efficient and effective way possible. Other strategies that school districts used to respond to ineffective systems were curriculum review committees, assessment calendars, internal reviewing (such as NCA and school and improvement team reports), and external
reviewing (such as state assessments, NCA and Blue Ribbon audits). District A’s superintendent reports to the district (K-12) on progress made throughout the year.

Meetings are held to work on vertical articulation. He stated:

The middle and high school staff work an hour together on viewing data and curriculum review. Then the elementary join them the next hour and then they work an hour on their own. This is a way for us to get continuity.

The superintendent held these meetings on an average of five times a year.

An issue that has been resolved in all districts has been the warehousing of all data. Just recently, all districts have purchased programs that allow them to gather not only state data but local data as well. Superintendent E indicated his district uses this data tool to identify how well students are performing. Having this data warehouse helps districts track individual improvements and act.

District A used a specific program called “Plan, Do, Check, Act.” This particular district works with Pat Davenport, who started this program in response to effectively meet the needs of her 90/90/90 (90% success, 90% minority, and 90% poverty) school in Brazosport, Texas. In addition, all District A schools have been externally audited and have received Blue Ribbon status. They were the only school district that has achieved this mark in Michigan. District B initiated the process with Blue Ribbon validation and their middle school has achieved this honor. Finally, it was found that District D had taken this issue of gathering and using data to monitor progress as a matter of such high importance that they now employ a professional to strictly oversee all the aspects of data collection, reporting, and using information from the data. Other districts did not have a designated position; however, they used teachers and “Lead Teachers” whose job it was to collect and analyze data to assist teachers in effective instructional decisions.
Use of Resources to Support the Goals

All superintendents studied believe that it is their job to provide resources and professional development to their teachers and principals. Themes, again, were established by four or five of the superintendents using resources to support the goals. Emerging themes are identified by three of the five superintendents using this research-based responsibility. Themes established for supporting goals through resources included: (1) adopting management systems to support district philosophy, (2) providing a support system for professional development, (3) training staff in instructional practices, (4) providing resources, and (5) providing a district-wide professional development plan. Table 8 illustrates that the superintendents fully implement the practices related to using resources to support the goals for achievement and instruction. Below, in depth, are the specific findings related to this topic. Even though all superintendents fully implemented this, strategies used varied with each superintendent. Additionally, the themes that are established for this research-based responsibility are supported in detail below using quotes and other pertinent information gathered from the study.

Professional Development Plan and Resources

As District C’s superintendent observed, “I want to equip my staff with the necessary tools so we can get it right the first time. It all comes down to what we can do in the classroom to help all students.” While all districts do a great job providing time, money, and resources to their staff, they all do it in different ways. District A and C have outside experts come in on a frequent basis to help address a building or district goal.
District A’s superintendent talked extensively about having the outside expert coming in. This district has established a relationship with Dr. Patricia Davenport, who changed the district from one that taught poverty-stricken kids and one that was struggling to meet the needs of the students, to one that is nationally recognized for its student achievement. In addition, they have had an ongoing partnership with Dr. Willard Daggett, who is often cited as a “guru” on effective education. District A superintendent indicated, “This has been a powerful tool for our district. Teachers are able to hear from the best. There is instant credibility.” This school district also pays content experts to come in and work with their staff. This allows them to provide content specific assistance to their staff.

Table 8

*Occurrence of Best Practices (Use of Resources) Used by Effective Superintendents*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Use of Resources to Support the Goals for Achievement and Instruction</th>
<th>Practices Used by Superintendent</th>
<th>Superintendents Using Best Practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adopting an instructional and resource management system supporting implementation of the district’s instructional philosophy</td>
<td>Superintendent A, B, C, D, E</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing extensive teacher and principal staff development</td>
<td>Superintendent A, B, C, D, E</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training all instructional staff in a common but flexible instructional model</td>
<td>Superintendent A, B, C, D, E</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controlling resource allocation</td>
<td>Superintendent A, B, C, D, E</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proving access to professional growth opportunities through the design of a master plan to coordinate in-service activities of the district</td>
<td>Superintendent A, B, C, D, E</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All districts studied use the NCA accreditation model and/or the Michigan State Ed Yes Report Card School Indicators as a resource. NCA personnel, surveys, and the audit process all provide valuable information and guidelines to the districts. In reviewing
the NCA reports and State Report Card, it is evident that all districts use these tools to address specific gaps in the core curriculum. In addition, the indicators showed specific strengths and weaknesses in the school improvement process. No superintendent discussed this process as a tool.

Districts D and E use the “train the trainer” model for a lot of their professional development. They pay for a few of their staff members to become experts on a particular topic. Those trained are then used to train the other staff members. District E’s superintendent reported that this is their model of choice. He stated:

We put our focus on professional development by using our staff. This helps keep the costs down while allowing people to advance. We have very capable people on staff that can handle the training. This is a cost effective and proven model.

District D’s superintendent echoed those same sentiments and added:

We have found that having our staff assist in developing others builds leadership capacity. We also are able to sustain it because the staff owns it versus having an expert from the outside come in and do a one hit wonder on a particular topic.

District E also provided assistance by offering courses on instruction to all staff. This is in addition to the instructional coaches who help by modeling and observing teachers, which is also a model that District D incorporates into their professional development.

District E has a unique way in providing time for their professional development without taking time away from instruction. They have a delayed start a couple times a month to have teachers work together on district, building, and individual goals. District D is trying to offset some costs by having buildings take half-day sessions so they can utilize substitute teachers for only two buildings a day. All five districts also fully utilize the five days professional development set aside by the state for that specific use. Three of the five districts, A, D, and E, have a committee comprised of administration and
teachers to identify the professional development needs of their individual districts. The researcher attended at one such meeting at District A. At this meeting, the superintendent reviewed the next school year’s professional development dates and NCA goals for all buildings. Teacher leaders in each building shared what their respective buildings wanted for professional development. All topics were written on the board and decisions were made from that point.

*Training Staff on Instructional Model*

All districts have had their professional staff trained in utilizing best instructional practices, use of technology, brain research, and differentiating instruction. These topics continue to be addressed on a daily basis within each building. Principals are expected to monitor growth by doing classroom walk-throughs and evaluations. There is also new teacher mentoring going on in each district as well as ongoing training to help the staff look at their own data to best guide their instruction.

*Resources Allocation*

District A uses a zero-based budget system, which provides each building leadership council the opportunity to propose initiatives, specify professional development plans, and purchase resources that will aid their respective schools.

All districts have a cycle for curriculum review where they may purchase new supplies and materials to support curriculum changes. District B’s superintendent emphasized that this is a very important process that they do not take lightly. She said:
We have the responsibility in the curriculum review cycle to make the best decision possible because we have to live with it for 5-6 years. We need to ensure the resources we choose will benefit our whole student population. This is such a huge undertaking. That is why we have to do so much homework. That is why we need to consult many individuals to make sure we are making the right decisions.

When discussing resources with District C's superintendent, he stated it was important to order and get the materials into the teachers' hands as soon as possible before the school year began in order to make those teachers as prepared as possible.

Districts A, B, and E make an effort to involve themselves in "action research" whenever possible throughout the whole review process. They pilot programs such as "looping" and "multi-age" before full implementation of these curriculum changes. District A piloted both looping and multi-age programs. They are now in the process of beginning to pilot specific gender rooms. District B is currently piloting an academic achievement center at their high school in order to try to meet the needs of those students who have not been successful in the regular setting.

In reviewing the fund balance of all school districts, only one district has enough money to ensure that they do not have to borrow money throughout the year. With that said, it appeared that all districts are providing adequate professional development to their staffs. District C's superintendent addressed the topic of finding other monies to help offset the costs. Her district was fortunate to receive a substantial grant to help them with the teaching of mathematics. The three-year grant covered materials, curriculum supplies, and ongoing professional development. They were able to address specific needs by finding other ways to pay for it.

Several other resources were mentioned in the interviews. District B cited using the community for a significant amount of resources. Parent and community volunteers
provide time in and out of the classroom as well as serving as financial support in many ways. District A’s superintendent discussed utilizing Michigan Department of Education (MDE) personnel and MDE documents to help guide educational decisions. He mentioned using their local intermediate school district for support. He also commented, “While our local ISD does not have content specialists on staff, they do an excellent job bringing in experts from all areas and making them available to train various members in our district.” He said that in the last five years they have seen and been trained by Robert Marzano, Larry Lazotte, Pat Davenport, Grant Wiggins, and William Glasser, to name a few.

**Defined Autonomy**

Each superintendent provided some autonomy to their principals and teachers. However, it appears that Marzano and Waters’ broad definition in the meta-analysis used to identify the superintendent responsibilities does not always fit the common definition. Themes, again, were established by four or five of the superintendents providing autonomy to the schools in their school district. Emerging themes are identified by three of the five superintendents using this research based responsibility. The themes established in defined autonomy included: (1) developed district-defined autonomy, (2) used standards for instruction principles, (3) committed to instructional improvement, (4) prioritized teacher evaluations, (5) principals discussed results with stakeholders, (6) agreed on district-wide principles and values, (7) agreed on clear school performance mission, (8) provided all students learning opportunities, (9) socialization and functions in meetings, (10) agreed on high expectations, (11) principals are instructional leaders,
(12) directed personnel operations, (13) developed orderly climate, (14) promoted innovation, (15) principals made aware of district goals, and (16) leadership of curriculum development. There was only one emerging theme. This was the participating in the interviewing of teachers. Only one theme was not established at all, which was the rewarding and penalizing appropriately, used only by Districts B and C. As reported in Table 9, a number of topics were not mentioned by the five respondents. These included: applying district sanctions to students for unsatisfactory academic performance, the hiring of experienced teachers, rewarding students beyond standard honor rolls and recognition assemblies for exceptional performance, and ensuring that homogenous ability groupings within classrooms do not segregate students into racial or other inappropriate groups. The themes established for this research-based responsibility are supported in detail below using quotes and other pertinent information gathered from the study.

Table 9

Occurrence of Best Practices (Defined Autonomy) Used by Effective Superintendents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Defined Autonomy; Superintendent Relationship with Schools</th>
<th>Practices Used by Superintendent</th>
<th>Superintendents Using Best Practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Developing shared vision and understanding of “defined autonomy”</td>
<td>District A, B, C, D, E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Using standards for content and instruction as basic design principles</td>
<td>District A, B, C, D, E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Committing the district and schools to continuous improvement</td>
<td>District A, B, C, D, E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Screening, interviewing, and selecting teachers along with principals</td>
<td>District A, C, D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hire experienced teachers</td>
<td>Not observed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rewarding successful teachers and terminating the employment of unsuccessful teachers</td>
<td>District B, C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Establishing teacher evaluations as a priority for principals</td>
<td>District A, B, C, D, E</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 9—Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Defined Autonomy; Superintendent Relationship with Schools</th>
<th>Practices Used by Superintendent</th>
<th>Superintendents Using Best Practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ensuring that principals speak with teachers about results</td>
<td></td>
<td>District A, B, C, D, E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing strong agreed-upon principles/values which directions of people</td>
<td></td>
<td>District A, B, C, D, E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensuring that schools have a clear mission focused on school performance</td>
<td></td>
<td>District A, B, C, D, E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensuring that school practices are characterized by opportunity for all students to learn</td>
<td></td>
<td>District A, B, C, D, E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Including socializing functions in district meetings</td>
<td></td>
<td>District A, B, C, D, E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintaining high expectations for school performance</td>
<td></td>
<td>District A, B, C, D, E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expecting principals to fulfill instructional leadership responsibilities</td>
<td></td>
<td>District A, B, C, D, E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directing personnel operations to assure a stable yet improving and well-balanced work force</td>
<td></td>
<td>District A, B, C, D, E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensuring that schools are characterized by an orderly climate</td>
<td></td>
<td>District A, B, C, D, E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promoting innovation</td>
<td></td>
<td>District A, B, C, D, E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing principal awareness of district goals and actions directed at goal accomplishment</td>
<td></td>
<td>District A, B, C, D, E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing leadership of curriculum development</td>
<td></td>
<td>District A, B, C, D, E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensuring that homogeneous ability groupings within classrooms do not segregate students into racial or other inappropriate groups</td>
<td></td>
<td>Not observed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applying district sanctions to students for unsatisfactory academic performance</td>
<td></td>
<td>Not observed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rewarding students beyond standard honor rolls and recognition assemblies for exceptional performance</td>
<td></td>
<td>Not observed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Develop Shared Vision and Mission**

A number of concepts under the autonomy section were addressed in previous sections and included 13 items: (1) developed principal awareness of district goals and actions, (2) directed at goal accomplishment, (3) provided leadership of curriculum development, (4) used standards for content and instruction as basic design principles, (5) committed the district and schools to continuous improvement, (6) established teacher evaluation as a priority for principals, (7) ensured that principals speak with teachers about results, (8) established strong agreed-upon principles/values which direct actions of people, (9) maintained high expectations for school performance, (10) expected principals to fulfill instructional leadership responsibilities, (11) promoted innovation, (12) developed principal awareness of district goals and actions directed at goal accomplishment, and (13) provided leadership of curriculum development. All superintendents fully implemented these best practices, which were previously discussed.

All superintendents and their districts have developed strong vision for their respective districts, a mission statement, and guiding principles. All superintendents reported that establishing the vision first helped in further development of goals and curriculum development. This aids in the districts’ ability to maintain high standards for the students, staff, and community. All districts have a “learning for all” philosophy that directs their daily practices.
Interviewing Process and Rewarding and Terminating Teachers

The only superintendent that addressed celebrations with the researcher was Superintendent B. The District B superintendent celebrated and rewarded staff, students, and community, who go above the call of duty. He accomplished this by sending “Good to Great” postcards to those individuals who have exemplified and demonstrated greatness. In addition, he gave away a number of scholarships to staff members for doing great things. This program was supported by the local foundation. He also discussed having a luncheon for all staff at the end of the school year. This again demonstrated a commitment to the staff by celebrating another great school year. Along this same topic, but on the negative side, it was found that only one district addressed terminating personnel for not meeting the districts’ goals. The superintendent shared with the researcher that they were talking to legal counsel to address letting two staff members go at the end of the school year. The same superintendent stressed the importance of the building principal’s ability to evaluate properly and meet all deadlines. Personnel are considered “a big investment” by this superintendent and, like any big investment, should be cared for properly. Other districts shared their thoughts on the importance of hiring good people. Three superintendents (A, C, and D) stated they play an active role in the interview process. They all meet with the principals’ selections making sure that the candidate(s) understood the districts’ vision and drive for excellence. District C’s superintendent extensively discussed the hiring processes of her district. All prospective candidates are interviewed by a team of administrators, parents, teachers, and sometimes students. They teach a lesson with students present and candidates have to write two
memorandums (one to the principal and one to the parents). An extensive reference check is done. Final candidates are forwarded to the superintendent.

Socializing Functions

In all districts it was found that at district meetings there was a lot of structured socializing. Superintendents were not "the sage on the stage." They were facilitators that did a lot of listening and asking questions. Interactions between all staff were considered important by all superintendents. Open and equal interactions were considered very important in each of the five districts. It was apparent that there was an atmosphere of mutual respect. Food was provided for all staff at most of the meetings attended. District D provided a breakfast buffet for those in attendance at their strategic planning roll-out.

Orderly Climate

As far as an "orderly climate" is concerned, it was apparent by the practices being implemented on all levels that the need for order and a positive climate was an essential quality deemed important for the success of the schools. District B's superintendent stated, "The biggest determining factor in a kid's school (success) is, does he or she feel cared about? If the child in your classroom does not feel cared about, then he or she is not going to care (about school)."

Personnel Operations

None of the districts have an administrator who is solely responsible for directing personnel operations. The researcher learned about the superintendents' direction of the
work force operations through conversations related to hiring procedures, relationships with union leadership, teacher evaluations, personnel training, and financial decision making. It was clear that maintaining consistent communication with all stakeholders, keeping a high degree of expectation from new hires, placing a high degree of importance on training and evaluation, and making training and retaining of staff a priority, were all important for a well-developed and improving work staff.

*Principals as Instructional Leaders*

In closing, each superintendent stressed the importance of affording professionals in their districts the ability to make decisions on their own at the building level and supporting them throughout the process. District B’s superintendent stated, “Principals know that they are accountable. They work hard at reviewing data with their teachers and looking at ways to continually improve their teaching skills.” District C’s superintendent stated she supported the principals and their staff by providing resources and acting as a sounding board. She promoted the principals in the community and afforded them the opportunity to use their skills. District A’s superintendent has a unique way of acting as a sounding board for his students and staff. He has two leadership councils that meet with him on a monthly basis to discuss school improvement. District A’s superintendent also commented:

> Our principals have a great deal of autonomy. I make it clear to them that they are the leader, the administrator in their building. They are the ones that make the decisions. They keep me informed and in some cases I may still want to consult. Each principal is responsible for setting up schedules keeping an eye on the student enrollment numbers and teacher class ratio. We work together to keep expenses down and still keep in mind the main goal which is what can we do better for our kids.
Findings Related to Research Question Two: What are the factors that detract superintendents from successfully carrying out their responsibilities/practices? How do they overcome those barriers?

Many factors inhibit superintendents from successfully implementing research-based responsibilities/practices that have been found to raise student achievement. Most of the problems were based on time, money, and buy-in support from all stakeholders. Superintendents in this study overcame a number of these challenges by implementing best practices. These findings are discussed in the following section.

Goal-Setting, Non-Negotiable Goals, and Monitoring of Goals

Time

In monitoring the goals, the superintendents noted that getting data back in a timely manner was a concern. State assessments do not provide the data they need to make changes and better the curriculum in a way that is helpful to the learning that takes place in the school district. In order to combat this, Superintendent A established local and common assessments and purchased district-wide tests such as NWEA (MAP testing) and DIBLES to obtain data that were more relevant and timely. Monitoring challenges have been largely taken care of by the help of outside sources such as Pat Davenport (Plan Do Check Act) and through school improvement committees.

The superintendent in District B addressed the concern of time wasted while organizing data. He found he was able to bring it all together in a more user-friendly manner by purchasing a “data warehousing” program so that the teachers and building principals had better access to what they are doing in a timelier manner. The staff had
been trained on how to use this program to meet the needs of their classrooms and their individual students. Using current and up-to-date data allows the professionals in his district to make the necessary changes right away, which goes a long way to deal with the broad goal and challenge of meeting the needs of “Every Child, Every Day.”

To some degree all districts are working on the issue of differentiating instruction to meet the needs of all learners. All districts have come to the realization that they cannot wait to monitor for student achievement along the same timeline as state results. Each district is working to build ongoing formative assessments into their yearly plans. District C’s superintendent stated that the issue of time plays into the issue of monitoring as well. She stated:

If we wait until a student graduates from high school to decide if they are a life long learner, 13 years have gone by. It’s too late to see if what we have in place worked. We have to have a certain amount of impatience about the outcome.

District E’s superintendent identified one of their challenges is to keep improving once they receive scores that are good according to the state. He observed the difficulty in convincing people that they need to be constantly improving how the schools are functioning. State mandates pressure every school district to keep improving. Maintaining this mindset is a challenge even though a district’s scores might be good or better than state average.

The issue of time as a resource came up on a number of different levels when interviewing the different superintendents in the study. District E’s superintendent stated that “We are constantly trying to improve our tools by developing and gathering more common assessments which give us more information on a more frequent basis.” All districts discussed how to get common assessments done and back in a timely manner in
order to make improvements in education throughout the year. District E noted that making the teachers see the immediacy of the situation is sometimes a challenge. He commented, “When monitoring for improvements some teachers drag their feet and need a little more help to overcome teaching pitfalls—we work hard at trying to keep the loop closed.” Superintendent A stated, “We need to do homework to get researched-based programs in the district. It takes time to research and implement.” In addition, he added:

We also need time to see what is working with the different programs and what we need to adjust. This is a time lengthy process that cannot really be shortened. Until you see trend data, you cannot really know for sure.

Many times state mandates do not lend themselves to this need for retrospection.

Money

Goal-setting for the districts invariably comes down to funding. Once districts have their plans set, they need to find ways to best use their resources to follow through with what they need to do to be effective. District B’s superintendent viewed the challenges of goal-setting with concerns for finances at the forefront. He stated that before he became superintendent, he noticed that the whole strategic planning in his district was netting frustration instead of true goal-setting and realization of these goals. He stated, “So often you come up with great goals and ideas but there is no way financially to support the environment to make it happen.” Instead of adopting a complex model of district goals and five-year strategic plan, he opted for a more simplistic model-based plan which consists of a philosophy based on a Jim Collins book. His basic premise is that he wants his schools to constantly go from what is good, to what is great. He never wants the district to say that they are good enough at what they are doing. This ties into
their “Every Child, Every Day” motto, where they keep their focus on doing what is right for every single child in the district. In adopting this philosophy, District B’s superintendent has focused on what they are doing well and what they can do to maintain and do better. He does not believe in diverting focus to new and sometimes costly programs. He prefers to keep his eye on staying true to the philosophy and doing what they can as a district to help make a difference in the classroom and help the educators stay focused. District B’s superintendent sees the No Child Left Behind mandates as being both a challenge and a motivator to the accomplishments of their goals for the district. He stated that NCLB “makes you be more reflective.” No Child Left Behind also served to force District B to better deal with another challenge in the monitoring of their goals—not only gathering of the data, but looking at the data and making changes as they relate to improving education for every child. He said:

If scores start going down, the principals are accountable. We just do not say that it’s their problem, we say, what is the problem and how can we fix it? We do not have much of this (scores going down) and I think this is one of the positives of No Child Left Behind. It makes the school much more aware of their accountability. Our staff realizes that you have to look at data and you must look at the results.

Ultimately, the threat of losing funds because of the results of poor goal-setting is driving districts to make sure that goals are set at all levels and that there is follow-through at all levels.

Buy-in from Stakeholders

Goal setting and monitoring understandably stood as a challenge for most districts when it came down to getting buy-in from all the professionals and community members
involved. District A’s superintendent stated that getting everyone on the same page, narrowing the focus, examining the data, and answering what is best for the district as a whole were challenges to overcome during the whole process of goal setting and monitoring process for the district. District A’s superintendent noted that when bringing a group of people together to come to a consensus about a common goal, you need to prioritize and keep asking yourself an essential question, “What is good for all kids?” He stated, “Everyone wants special projects like swimming pools, but we have to stay focused with student achievement.” Superintendent A answered the challenge with continued communication to all stakeholders and a constant re-focusing on the basic question of “What is good for kids?” He even rephrased it at times to take ownership and force others to take more ownership, asking the question, “What is good for MY kids?” He stressed the importance of listening to the whole group and getting them to come to a consensus with all of their varying ideas and wants for the district. He commented, “…getting that consensus that’s key. That takes a lot of discussion and compromise and those meetings were valuable in establishing that we can all agree that these are our goals.” He was also able to bring in an outside source to help the group stay on focus and develop the goals needed for a district strategic plan. District A’s superintendent also credits his success with his challenges in setting and aligning goals all stakeholders from the beginning and throughout the process of development to monitoring. “There is a huge acceptance because everyone in our school family owned this, knowing that there were so many stakeholders involved.” He also stated that this served as a living and breathing document and that it was “front and center” in all district and school improvement meetings.
As far as working to meet the goals, during this process, he was able to bring in that outside source as well. He stated that “success breeds success” when working toward meeting goals. For example, when one school met the challenges for becoming a Blue Ribbon school, he found that other schools wanted to then make that their success as well. This was a definite motivator for buy-in from both school personnel and from the community.

District C noted challenges with the goal setting process and buy-in from stakeholders as well. She reflected on it citing it as one of the biggest challenges in her job. “We have to have all arrows pointing in the same direction. We look broadly across the landscape to all of the different variables and set goals which are attainable.” Involving all stakeholders and getting them to buy in to a common goal can be a difficult process. She stated that “Goal-setting is not a neat process because of the conflicting information that enters the system.” She noted that, unfortunately, what the community is doing and what the economy is doing many times sets the pace for setting the goals for the school district. She commented that her goals are often changed by the political and demographic context in which they are conceived and implemented and that she is able to confront these challenges by “making sense of all those different dynamics.” She meets these challenges by sometimes extending timelines and redesigning goals. Superintendent C also combats the difficulty by making sure that she maintains up-to-date information on her part. She communicated with all parties essential to addressing the problem of differing dynamics in goal setting, but that gaining information through various channels is still not a neat process. She is able to get direction from the Department of Education
and that this is helpful because they are constantly showing them where they need the district to be heading.

_School Board Alignment with Goals_

_Buy-in from Stakeholders_

All superintendents reported they had great school boards that had the best interest of the district and the students in mind. Most superintendents discussed that they had a veteran board that understood the big picture. All agreed that the challenge, at first, was like the challenge they had in getting the support and approval from the community and their staff. This was in building trust. The answer was simple—communication. District B’s superintendent stated that this was an especially hard road to go down for her as a newcomer to the district. As previously stated, she was the only superintendent studied that was coming into the district without prior employment within the district. She indicated that coming into a district that had some existing issues, she “spent a lot of my time going along, trying to educate the board members to earn their trust and confidence, through personal meetings and telephone conversations.” All districts mentioned that this issue of building trust was essential in increasing communication and getting the board to come together on issues. District D’s superintendent stated that “If you are going to operate without conflict, there should be no surprises.” All superintendents studied stated that their boards were knowledgeable due to their frequent and ongoing dialogue (i.e., meetings, emails, phone conversations, weekly superintendent reports, and building reports) with the school boards. This helped keep everyone informed and up-to-date with
what was going on in the districts. Four of the five superintendents utilized board
members on committees to do various projects and discuss goals for the district. In
addition, Superintendents A, C, and D brought in experts to help train, assist, and
facilitate board members in getting goals aligned in the district. It is through this positive
communication and trust building that all five districts studied have had excellent records
with unanimous votes from their boards.

Use of Resources to Support Goals

Time

All districts had issues related to time as far as limited resources. With the new
state standards and assessments, this period in the state’s educational system has been one
of really being forced into an “overhaul” of the way things have been done in the past.
Instead of addressing one or two pieces of change, districts are looking at making major
changes in multiple areas over a short amount of time. The District A’s superintendent
stated:

It takes time to research best practices, programs, etc. We need to do our
homework upfront by reading journal articles, books, contact consultants, talk to
representatives from the state or ISD, and do site visits. It takes a lot of time to
make changes.

District B’s superintendent added, “It takes time to get buy in from staff.” While districts
find these changes necessary, time is definitely an issue with implementation. None of the
districts had any effective answers for the lack of time issue, although all districts seemed
to be taking the state-mandated issues in stride and were using it to make beneficial
changes to their school districts.
Money

All superintendents reported they provide the necessary resources to aid their staff in reaching the district/school and individual goals. With that said, all superintendents discussed the challenge that all schools are currently facing with the gloomy picture of the state and local economy. Not knowing on an annual basis what the allocation per student will be from the state has everyone guessing as to how to make the necessary decisions to stay afloat financially while also trying to provide as much assistance in training and programming and keeping the student to teacher ratio at an adequate number. Three of the five districts discussed their problem with declining enrollment as well. Only one school district had enough money in their reserves to avoid borrowing money during the year to make payroll. District C’s superintendent said, “People are leaving our community and state in hopes of finding jobs.” This is a statewide problem; Michigan has the highest unemployment rate in the nation. To that end, District E’s superintendent commented, “Budget cuts eliminated that additional support—resource pieces are missing. In a declining economy it makes it more difficult. With declining enrollment as well it makes it very difficult to accomplish tasks such as, goals, curriculum, and common assessments.”

Districts varied in their responses to these financial resources issues and how they relate to supporting the goals. In an obvious response, as District D’s superintendent reported, “All are learning to do more with less.” Each district has found creative ways to address the problems with limited resources for professional development. Districts D and E have taken the approach of “training the trainer” model. This is where a lead
teacher or group of teachers is trained by an expert or group of experts. Those lead teachers then come back to the group as a whole and share their experiences with those professionals. One hidden benefit of doing professional development this way is that many times the teachers are able to better “own” the initiative rather than just hearing about it from outside sources. Also, it helps build leadership capacity among the staff, which is extremely beneficial in bettering the districts.

District D has implemented a delayed start for their district in order to provide time for staff to work together on their school goals and initiatives. This cuts down on the need for subs and therefore cuts expenses in that way. District E uses a half-day schedule for professional development in order to save money on substitutes in the buildings by sharing subs for the professional development days. District C has been very effective writing grants to provide them with professional development and resources in critical areas. They just recently were awarded a grant to help with mathematics K-12 for a three-year period. District A continues to receive professional development support from their Intermediate School District that has contracted with nationally reputed experts.

One strategy that District A identified as helpful was the building of a more workable community with financial problem solving. Their goal is to more effectively communicate the budgetary process to all stakeholders. They found this helps build feelings of “ownership” among all the personnel, which in turn creates an atmosphere of trust and “problem solving.” It is more a part of the school improvement process when the group is able to meet and start off with a “zero base” budget in order to more accurately go over the true needs of the district.
District D cited no specific challenges with resources. However, they are facing the same financial challenges as other districts in the state regarding resources, so it is an ever continuing battle. They were fortunate to have been able to see their school enrollment increase by move-ins and increased school of choice students. The superintendent stated that he is low on the administrative end in order to support the teachers through directors of teaching and learning (DTLs) who are master teachers serving as leaders for the other teachers. District E, who has lost money due to declining enrollment, has also implemented a “train the trainer” type program to increase professional development while cutting the costs in this area. The elementary school for District D has one principal each for the upper and lower ends. He believes that he has one of the highest student-to-administrator ratios in the state. He is also the only superintendent who does not have an assistant superintendent. He is the leader of the largest district in this study as well. They have tended to put all resources into their classrooms.

Providing Autonomy

Buy-in from Stakeholders

District superintendents reported they were able to give autonomy to their principals and individual schools. Nobody in the study stated specifically that there was a challenge with this particular topic. The one area where difficulties surfaced indirectly under autonomy, however, was dealing with staff buy in. Superintendents C and D felt that it was imperative to hire quality people. Superintendent D stated, “You have to have
the right people on the bus in order to make positive change.” All superintendents indicated they constantly addressed principals and building staff on the vision and goals of the district. District A’s superintendent noted, “It is important for people to embrace change. I meet and communicate on daily basis with stakeholders.” District C’s superintendent commented, “As the superintendent, I have to develop relationships. That’s important in everything that I do.” Superintendent B feels that his district has accepted and sustained change because they (the staff) trust administration and the school board. He revealed, “We listen and understand our staff. This is important because they are in the trenches teaching our kids.” He further stated, “We do not make top down decisions. Everything that we do is collective.” All districts have building-level and district-level school improvement committees who help make decisions for the district.

Superintendent C mentioned that it is extremely important to train the staff. If he or she is not willing to take on the training or not buying into the district vision, mission, and goals, then you must sever the ties. This superintendent shared the district had to let go of two teachers this past year and an administrator the year before. This would be the end result if personnel were not on the same page. This could be considered one of the difficulties associated with maintaining autonomy in a district. Despite the best intentions, there may be difficulty relinquishing autonomy to some individuals and this may be solved either by constant working with that individual until improvements are made, or by terminating that person from the job. Superintendents took the position that an atmosphere of autonomy was better created when the superintendents were actually in the “trenches” with the rest of the staff.
Conclusion

Chapter IV presented a description of the participants in the study and the analysis and discussion of research questions. This chapter presented the findings that resulted from the interviews, meetings, and artifacts. Themes were identified in each of the research-based superintendent responsibilities. Most of the best practices identified in Marzano and Waters’ (2006) meta-analysis were found to be themes in this study. Each superintendent carried out these themes/best practices in different ways. Table 10 summarizes themes that mirrored Marzano and Waters’ meta-analysis.

To summarize the findings from research question 2 in relation to these themes, many factors inhibit superintendents from successfully implementing research-based responsibilities/practices that have been found to raise student achievement. Most of the problems were based on the following themes: time, money, and buy-in support from all stakeholders. Superintendents in this study overcame a number of these challenges by implementing best practices.

In Chapter V, the researcher will present an overview of the study revisiting the methodology and selected findings, while also providing a conclusion, implication for practice, and recommendation for future research.
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<th>Constructs and Themes (identified)</th>
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<td>Emerging themes in this study that concurred with the findings of Marzano and Waters meta-analysis three of five superintendents in the study successfully implemented the research-based responsibility</td>
<td>1) shared vision; 2) goal setting with shareholders; 3) academically focused goals; and 4) consistent communications of expectations to administrators</td>
<td>1) modeling instructional design; 2) establishing clear priorities; 3) adopting curriculum-based methodologies; 4) using diverse instructional methodologies; and 5) ensuring adoption and implementation of instructional programs</td>
<td>1) board president agrees with district goals; 2) board president agrees with type and nature of conflict; 3) board president agrees with the political climate of district and 4) board president agrees with teaching and learning strategies.</td>
<td>1) uses evaluation to address district’s instructional program; 2) monitors student achievement through feedback; 3) uses system to manage district change; 4) evaluates principals annually; 5) reports student data to board regularly; 6) ensures curriculum needs are met; and 7) coordinates efforts to organize and increase reliability.</td>
<td>1) adopting management systems to support district philosophy; 2) providing support system professional development; 3) training staff in instructional practices; 4) providing resources; and 5) providing district-wide professional development plan.</td>
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<td>Non-emergent themes that were not found in this study but were found in the five superintendents in the study</td>
<td>1) professional development provided for school board; and 2) board president agrees on effectiveness of board training.</td>
<td>1) identifies instructional goals; 2) monitors student achievement and 3) reports student data to board regularly.</td>
<td>1) adopts management systems to support district philosophy; 2) training staff in instructional practices; 3) providing resources; and 4) providing district-wide professional development plan.</td>
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Table 10—Continued

| Define autonomy | 1) developed district-defined autonomy; 2) used standards for instruction principles; 3) committed to instructional improvement; 4) prioritized teacher evaluations; 5) principals discussed results with stakeholders; 6) agreed on district-wide principles and values; 7) agreed on clear school performance mission; 8) provided all students learning opportunities; 9) socialized and functions in meetings; 10) agreed on high expectations; 11) principals are instructional leaders; 12) directed personnel operations; 13) developed orderly climate; 14) promoted innovation; 15) principals made aware of district goals; and 16) leadership of curriculum development. | participating in the interviewing of teachers. | 1) rewarding and penalizing appropriately; 2) applying district sanctions to students for unsatisfactory academic performance; 3) the hiring of experienced teachers; 4) rewarding students beyond standard honor rolls and recognition assemblies for exceptional performance; 5) and ensuring that homogenous ability groupings within classrooms do not segregate students into racial or other inappropriate groups. |
CHAPTER V

OVERVIEW

The purpose of this study was to examine the leadership responsibilities and practices of successful superintendents using Marzano and Waters' (2006) meta-analysis findings as a conceptual framework. The intent was to determine "how" superintendents were carrying out the specific responsibilities/practices related to research. This study attempted to identify detractors that detracted or slowed down the use of research-based responsibilities/practices and how effective superintendents overcome barriers.

In this chapter, the work of Marzano and Waters’ meta-analysis on superintendent leadership leading to student achievement is reviewed. An overview of the study will include a brief section on methodology and selected findings. The final sections consist of a conclusion, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.

Marzano and Waters (2006) found in their meta-analysis that there are specific responsibilities and practices that superintendents can use to help lead their district in achieving high standards of excellence with student achievement. This study used findings from the seminal research on the superintendency by Marzano and Waters as a basis for the investigation. These findings included:

Finding 1: District-level leadership matters
Finding 2: Effective superintendents focus their efforts on creating goal-oriented
districts. There are five district-level leadership responsibilities that were found to
assist superintendents in focusing on teaching and learning. They exhibit:

Collaborative goal-setting – Effective superintendents include all relevant
stakeholders in establishing goals for the district.

Non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction – Effective
superintendents makes sure that during the goal-setting process they
establish non-negotiable goals for instruction and student achievement.

Board alignment and support of district goals – In highly effective school
districts, the board of education is aligned with and supportive of the non-
negotiable goals. In these districts the goals remain the focus and no other
initiatives or resources are taken away from accomplishing these goals.

Monitoring goals for achievement and instruction – Effective
superintendents continually monitor the district goals and champion them
throughout the process.

Use of resources to support achievement and instruction goals – Effective
superintendents make sure that the necessary resources, including money,
time, personnel, and materials, are allocated to assist in accomplishing the
district’s goals.

Finding 3: Defined autonomy – Effective superintendents, after the collaborative
goal-setting process allowed the respective schools in the district to take on the
ownership of the goals and determine how they will achieve the goals.

Research Questions and Methodology

This study was based on two research questions.

1. Do effective superintendents exhibit current exemplary leadership research on
   responsibilities? If so, how?
2. What are the factors that detract superintendents from successfully carrying out their responsibilities/practices? How do they overcome those barriers?

This study used a qualitative multi-site case study to address the two research questions. A purposeful sampling of five southwest Michigan superintendents who met the criteria for this study were identified using predetermined criteria: (1) All candidates had to be a current superintendent who had been in their current position for more than five years; (2) Candidates' districts needed to achieve an A on the Ed Yes Report Card since the inception of the program in 2005 (the researcher used the MDE website to view grades of districts); (3) Districts under these superintendents also needed to make adequate yearly progress in all schools and in all categories (i.e., ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, special needs); (4) Districts used in this study had to be from the southwest area of Michigan; and (5) Districts in the study also had to have populations between 2,500 to 3,700 students (the researcher used MASA directory and website to view school district size). Only five superintendents and their districts, within a 100 mile radius, met these criteria. All five superintendents agreed to participate in this study.

The primary source of data collection was interviews with the superintendent. In addition, time was spent in the district with the superintendents in meetings while job shadowing. District artifacts, including district annual reports, newsletters, financial reports, committee agendas and minutes, strategic plans, board minutes, and NCA reports were used to respond to the research questions. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Triangulation of data (interview, observation, and district artifacts) helped to identify common themes or characteristics and to identify diverse strategies used by the five superintendents. Themes identified in the investigation corresponded to the research-
based superintendent responsibilities. While most of the best practices identified in Marzano and Waters’ meta-analysis were found to be themes in this study, it is apparent that each superintendent carried out those practices in different ways. Findings are presented in the following section:

Selected Findings

Research Question 1 – Do effective superintendents exhibit current exemplary leadership research on responsibilities? If so, how?

The researcher asked open-ended questions based on the six themes that Marzano and Waters found in their meta-analysis work. These included: (1) goal setting, (2) non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction, (3) board alignment with and support of district goals, (4) monitoring goals for achievement, (5) use of resources to support the goals, and (6) defined autonomy.

Goal-Setting Process

All five school districts fully implement best practices related to the goal-setting process and each district had a clear and well communicated mission, vision, and belief statements. Four of the five districts involved the school board and other stakeholders in this process. The other school district board members believed the goals should be established by teachers and administrators. All districts have full support from their school board with the goals. In analyzing the district goals it is apparent the goals are based on teaching and learning. Goals are established to address deficiencies in the learning process. All school districts in this study used the S.M.A.R.T. (Specific,
Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-bound) format for setting goals. Four of the five school districts have professional learning communities in place to help articulate the curriculum, assessments, and goals. Questions the superintendents ask their principals and staff included: (1) What do we want our students to learn? (2) How will we know if they learn it? (3) What will we do if they don’t learn it? Principals lead their PLCs and are asked to report on how their respective schools are progressing towards achieving their goals in ongoing meetings with the superintendent.

**Non-Negotiable Goals for Achievement and Instruction**

Superintendents established non-negotiable goals in their district. All districts had an established curriculum their staff used and which acted as a reference guide for all educators.

Best instructional strategies have been a focal point in all districts. Extensive training in multiple intelligences, brain research, and use of best practices have directed a lot of the professional development time. All five school district superintendents noted that this training helped in adding tools to their staff’s toolbox. One district, however, went one step further and had their teachers teach a specific way utilizing best instructional practices. With this approach teaching is intentional. Another best practice utilized in all districts is the use of technology. Teachers are continuing to learn and use technology as a “hook” to make the lessons more relevant to today’s world.

The use of master teachers to assist in training others in the district was utilized in all cases to varying degrees. This coaching concept allows master teachers to teach lessons using specific strategies and give constructive feedback to staff on lessons
observed. In addition, the coaches help by finding resources for the teachers. All superintendents asserted that this was a powerful tool for their district to help assist educators in a non-threatening manner.

It was noted from each superintendent that all districts are working on meeting the needs of all their students. Differentiating instruction and response to intervention are pivotal to the success of meeting the mandates of “No Child Left Behind.” The school districts have established systems for identifying, tracking, and using interventions to assist all students. A question asked in all districts is, “Where does the data support this?”

Only two of the five districts have implemented a five-year strategic plan with specific instruction and student achievement goals. The other three districts have goals in each of their buildings that are monitored on an ongoing basis.

*Board Alignment with and Support of District Goals*

The board of education plays an integral part in the success of the district. All superintendents believed they had very supportive and educated school board members who could see the big picture when addressing goals and district problems. Training was essential in all cases to assure that the board members know their roles/responsibilities to the district. Professional development, outside experts, board retreats, and committees are all strategies used by these districts to train the board and to create an atmosphere of mutual understanding and support. The respective schools in each district host at least one school board meeting a year to inform and celebrate the buildings’ successes. This allowed the school board to learn the specifics of each building.
Communication was paramount to the success of the superintendent/school board relationship. All five district superintendents have weekly board packets that address what is going on in the district. In addition, almost daily communication via telephone or email is used to keep the school board members aware of problems and issues in the district. Through time, this positive communication has allowed the superintendent to develop trust from the school board. It is the work behind the scenes, the constant informing of the board that helps move the district forward and keeps the school board cohesive and working as a team.

**Monitoring Goals for Achievement and Instruction**

Monitoring goals was a strength for all districts. One key finding from this research was that all districts are examining and using data more frequently than in the past studies. Earlier studies used summative assessments to gauge student proficiency and mastery. All districts had common formative and summative assessments throughout the year monitoring what individual students were doing. Superintendents reported using more formative assessments with the intent to increase their scope of formative assessment use.

Using the formative assessments allowed the five districts to establish interventions for their reluctant learners. All districts researched have implemented an intervention program called RTI (Response to Intervention). RTI is a program by which data are looked at on an ongoing basis and strategies are used to address individual students' needs. In addition, those who are closest to the students are involved and can make the necessary changes in programming in a timely and relevant manner.
District superintendents relied on principals to monitor their individual buildings. This is accomplished by classroom walk-throughs, the annual evaluation process, and evaluating the progress on the school improvement goals. Principals are seen as instructional leaders in all districts. All superintendents met with their principals on an ongoing basis, conducting “check ups” and making sure that the buildings were progressing. These five superintendents used data to make decisions and to help guide their principals towards change. All superintendents addressed the importance of evaluating principals on an annual basis.

The state also monitors districts in a variety of areas. Districts used the Ed Yes Report Card to gauge where they are compared to comparable schools in the state and area. All districts used NCA (North Central Accreditation) as a school improvement model as well as a vehicle to monitor progress. Two of the five districts utilized monitoring for the Blue Ribbon award to gauge progress with one school district monitoring all of the schools in the district for Blue Ribbon status.

*Use of Resources to Support the Goals for Achievement and Instruction*

Providing the necessary resources for staff members to help with instructing students and to give professional development to all is an important component that all five superintendents felt they did well. All school district superintendents felt that they did a great job providing time, money, and resources to their staff members. The predominant challenge was trying to continue to provide for their staff members with the uncertainty of the future of state and federal monies coming into the districts. This topic will be addressed in the next research question.
A number of "best practices" were found relating to providing resources and support. Outside experts, professional trained teachers, master teachers, courses on best instructional practices, and resources from the ISD were ways these districts provided professional development and support. Staff members attended and interacted with these forms of professional development and learned how to apply the concepts covered into the classroom. All school districts utilized NCA and state documents to help with school improvement. All district superintendents noted that their staff members have been trained in using best instructional strategies, use of technology, brain research, and differentiating instruction. Three school districts involved themselves in action research. Another resource discussed was having community members help in the classroom and financially assist in some capacity.

Providing time for professional development was done creatively in some of the districts studied. One school district utilizes a delayed start to the school day to allow staff members time to meet and work together on school improvement initiatives. Another district allowed two schools in the district to share substitutes and has half-day professional development sessions during the school day.

One district used a zero-based budget process, which gave control to the schools. This budget process has forced school improvement teams to plan ahead, basing everything on the needs of their respective schools and school improvement goals. Another school district actively pursues grants to assist in training staff.
Defined Autonomy; Superintendent Relationship with Schools

The findings of this study did not mirror the research related to this topic. Although all superintendents felt that they gave full autonomy to their principals and school improvement teams, they did not specifically address the following topics: applying district sanctions to students for unsatisfactory academic performance, hiring experienced teachers, rewarding students beyond the honor roll, and ensuring homogeneous ability grouping within classrooms did not segregate students into racial or other inappropriate groups.

Each superintendent created a shared vision of autonomy with their principals and was in charge of working on district goals and developing standards towards meeting them. All districts had screening processes for teacher selection in place and a comprehensive system for evaluating teachers. District officials also had meetings with various stakeholders to discuss and develop agreed-upon principles and values to help maintain high expectations for school performance. Two school districts did this through the use of retreats. The superintendents studied maintained an orderly climate through communicating expectations to principals. Even though the superintendents did not cite this specifically as a reward for students, one superintendent awarded those staff members who went above and beyond with a monetary stipend for school use.

Superintendents behaved mostly as facilitators in the many structured social situations that were planned for the district. This helped create a sense of autonomy in the district. Action research and other research-based methods such as looping and multi-aged classrooms were encouraged.
Research Question 2 – What are the factors that detract superintendents from successfully carrying out their responsibilities/practices? How do they overcome those barriers?

There were many factors that appeared to inhibit superintendents in successfully meeting their responsibilities that relate to student achievement. Most problems were based on time, money, and buy-in support from stakeholders. Superintendents overcame a lot of these challenges by implementing best practices.

Time

Superintendents noted that getting data back in a timely manner was a concern. Currently, the state assessments do not provide data they need to make changes to the curriculum in ways helpful to the school district. Districts have taken the challenge of incorporating common formative assessments throughout the year to obtain data that are more relevant and timely. In addition, districts purchased other tests like NWEA, DIBLES, and Plan tests to try and get more information on the needs of the students and to address curriculum slippage areas.

Another factor relating to time is analyzing data. A challenge recently addressed in all districts was organizing the data to make sense to those closest to the students—the teachers. Each of the five districts purchased a data warehousing program to provide principals and their teachers better access to results in a timely manner. Securing current data allows the professionals to make the necessary decisions right away.

A number of superintendents discussed the importance of more time when researching and implementing new programs and curriculum. With the demands from the
state and nation, it is difficult to be patient with such programs. In addition, it takes time to make changes, especially if you want to get buy-in from all the stakeholders. With the new mandates, school districts have been forced to overhaul their curriculum and programs. None of the superintendents had workable solutions for the lack of time to address program shortcomings.

The final topic related to time addressed by all superintendents was building relationships with stakeholders. These five superintendents believed that it was their job to effectively communicate with all stakeholders by being approachable, good listeners, and involving all stakeholders as much as possible. Through time, all felt they had gained the trust of their staff, board of education, and community. Building trust between the board and superintendent was regarded as crucial by the five superintendents. There were a number of ways that the superintendents accomplished this. Some worked to build that relationship through quality time spent on board retreats. All felt that educating the board was imperative. Some brought their own facilitators in at times, while others worked within the district and community to bring about understanding of educational issues. Good communication was also an important way of gaining this trust. Above all, the superintendents concurred that necessary information must get to the stakeholders in a timely manner. In the words of one superintendent, “There must be no surprises.”

Money

Superintendents discussed the financial challenges that their districts were facing. Four of five school districts have had to borrow money during the year to make payroll. Schools across America, especially in Michigan, are faced with the gloomy picture of not
knowing how much money is going to be allocated each year to the local school districts.
To add to this dilemma, three of the five school districts are dealing with declining enrollment. As one superintendent stated, "We all are learning to do more with less."
Superintendents must make difficult decisions and cuts throughout their district to continue to stay solvent. Districts have discussed and started to implement outsourcing of certain jobs. All superintendents indicated they are trying not to make cuts that are directly impacting students' learning.

*Buy-in and Support from Stakeholders*

All superintendents felt that they had buy-in from all stakeholders. In reviewing the data, it appeared this was an item at one time that was a challenge for the superintendents. It is important to have buy-in or agreement from all stakeholders. Superintendents attempted to involve all stakeholders in the decision-making process. These superintendents had a vision based on what is good for students and strategies that could meet all student needs. Slogans such as "Success breeds success," "Good to great," "Every child, Everyday" helped these superintendents and stakeholders keep the focus on doing what is right for the students and upping the bar. One district superintendent reported using the state mandates as a constant reminder for the need for improvement in his district. In this way, state requirements eased the pressure off of the "messenger," explaining that the need for improvement is commanded with no alternative. There is no choice but to improve. According to the state, nobody is allowed to vocalize that something in their schools is good enough. More specifically, these superintendents
approached the issue with finding “buy-in” from staff with having more involvement in the hiring process in order to make the positive changes they were working toward.

Implications for Practice

The position of superintendent is a unique and powerful position. There is no other job within the public school system that can make such a strong positive or negative impact on an entire school system. This study supported the research from Marzano and Waters’ (2006) meta-analysis, which outlined the five main responsibilities and practices implemented by successful superintendents. The study revealed that all five superintendents studied were successfully carrying out all of the five responsibilities as outlined by Marzano and Waters. The study also suggested the superintendents studied were implementing nearly all of the practices recommended under the five responsibilities of Marzano and Waters. The study went further into detail with questioning the “how” of the practices implemented. Specific practices used by the effective superintendents as to how they went about carrying out these responsibilities that are essential to a successful superintendency were identified. Current and aspiring superintendent, preparation programs at the university level, and corresponding associations should use this information and possibly expand or create a “how-to” guide using the research-based responsibilities and practices. School boards should evaluate their superintendents using this guide of research-based responsibilities and practices.

The study outlined and identified some of the detractors and offered strategies superintendents used to overcome or reduce the detractors to implementing successful practices. The investigations revealed that, most of the time, the effective superintendents
were able to rise above the forces negatively impacting their progress by using best practices. Again, the above mentioned guide would help to combat the obstacles that arise.

This study has important implications for current superintendents, aspiring superintendents, school board members, or school administrators interested in leading their school district to high achievement and student success. Because this study excluded generalizations, the depth of the data provides a richer and more realistic view of what successful superintendents are doing as limited by this case study. This study can serve as a catalyst of information for those who are looking to improve an educational system or maintain a system that is already doing well.

Recommendations for Future Research

Throughout the data collection and analysis process, indications for future research emerged in several areas: Is there a hierarchy of superintendent behaviors that needs to be followed in order to be effective with the six areas as outlined by Marzano and Waters (2006)? For example, does a superintendent need to build a high degree of trust before he is able to be successful in other areas?

This qualitative study examined the relationship between the findings of Marzano and Waters’ meta-analysis on superintendent responsibilities and practices and the responsibilities and practices of current effective superintendents. Further examination of the districts with a quantitative review in a number of areas (student achievement results—rate of improvement, leadership style, and survey of stakeholders) will provide further insight into leadership and student learning.
It would be of interest to determine if the perspectives shared by the five superintendents are unique to superintendents of successful school districts or are common to all superintendents (urban, rural, high-achieving, low-achieving, demographics served, and age of superintendents). Further study needs to be undertaken on a cross section of superintendents to determine if they carry out the same responsibilities/practices that are found in research. In addition, a compilation of the data adding the “how” would help to create a guide for evaluation and preparation.

Data collected were self-reported and not confirmed through interviewing other stakeholders in the school community. It is recommended that additional interviews with stakeholders, and possible attendance of other meetings, be a part of the study that involve at least the board president, principals, and lead teachers. By doing so, it would more so validate the findings. A follow-up should be replicated to see if the respondents’ principals, teachers, and board members agree.

In this study, the researcher did not provide the respondents a copy of the meta-analysis. Specific questions were asked of the superintendents relating to how they carry out the specific responsibilities. Questions were not geared toward the practices that were outlined in Marzano and Waters’ meta-analysis. It would be interesting to see if other items would be identified or the findings would be more in depth had the respondents been allowed to review this document before the interviews.
Appendix A

Qualitative Research
## TOPIC: The use of best practices from award-winning superintendents of the year in the State of Michigan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Concepts</th>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Research Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership is a matter looking at research-based responsibilities that</td>
<td>Superintendent's responsibilities and practices that have not yet been</td>
<td>To whom does the award winning superintendent's leadership</td>
<td>1. To whom does</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lead to student achievement;</td>
<td>examined against actual systems that recognize exemplary practices as</td>
<td>responsibilities best practices differ from current exemplary</td>
<td>award-winning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Best Practices</td>
<td>superintendent, e.g., the AASA superintendent of the year program</td>
<td>leadership in the research-based practices that lead to</td>
<td>superintendents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership styles have changed through time</td>
<td>Preservice and ongoing professional development programs that train</td>
<td>achieving leadership in research-based practices that lead to</td>
<td>lead to current</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Accountability</td>
<td>superintendents and may not align with research-based practices that</td>
<td>student achievement</td>
<td>exemplary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Need for good superintendents</td>
<td>correlate to student achievement</td>
<td></td>
<td>leadership in the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Data been used</td>
<td>Schools are being made to become increasingly accountable for student</td>
<td></td>
<td>current leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Superintendents are retiring</td>
<td>achievement. School funding depends on student achievement</td>
<td></td>
<td>in the research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Perspectives</td>
<td>Successful superintendents are needed to ensure accountability of</td>
<td></td>
<td>based practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem</td>
<td>“These are distancing numbers of students and capable candidates for</td>
<td></td>
<td>that lead to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Preservice training and service</td>
<td>superintendent and professional development and recognition programs</td>
<td></td>
<td>award winning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Professional development and professional development and recognition</td>
<td>need to be a primary source of guidance to those who are preparing to</td>
<td></td>
<td>superintendents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>programs are associated with research-based practices associated with</td>
<td>enter into the field</td>
<td></td>
<td>respond to these</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Assigning preservice training and service</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>challenges</td>
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<tr>
<td>programs are associated with research-based practices.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Purpose

The purpose of this study is to identify and describe through case studies the leadership responsibilities/best practices drawn from award-winning superintendents in the State of Michigan and the responses of those within the leadership circle regarding these leadership practices.

The findings will have implications for the hiring, preparing, and selecting the top leadership positions. The study's findings will determine how effective practices can be implemented in student achievement. This study will also assess how those superintendents apply best practices in their work.

This study will address the reasons associated with applying best practices in the role of the superintendent and identify ways that award-winning superintendents respond to these issues.

### Research Questions

1. To whom does the award-winning superintendent's leadership responsibilities best practices differ from current exemplary leadership research on leadership and practices associated with raising student achievement? If so, how?

2. What are the common leadership and practices that associate with raising student achievement? How do they overcome those barriers?
Appendix B

Conceptual Framework
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Topic: The use of research-based responsibilities/practices from award-winning superintendents of the year in the State of Michigan

To what degree do award-winning superintendents exhibit current exemplary leadership research on responsibilities/practices if so how? What are the factors that distract superintendents from successfully carrying out their responsibilities/practices? How do they overcome these barriers?
Appendix C

Requesting Participation Letter
Dear Superintendent,

My name is Rusty Stitt and I am the principal of Sturgis High School. In addition to my administrative duties, I am also a doctoral student at Western Michigan University. I am writing to ask you to be part of a qualitative research study on examining responsibilities/practices of high achieving school district superintendents to current research. This is part of the requirements for a doctoral degree in Educational Leadership. I hope you will agree to participate.

Participating in this study will include:

An interview conversation that should last approximately 60-90 minutes and that will be conducted at your convenience in a private location in your school building. This conversation will be recorded by a tape recorder, and I will also be taking written notes. If needed, a follow up meeting may occur which will allow me to check for accuracy of my notes and to ask any follow up questions I had after reviewing the transcripts of our first meeting. The researcher will also shadow you for at least a day to gain insight on how you go about doing your daily business.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and there is no penalty for not participating or for withdrawing from the study. If you agree to participate in this study, your identity will be kept strictly confidential. Your name and school will not appear in the study. Your stories 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.

Please contact me by replying by email to rstitt@sturgisps.org or by mail to 66086 Knollwood Drive, Sturgis, Michigan, 49091. Or you may feel free to contact me by phone at (269) 651-4636.

Sincerely,

Rusty Stitt
Appendix D

Letter of Purpose
You have been invited to participate in a research project entitled "The Use of Research-Based Responsibilities/Practices from Superintendents in High Achieving School Districts in Michigan (Region 7)." This study is being conducted by Wayne "Rusty" Stitt, Principal of Sturgis High School, and a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership doctoral program at Western Michigan University, under the supervision of Dr. Van Cooley, his dissertation committee chair.

This information is being shared with you to determine if you would like to participate in this study. Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate at anytime, or not answer specific questions, or request your data not be included in the analysis.

As stated earlier, the purpose of this study is to examine the leadership responsibilities/practices of superintendents in high performing school districts and comparing them to current research. If you decide to participate you will be asked to participate in an interview, no more than 90 minutes in length. This interview will be audio recorded to ensure the accuracy of the collected information and all interviews will be transcribed into a written document. Your name and school district will not appear on any papers on which this information is recorded. The forms will all be coded, and the student investigator will keep a separate master list with the names of participants and the corresponding code numbers. Written transcripts and other documents will be retained for the duration of the project in a locked file in the student investigator's home office and will be destroyed after one year following the completion of the study. The audio recording of the interview will be destroyed once the transcription process has been produced and you are confident that the written transcript accurately reflects your comments. All of the information collected from you is confidential. There are no other known risks/discomforts associated with participating in this study.

There are a number of benefits for participating in this study. They are: 1) better understanding of current research on leadership responsibilities/practices; 2) information on your own responsibilities/practices relating to research; 3) specific "how to" guide addressing best responsibilities/practices from study; and 4) finding barriers that detract from research based responsibilities/practices from superintendents.

You may refuse to participate or quit at any time during the study without prejudice or penalty. If you have any questions or concerns about this study, you may contact, either Van Cooley at van.cooley@wmich.edu or Wayne Russell Stitt at rstitt@sturgis.k12.mi.us or 269-659-1515. You may also contact the Chair of Human Subjects Institutional
Review Board at hsirb@wmich.edu or (269) 387-8293, or the Vice President for Research (269) 387-8298 with any questions or issues occur during the course of the study.

This consent document has been approved for use by the researcher for 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 the study if the stamped date is older than one year.

Your signature below indicates that you have read and/or had explained to you the purpose and requirements of the study and that you agree to participate. A signed copy of this consent form will be given to you for your records.

Participant Signature: __________________________
Date: __________________________

Consent obtained by: __________________________
Date: __________________________

Initials of Researcher
Appendix E

Interview Questions
Interview Questions

Project: The Use of Research-Based Responsibilities/Practices from Superintendents in High Achieving School Districts in Michigan (Region 7)

Time of interview: ________________________________

Date of interview: ________________________________

Location: _______________________________________

Interviewer: _____________________________________

Interviewee: _____________________________________

Introductory Questions
What are the most important aspects of your work as the superintendent that raise student achievement?

What one accomplishment related to student achievement are you most proud of as superintendent?

What would help you the most as superintendent in improving student academic achievement in their respective school districts?

As you reflect on your role as Superintendent, how has your role changed over the length of your tenure as a Superintendent? What has influenced these changes?

How do you organize your staff? Your time spent on the job? What priorities do you make and keep? What caused you to make these organizational decisions?

How do you facilitate change?

What political, educational, and demographic contexts frame your leadership behaviors?

Specific Questions that are geared to research based best practices
Goal-setting process
Please describe the process you use for goal setting in your district. Who is involved, how are they involved, and what are the challenges you encounter in this process and your strategies for responding?
Non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction
How do you set priorities relating to instructional programs and student achievement? Please describe how this happens and who is involved. What are the challenges associated with the process and your strategies for responding?

Board alignment with and support of district goals
Describe how you work with your Board and how they develop their goals and priorities. What are the challenges associated with the process and your strategies for responding?

Monitoring goals for achievement and instruction
What gets monitored in your district and how does the monitoring process work? What are the challenges associated with the process and your strategies for responding?

Use of resources to support the goals for student achievement and instruction
Describe your process for allocating fiscal and other resources. What are the challenges associated with the process and your strategies for responding?

Superintendent relationship with schools and defined autonomy
Describe your relationship to the individual schools in your district and the way you work with your principals. What are the challenges associated with the process and your strategies for responding?
Appendix F

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 her 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

Coding Documents
Coding Document 1

How do superintendents use the below responsibilities/practices?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superintendent</th>
<th>S#1</th>
<th>S#2</th>
<th>S#3</th>
<th>S#4</th>
<th>S#5</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goal Setting Process</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-Negotiable Goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monitoring the Goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Use of Resources to Support the Goals</td>
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<td>Board Alignment Supporting District Goals</td>
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<td>Defined Autonomy to Principals</td>
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</table>

Coding Document 2

How detractors or roadblocks are superintendents encountering in using the below responsibilities/practices and how do they overcome them?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superintendent</th>
<th>S#1</th>
<th>S#2</th>
<th>S#3</th>
<th>S#4</th>
<th>S#5</th>
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<tr>
<td>Defined Autonomy to Principals</td>
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</table>
Appendix H

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board
Letter of Approval and Information
Date: January 22, 2009

To: Van Cooley, Principal Investigator
Wayne Stitt, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number: 09-01-10

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project entitled "The Use of Research-based Responsibilities/Practices from Superintendents in High Achieving School Districts in Michigan (Region 7)" 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: January 22, 2010
Project Title
The Use of Research-Based Responsibilities/Practices from Superintendents in High Achieving School Districts in Michigan (Region 7)

Purpose of Study
The purpose of this study is to identify and describe through a case study the leadership responsibilities drawn from superintendents in high performing school districts in the State of Michigan (Region 7).

The findings will have implications for the training, preparation, and recognition for aspiring and practicing superintendents. The study’s findings will demonstrate how practices of superintendents in high performing school districts align with research findings on superintendent practice that correlates to improvements in student achievement. The study will also look at how these superintendents apply best practices in their work.

This study will address barriers associated with applying best practices in the role of the superintendency and identify ways that award winning superintendents respond to those barriers.

Research Questions
1) To what degree do superintendents in high performing school districts exhibit current exemplary leadership research on responsibilities that are associated with raising student achievement? If so how?
2) What are the factors that detract superintendents from successfully carrying out their responsibilities? How do they overcome these barriers?

Population
Five superintendents from southwest Michigan will be recruited to participate in this study. The participant will be asked to partake in an individual, semi-structured interview about their experiences.

Data Collection
An in-person interview, no longer than one hour in length, will be conducted with each participant. The Interview will be recorded using a digital voice recorder. The interview response will be compiled and analyzed by the investigating student. A member check will be conducted to ensure the participants’ agreement with the gathered material.
Confidentiality
All data and documentation will be destroyed at the completion of the dissertation.

Intended Use of Data
The data collected for this study will be used exclusively for the dissertation and will not be used for any other purpose.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


