FIVE IDAHO SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS: A CASE STUDY IN POSSIBILITY

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Abstract

Effective leadership is essential to districtwide improvement. This case study investigates the beliefs, perceptions, and actions of five superintendents regarding district improvement. Findings suggest that the participants are deeply engaged in academic leadership, view improvement as a collective endeavor, center decisions around ensuring all students succeed, and mediate external influences.

Introduction

Under current federal education policy, it is expected that "all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and state academic assessments" (No Child Left Behind Act, 2001, Section 1001). Decades ago, the concept of a free and appropriate public education was established as a civil right (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004). However, the degree to which a student's educational experience has ensured that he or she has achieved proficiency at national or state levels has persistently differed considerably between classrooms, schools, districts, and states throughout the nation (Kozol, 2005; Nelsestuen, Burke, Greenberg-Motamedi, & Scott, 2009; Rampey, Dion, & Donahue, 2009).

Federal legislation has been enacted in various cycles in order to increase the likelihood that students will receive an appropriate education as a promised civil right. The original Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 was one such measure to reduce the achievement gaps between the nation's underserved youth and their more affluent peers. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; originally the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975) was similarly enacted in order to better ensure that students with disabilities received an "appropriate" education. However, the achievement gap has continued to exist. Therefore, when a bipartisan Congress reauthorized the ESEA as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, the standards for performance were substantially increased. The law required that no child would be allowed to fall through the cracks any longer. By 2014, the law sets the expectation that all students (100%) must be proficient in their performance of state academic content standards.

While it has been nine years since NCLB was enacted, there is still great variance among student subpopulations in regard to the level of academic achievement (Vanneman, Hamilton, Baldwin Anderson, & Rahman, 2009). These achievement gaps have closed significantly in some areas of the country, remained the same in others, and widened in still others. Great time and financial resources have been devoted to improving academic opportunities for students, but these have met with mixed results.

As an employee of the Idaho State Department of Education, and as a former instructional coach and teacher, I am interested in learning about what it takes to truly meet the needs of all learners. In my personal and professional journey, I have had the opportunity to see and experience many initiatives related to school improvement, some of which have been successful while others were less so. In my current role, I work with a team of deeply knowledgeable individuals who provide support programs for school and district improvement under the umbrella of and as a response to the State's accountability system. In our work, we are devoted to the academic success of Idaho's school children and the teachers and leaders who serve them. As such, I am interested in knowing how to better support those teachers and leaders, and the systems in which they work, for over time I have learned that the idea of school and district improvement is a significantly complex endeavor.

School districts are comprised of so many interconnected pieces that are constantly in motion, and it has become clear that there is no one-size-fits-all model for how to be successful (Redding, 2006). There are so many variables within a school district that the system itself must be built in a way such that it continuously improves. However, such a stance of continuous improvement is not easy to develop in an organization. One teacher may have such a stance. A grade level may work well together. Even one school may demonstrate continuous improvement

and the various characteristics of being high performing. Yet, we as a nation cannot be satisfied with pockets of excellence, even at the school level. School districts form the most logical unit of analysis in terms of accountability and evaluating success from a state and federal policy perspective because they are the local agency which governs all of the educational processes within their bounds. A school district can help or hinder the improvement process of its schools depending upon the conditions it creates. Staffing, calendars, salary scales, bussing schedules, facilities, and so much more are directly influenced by the district office and its leadership. At any one of the intersections between a district's decision-making processes and its schools and classrooms, systemic conditions will impact the quality of teaching and learning. When these impacts are neutral, it allows for pockets of excellence. Worse, when these impacts are negative, it can detract from the entire system, making even pockets of excellence unlikely.

So then, what does it take to move an entire district to the point where it can be described as high performing or as taking on a stance of continuous improvement? What types of beliefs and actions exist among school district leaders who defy the odds? These types of questions form the basis for this study, in which the purpose is to examine the qualitative characteristics of a small set of school superintendents in Idaho whose districts have demonstrated academic success despite the significant demographic challenges represented in their student populations. As the primary leaders in their districts, this study makes the assumption that the success demonstrated within their districts is directly related to their leadership, and therefore it aims to discover commonalities among these individuals that may be useful for other district leaders who are seeking to improve their entire systems.

Additionally, this study seeks to provide insight for state and federal policy makers who are interested in supporting large scale educational improvement. At present, members of the United

States Congress have indicated an interest in reauthorizing the ESEA, or NCLB. President Obama and Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, have presented a blueprint for educational reform that focuses greatly on schools and teachers (US Department of Education, 2010a). If improvement is dependent on the actions and beliefs of district leaders, policy makers would be wise to consider the implications this has for accountability systems and support programs as they consider redesigning NCLB at the national and state levels.

Literature Review

Traditionally in education reform movements, teachers have borne the tremendous burden of public opinion when schools struggle to succeed. Since the time *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) was published, the level of concern has been raised in our country about the quality of our educational system. Many people suggest that the key way to affect change is to enable teachers to change their practice. One need simply look at current headlines or media to see this trend; the documentary, *Waiting for Superman* (Guggenheim, 2010), suggests that struggling schools are failing because of poor teachers. Policy talk often centers on teachers; the Secretary of Education's *Race to the Top* and *School Improvement Grant* programs focus on models that target "teacher effectiveness" (US Department of Education, 2009, 2010b). Yet, while educational change does depend ultimately on the teacher-student interaction, its prerequisites move far beyond that to the organizational features of the school and district (Fullan, 2007). Educational improvement requires understanding stages of implementation and concerns teachers have about new innovations for improvement (Hord & Loucks, 1980), working through the levels of use they display with those innovations (Loucks, 1977), and addressing issues of organizational health; these and other organizational conditions of teaching and learning need extensive support in order for teachers to

be successful. Teachers cannot by themselves do the work required to improve an entire educational system. They must have strong and effective communities of practice that undergird and strengthen each member therein (Fullan, 2007). Put quite simply, even the best teachers will fail to produce the results desired if they are operating in a weak system; the faults of the system will override their best efforts every time (Schmoker, 2006).

Educational systems have historically been either helped or hindered by administrators in the process of educational improvement. Administrators at the school and district levels have, more often than not, been males who utilize managerial skills to oversee a predominately female workforce (Fullan, 2007; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). The relationship between non-educational managers and the instructional workforce has resulted in a "loose-coupling" between administrators and the Instructional Core of teachers, students, and learning (Elmore, 2008). In other words, the critical decisions about what gets taught, how it is taught, performance objectives that students should be able to demonstrate, and how such learning should be measured has for the most part been left in the hands of individual classroom teachers (Elmore, 2008). It is no surprise, then, that performance continues to vary from classroom to classroom, let alone school to school. Certainly, there are pockets of high success here and there. However, because educational systems have been so loosely coupled, students have suffered from disjointed and incoherent systems which, over time, increase the achievement gaps for those who start at a disadvantage.

In the literature, there has been somewhat consistent understanding for over 30 years about what characterizes highly effective schools (Redding, 2006). Effective school leaders operate out of a clear and shared focus in which they maintain high expectations for the academic success of all students (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007). The principals and teachers in effective

schools design instructional programs in which the curriculum and instruction methods are aligned with standards for learning (English & Steffy, 2001; Tyler, 1949), and assessment "for" and assessment "of" learning are both used to inform professional practice (Chappuis & Chappius, 2002). The decisions about instructional programs are research-based; implementation is monitored frequently; and, when students are struggling to meet predefined goals, adjustments are made based on a set theory of action (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009; Shannon & Bylsma, 2007). Collaboration and communication is seen as a critical component of overcoming obstacles within a framework for continuous improvement (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004). These and other characteristics have been demonstrated in the research literature consistently.

What then makes for a highly effective district? School district superintendents have not traditionally been the primary instructional leader in the organizations they lead. They have focused on such things as financial and personnel issues, management of educational specialists and programs, and dealing with conflict and crisis (Fullan, 2007). Blumberg (as noted in Fullan, 2007) found that matters of curriculum and instruction rarely even entered into the "working lives" of superintendents. This is not surprising considering the difficulty of the job that they have, but it is disconcerting in light of the types of characteristics that are necessary to help schools succeed. Thus, according to Fullan (2007), effective districts demonstrate deviance from this norm and seem to have what he terms a "positive district ethos" (p. 213). This ethos is demonstrated in the following ways:

- Taking care of business (a learning focus)
- Monitoring performance (an accountability focus)
- Changing policies/practices (a change focus)
- Consideration and caring for stakeholders (a caring focus)
- Creating shared values (a commitment focus)
- Creating community support (a community focus)

In terms of leadership, effective districts are led by influential superintendents, who exhibit three types of leadership: "educational leadership (focus on pedagogy and learning), political leadership (securing resources, building coalitions), and managerial leadership (using structures for participation, supervision, support, and planning)" (Fullan, 2007, p. 210). They are not only leaders in these three domains, they are also teachers. Effective superintendents model, coach, and build leadership capacity within principals, teachers, board members, and others; and they are also very skilled at cultivating relationships while driving people to improve (Fullan, 2007). Additionally, in order to truly attain improvement at scale in multiple schools, they must be adept at "balancing top-down and bottom-up forces" (Fullan, 2007) in a framework for decision-making that is both shared and hierarchical (Redding, 2006). They accomplish change by engaging school leaders purposefully and meaningfully, by being collaborative rather than prescriptive, and by leaving the more minute details of plans for improvement in the hands of the principal and staff of each school (Fullan, 2007).

If these types of things are known about effective schools, districts and leaders, why do districts still struggle to succeed? Is it a matter of simply working harder to approximate these characteristics? Probably not. There does not seem to be a static model of any sort that can be approximated or replicated in order to be successful. In fact, there are districts and schools that have demonstrated these characteristics, but which have ultimately failed (Fullan, 2007). A school district is a complex "system with many parts to be continuously engineered to precision" (Redding, 2006). Therefore, successful improvement efforts at the district level hinge upon the fact that "the strategies employed must be much more respectful of ***how*** deep change happens" by building capacity, which is the "collective knowledge and understandings required for ongoing instructional improvement that meets the needs of each child" (Fullan, 2007, p. 217,

emphasis added). Fullan (2007) described the challenge in this way: "This is going to be a lot harder than we thought," due to the fact that capacity must be built at every level of the system simultaneously.

To examine the nuanced complexities of *how* deep change occurs in the organization of a district at large, this study focuses on data from five Idaho school superintendents situated in districts that are beating the odds. Superintendents were interviewed in order to discover their perspectives on and responses to the landscape of accountability and school improvement. Methods for the study were selected for the purpose of examining the participants' own points of view in comparison with the literature on substantial academic improvement.

Methods

Background & Design of Study

Methodological framework / motivating theory. While ample research exists on effective school improvement practices (Redding & Walberg, 2008; Shannon & Bylsma, 2007), and some information is known regarding the qualities of what district leaders do to effectively improve schools, districtwide improvement abides as a perplexing challenge in terms of how to actually attain large scale success. This study is guided by the theory that schools exist within school districts that are in actuality complex Mega Systems (Redding, 2006), and that schools are successful when those systems are guided by strong, effective leaders. My motivation for this study is to learn more about what distinguishes successful district improvement from average performance. While many Idaho schools and districts have met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) standards, there are still many that struggle to succeed (McGrath, 2010), and I want to better understand what I can do to support the latter. By studying the self-reported characteristics, experiences, and perceptions that school district leaders identify in relation to a

standard interview protocol, the study explored this question: What beliefs, actions, and perceptions exist in relation to school improvement among a set of Idaho school district superintendents who lead high-risk populations which demonstrate above-average levels of achievement? The qualitative data collected via interviews was analyzed to explore the superintendents' perceptions toward and responses to the national and local landscape of school improvement.

Study design. This investigation was conducted using a bounded case study research design (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2007) that focused on a small set of superintendents employed as leaders in five public school districts across the state of Idaho. District superintendents were interviewed once each over the course of one month using a questionnaire protocol drawn from research literature on effective school improvement (Redding & Walberg, 2008; Shannon & Bylsma, 2007). The contextually bound nature of these interviews occurred in Fall 2010, situated nine years after the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). The bounded design intentionally provides the reader specifically with an understanding of this set of superintendents in a specific time and place and is not intended to be representative of all superintendents in the state.

Worldview. As a researcher, my case study was seen through a worldview in which I look at reality in the following way. I believe that there is truth, truth that is absolute and knowable. For the most part, this type of truth exists outside the framework of this study. I also view people as being capable of perceiving themselves and the world around them subjectively. Hence, their beliefs and perceptions are held either as "truths" or opinions internally. Within such subjectivities, there is a spectrum of possibility for each person to perceive themselves, others, and the world around them. The purpose of this study, then, is to represent the

perceptions, beliefs, and experiences that the participants hold as true of themselves and their districts and compare these, when possible, with characteristics in the research literature. This study does not set out to verify that the participants are reporting something that can be quantified or otherwise represented as truth or fact. Thus, my research perspective most closely aligns with what Creswell and Miller (2000) described as a Systematic Paradigm. Ideally, I aim to represent the study participants in the most valid way possible.

Research Site and Participant Descriptions

Setting and participants. The study was conducted utilizing superintendents that make up a cross-section of Idaho's school districts. Participants were purposefully sampled based primarily upon the characteristics of their districts and a sampling of their students' performance. In Idaho, school districts are located in National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Metro-Centric Locale Codes of 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8. This means they are primarily rural, small and large towns, and mid-sized cities. There are no large city designations of Locale Codes 1 or 3 in the state. Idaho school districts also range in size from 4 to 33,000 students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). That makes the average district size approximately 2,100 students, but more than half of Idaho's school districts fall below the median of 620 children. Of the five participants, one school district is larger than the average of 2,100 students; one school district is smaller than the median of 620; and the remaining fall between the median and average sizes. While more robust demographic detail could be given, such data would likely identify the participants. Therefore, I will only provide a few further characteristics related to how the districts were selected.

As part of my work within the Idaho State Department of Education (SDE), I conducted demographic analysis of all the districts in the state of Idaho which identified the degree to which

each district in the state is comprised of students who are at risk of academic difficulty. There are four primary categories that our team used at the SDE to describe students who are at risk: students from low-socioeconomic status households, those served by special education, those eligible for services based upon limited English proficiency, and those from minority ethnic groups. The degree of risk is labeled as a “risk factor" and is averaged for the entire district. For each of the four categories, students can receive either zero or one point. Thus, the scale is from 0 to 4. A district with a higher average (e.g., 2.3) has students who typically are more at-risk academically than a district with a lower average (e.g., 0.7). The district superintendents chosen for this study were purposefully sampled from districts that placed very high on the risk factor scale (i.e., all were in districts that were more than one standard deviation above the mean). However, the 4th and 8th grade at-risk students whom their districts served achieved higher than average when compared with other districts across the state in Spring 2010. Thus, the identified participants seemed to be a logical sample for a case study centering on leadership and effective district improvement. For the sake of this study, the participants and their locales have been given the following pseudonyms:

Table 1

Pseudonyms for Superintendents and their School Districts

Participant	Superintendent	School District
1	Cicero	Antioch School District
2	Gaius	Verona School District
3	Martial	Sparta School District
4	Suetonius	Caesarea School District
5	Tacitus	Athens School District

Research instrument. As a bounded case study, there were two aspects to the research instrument. The first was the interview protocol crafted using a priori concepts drawn out of the research literature. The second and primary instrument was myself as the researcher. The analysis, coding, and identification of themes were dependent upon my questioning techniques during the interviews and my paradigm during the analysis and interpretation of the data. As such, I utilized a process called researcher reflexivity to understand and mediate the potential impacts of my own subjectivity and biases (Kleinsasser, 2000; Peshkin, 1988).

Data Collection

Contacting participants. The original intent in this study was to look at the perspectives of district leaders who were part of a process called an Instructional Focus Visit, which is conducted by a team of which I am a part at the SDE. Participation in a Focus Visit is mandatory, but the visits are not used for compliance or legal purposes of any nature. Focus Visits are targeted at districts that are in need of improvement and which warrant significant support. They are designed to collect information that can give a district insight into its own practices. No data collected are brought back to the SDE; all information is left with the district to analyze and process of their own accord. Hence, the original recruitment process depended significantly on the SDE's timeline. Due to unexpected delays in the Institutional Review Board approval, this recruitment method became unfeasible.

Therefore, I adjusted my recruitment process and identified a sampling of school districts at the opposite end of the spectrum in which the demographics of the student body would normally correlate with poor academic performance, but which seemed to defy the odds. Approximately nine districts fit this designation, but four had very small student populations that would have had unstable statistical means in relation to the grades and data that were sampled. Of the five

districts that remained with reliable data, all have a student demographic in which the average risk factor is more than one standard deviation above the State mean (i.e., the students have significant challenges). However, the average student performance, as defined by actual scale scores on the state accountability test among students that are at-risk, is in the high, above-average range.

Once I identified these districts, I sent an email to each superintendent requesting their participation in my study. Due to the geographical distance involved in traveling to districts in Idaho, each superintendent was asked to participate voluntarily in an interview either in-person or by phone, whichever was more convenient. The recruitment email identified that interviews would be approximately 45 minutes in length, stated that district and other identifiable information would be anonymized to protect confidentiality, and discussed the intention of the study along with how the results would be shared. Once participants responded to the invitation, a Letter of Informed Consent was emailed to them, and they were given the opportunity to ask any questions before participating in the interview. Due to distance, participants either faxed or emailed a copy of their signed consent form. Afterward, each interview was scheduled and conducted.

Data sources. Three interviews were conducted over the phone; two were conducted in-person. These five interviews became the sole source for data analysis. The interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder and then transcribed in full. Interviews averaged 49 minutes, ranging between 47 and 56 minutes in total. Each interview was structured around the Interview Protocol, but deviated in minor ways depending upon such things as the length of the participant's response and follow up questions that I asked for clarification.

Data Analysis & Reduction

Reading and analysis procedures. Transcribed interviews were chunked into units of thought roughly equivalent to paragraphs prior to analysis. The initial phase of coding was based on a set of *a priori* codes (Gibbs & Taylor, 2005) that were drawn from *The Nine Characteristics of High Performing Schools* (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007). These codes were applied to the various chunks of data such that multiple codes could be paired with the same chunk based on the systems-theory idea that everything is interconnected. Coding occurred in an iterative manner over the course of multiple initial readings. With successive reads of the transcripts, grounded codes began to emerge from the data.

After coding was complete, I built an explanatory schema (Foss & Waters, 2007) in order to identify themes and relationships between codes. The codes were grouped into four clusters that became the themes for the findings. I used each code as a word or phrase to create sentences that conveyed relationships between and within the clusters. This then became the basis for identified subthemes. Codes that were discrepant were set aside.

Limitations and Credibility

Limitations of the study. By nature of its bounded design, a limitation of this study is that the findings are limited to this set of superintendents. As such, it is possible that they are not representative of other school districts in their ability to improve. A further limitation of this design is that the data are self-reported. By utilizing an interview protocol that was structured around research-based indicators of effective practice, it is possible that the questioning techniques skewed the answers provided by the participants. However, this is unlikely due to the depth with which each participant was able to respond and by virtue of the fact that I was not able to get through the complete set of questions with any one person. The interviews in some ways took on a path of their own, albeit centered on the same topics. A further limitation of self-

reported data is that it represents the participants' perceptions of themselves. It would make for an interesting follow up to study the perceptions and beliefs of those whom they lead.

Validity procedures. Due to the confined timeframe of the study to fit within the bounds of a class semester, the following two validity procedures were utilized. First, I debriefed with a peer who was familiar with the transcribed data (Creswell & Miller, 2000). I discussed potential codes and themes as they emerged to verify if they were justifiable. Second, I sent a summary of the themes and subthemes that were identified in the analysis phase to the participants for the purpose of member checking (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Participants were given the opportunity to provide feedback on the degree to which they agreed with the tentative findings. Feedback confirmed that the findings did indeed represent their perspectives.

Findings

In analyzing the beliefs, actions, and perceptions of the superintendents who were the focus of this study, there were four key themes that emerged from the data related to their efforts for district wide improvement. First, the superintendents believed that it was critical for them to be directly and deeply involved in the academic business of schools. Second, they see district and school improvement as a collective endeavor that extends to individuals beyond the organization itself. Third, they view their primary role as being a leader who is responsible for the success of all the students in their district. Fourth, they act as the person responsible for mediating the impact of forces that directly bear upon the district's ability to improve but which are outside of their control.

Involved in the Academic Business of Schools

Participants believed that as superintendents, they must not only understand, but be directly and deeply involved in the academic business of their schools (in addition to, but above and

beyond the managerial side of things). Each superintendent indicated that he does not leave instruction to chance. They believe that strong practices in the Instructional Core (Elmore, 2008) form the foundation for the success of their students. Thus, they seek to ensure that classroom instruction is strong by monitoring teaching and learning across their entire system, and when they find areas that need improvement, they put robust approaches to professional development in place to improve upon any area of concern. Martial represented the sentiment of the participants well when he stated:

> We started the Sparta Leadership Institute with really two goals: to improve student achievement and to increase the deep rooted technical understanding of teaching and learning by our principals and building level folks. If we don't know what we expect other people to do, if we don't know it well, then how can we expect them to do it? And so that's a practice that we've put in place that is truly driving the way we do things in Sparta. So, what's come off of that? We've laid out the expectation of a standards based lesson or learning model we'd like to see in every classroom. We've taken the different components of those lessons and have become literally experts ourselves, and then delivered that expectation through professional development to all of our staff with our own people. So, we've taken the most current research associated with a piece of the standards based lesson or learning model, learned it, internalized it, made it our own, then turned around and delivered it throughout the staff… We do instructional reviews in every classroom where we sit … bell to bell and we capture the data. The trend data in the pieces of the standards based lesson drive the decisions we make around professional development. That's it. It's really a simple approach. So what do you want people to do? You've got to teach them how to do it. Then, see if it's happening, and then come back to it.

This statement about the way Martial leads the Sparta School District demonstrates three subthemes that were evident among the participants. First, the superintendents set district wide expectations for a strong instructional framework (i.e., curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices). Second, they actively monitor teaching and learning to evaluate if their expectations are being met. Third, they view professional development as an implementation tool for teaching new expectations or correcting poor performance.

Strong curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Participating superintendents indicated that they work toward having all the curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices based as

solidly as possible on some type of valid research. Elmore (2008) described these three components as the Instructional Core, or the "relationship of the student and the teacher in the presence of content". They believe that by having a strong Instructional Core in all classrooms, this will form the foundation for the success of their students.

Using the example of literacy instruction, three of the districts had participated in Reading First, a competitive grant program authorized under NCLB from 2002-2009. Reading First created a systemic model for school improvement that centered on the use of scientifically based reading research (Flachbart, 2002). Tacitus pointed out that "literacy has been a big emphasis." He continued by saying, "the Reading First [grant]... what we've been able to do with that; our kids have done really well as far as their state scores and so forth in reading." As an outgrowth of the success in the elementary improvement efforts, Tacitus stated that they "continued that in the secondary schools by developing a literacy-across-the-curriculum plan." Specifically, he described how the research-based instructional practice for literacy spread to other parts of the district in the context of joining the CRISS Initiative.

> CRISS is a really terrible acronym… it's a national, research based project…We eventually trained all our high school and all our secondary teachers in CRISS. CRISS stands for Creating Independence through Student-owned Strategies… Each of our teachers got a manual, got the training, we've been emphasizing it.

Similarly, Martial described a process of scaling up the research-based instructional model their district had used by applying Reading First strategies to four other schools that had not been part of the grant program, along with parts of both of the district's middle schools.

> We had to eliminate things that weren't working. And there was a lot of stuff that wasn't working…We changed to a Reading First driven model. I know you know the story about how two of our schools took off like crazy with literacy improvements and another actually revolted against the Reading First grant and just plummeted and continued to stay flat. It was obvious we had pockets of success in our district that we had to replicate and scale, and the Reading First approach was the best thing that we could have done when we did it. So, all six elementaries and both middles in 6th grade adopted a Reading First model for teaching for literacy. We didn't do it through policy, we just said, "We're

> going to use a Reading First model in the delivery of reading and literacy and language instruction, and that's the direction we're going to go."

The notion of developing a strong Instructional Core was not limited to literacy in grades K-6 or in just the districts that had participated in Reading First. Martial's district continued to develop an instructional framework district-wide by requiring every teacher to implement what they called a standards-based lesson protocol, meaning that each lesson should follow a framework defined by the district, and measured implementation using instructional reviews. Other superintendents also demonstrated a focus on the Instructional Core.

> Well I try to model with my administrators what I'd like to see. We do have monthly administrative team meetings where curriculum, instruction, and school improvement are always on the agenda… If I do see things in the classroom through my walk-throughs, my informal observation, that I'm concerned about, I would address it with the principal… When I enter a classroom, I expect to know just from observing them, what their objective is, what it is they're trying to teach their students. Everyone's efforts, including the principal's, needs to be intentional, standards-based, and improvement focused. – Gaius

In this, Gaius demonstrates that decisions about the Instructional Core must be purposeful no matter the level or subject matter. In a similar way, Suetonius emphasizes that there is intentionality in the curriculum design. In the Caesarea School District, he uses a backward mapping process, beginning with expectations for the highest students, and extrapolating backward to articulate the full curriculum:

> We used grant funds to write a new language arts program for what we call our honors tract, language arts curriculum… The theory behind that was, "Let's write the curriculum for our most capable kids with the idea that that's really going to kind of create a draft that will raise up all of our curriculum." … This year, we plan to do a curriculum audit to make sure we're doing it. – Suetonius

In their own ways, each superintendent made it clear that the Instructional Core is an important component of their vision for improvement. Decisions about it are usually intentional, based on educational research, and implemented throughout the district.

Monitoring teaching and learning. The importance of the Instructional Core continued to be demonstrated by the superintendents in that they described actively monitoring the teaching and learning occurring in each of their schools. This takes place through a combination of methods, but primarily through classroom observations that are non-evaluative.

In some cases, participants monitor the quality of instruction using their own observation process. Such superintendent observations are not connected to formal teacher evaluation, but inform decisions about the system. Some use informal observation processes to check in on the quality of their system.

> The evaluation model that we adopted really doesn't give me or the board a role… What's most important to me is the students. I really have a students-first attitude toward leadership and strive to be a curriculum and instructional leader first and make it a priority. I do classroom observations monthly in every classroom and have requested that my board of trustees do classroom observations as well. It's important to me that my board has a curriculum and instructional role too. – Gaius

Others use a structured tool in order to describe, quantify, and make decisions based on the data from their observations.

> We do instructional reviews where we sit through every classroom bell to bell and we capture the data, the trend data in the pieces of the standards-based lesson. That drives the decisions we make around professional development. – Martial

Additionally, the superintendents relied on the supervision process of their principals by expecting them to regularly check in on the quality of the Instructional Core. The ability to provide instructional leadership through observation techniques was described as a particularly important characteristic of an effective principal.

> The highest priority for me for principals is to know how to structure their time so they can do classroom observation. I know that's a very specific thing, but to me that is the most important task or responsibility a principal has. If they do effective walk-through observations, that means building confidence in them from the teachers. Knowing what the curriculum is, knowing how instruction is going, knowing how the students are working, knowing if there's engagement going on in their building. I want a principal who has the ability to get out there and be in the classrooms a lot. I challenge them to be in every classroom at least once a week. – Tacitus

Martial actually describes this same quality as a non-negotiable expectation of his principals:

> We have some non-negotiables…We will become experts with a deep rooted understanding of teaching and learning. We will, as building principals and leaders, be in the classes every day for a substantial amount of time.

When the building leaders demonstrate their ability to effectively monitor good teaching and learning, it actually seems to allow the superintendent to focus on the more abstract, higher level leadership functions and not worry as much about the minute details.

> I've got a great elementary principal who had a great Reading First experience over in another district, has been in the classroom at almost every grade level…I just have complete confidence in her. She knows how kids learn, she knows how to supervise instruction, she knows how to coach instructionally, she understands assessment… it's nice; I can be hands off there. – Suetonius

The idea of being in classrooms observing the Instructional Core is a clear principle that the superintendents value. They make it a priority to deprivatize practice in all of their classrooms through observation. They see each class as part of the larger system; and to improve the whole, they monitor the quality of the most basic part – the classroom.

Professional development as a multifaceted tool. Each participant views professional development (PD) as a tool that can both prepare for the successful implementation of new innovations and correct existing implementation practices that are poor. They generally work to deliver PD through more than just workshops (e.g., job-embedded coaching, collaboration meetings, peer observation, the Danielson model as a formative process, etc.). There was surprisingly little direct mention of traditional workshop training models, but when they were described, they were usually creative and fit within a larger effort.

> Teachers can voluntarily come back during those 6 furloughed days … We have something planned for professional development on our district goals, and they come and get their daily rate of pay, paid for by Stimulus funds. So, one of the things we did for example (this is a new professional development thing we started, so I thought it was kind of neat), but we did the Danielson training with the videos, the 6-8 hours of video. We did that so that people could earn their pay back from furlough, but we needed to do that anyway. – Tacitus

In other ways, professional development occurred through non-traditional means, such as job-embedded instructional coaching, collaboration structures, and study groups.

> Well, professional development I think is really important… One of the most significant things we've done; we're fortunate because we have an outstanding instructional coach, who was a teacher here for several years and a very well respected teacher who was very successful with her kids….We have, for example last year, we had a whole series of teacher study groups, and the teachers in that study group would meet two times a month … They had a little curriculum thing they were going through as far as effective instructional strategies and they would report back with each other and that sort of thing. – Tacitus

One method of professional development that stood out from the rest was that of peer observation. Often, peer observation is not seen by leaders as an option because of the difficulties in coordinating time out of the classroom, the potential awkwardness between peers, and various other challenges. However, Stewart & Brendefur (2005) recommended a specific model of peer observation as a powerful tool to advance improvement efforts since it centers teacher collaboration on refinement of their actual teaching practices. Peer observation was not only possible in these districts, it was seen as a natural part of professional practice.

> We just have teachers watch each other. It's not even scripted: "Go in and watch your neighbor; go in and watch somebody at a different school." We do it all the time…Previously, with the Reading First calibration visits, what you really had were classroom teachers observing other classroom teachers that took that practice back and implemented it in their classroom and saw a better way. And you drove the whole conversation to a new level. – Martial

In some of the smaller settings, the superintendent himself was even willing to fill in for a teacher to make peer observation possible.

> If I did see a concern that needed to be addressed in a teacher … I've offered myself to substitute for a teacher, if they have a weak area and would like to go observe another teacher who has a strength in that area. – Gaius

Regardless of the model, the purpose of professional development in each district was intentional. It was not viewed as a choose-your-own-adventure plan. It was purposeful, either to

meet a pre-defined goal, such as with the Danielson example, or to correct and improve performance in relation to a pre-defined standard for high quality instruction.

School Improvement as a Collective Endeavor

The participating superintendents describe the work of school and district improvement as a collective endeavor which is not limited to just the people on staff within their organizations, but something which extends to the community, local businesses, and other external groups. They believe that relationships are a critical component of the change process and intentionally build positive rapport. Yet, though they view the work as collective and strive to move forward together with others, they have a strong sense of personal responsibility.

Relationships, the driver of change. The superintendents see relationships as the foundation of what drives change and improvement. Relationships, whether they be between students and teachers, principals and teachers, themselves and principals, or the staff and community, are seen as important because they build intrinsic accountability among everyone and create an environment that supports learning since people feel respected and see themselves as important to the improvement process. The various successes their districts achieve are also intentionally used to support the relational dynamics and help them move to the next area in which they see a need to improve.

> So another part of it is my job is really to build meaningful professional relationships with every direction that allows us to drive change. It's the grease; the relationship is the grease that drives change. If there is no grease, it's harder to turn. – Martial

One of the primary relationships that are critical to classroom improvement is that which exists between the teachers and students. In this regard, Tacitus said:

> As far as teachers, I want them to understand the content of what they're teaching; I think that's very important. But even more important is the ability to develop a relationship with the kids and have the kids respect them, and that the kids know that their teacher cares about them.

Relationships with the community were also seen as tremendously important:

> I already had strong relationships with the community and the [local Native American] tribe. As a teacher, and in my leadership roles in the district, it's been really beneficial because, although we're a public school, an Idaho public school, we are located on the [tribal reservation], so relationships with the tribe are very key for success. – Gaius

In Gaius' perspective, the tribal community supports educational and financial decision making processes that improve the quality of services for students. For example, the Verona School District needed a matching source for a federal grant. The tribe not only matched the $300,000 necessary, but gave $500,000.

The converse of these experiences, when poor attention is given to relationship development, is seen as a reason for why innovations fail to succeed. Personal commitment ends up being lacking from the people who matter most to the implementation side of the decision.

> No matter what it is, I start with people. Who needs to be involved with making that decision? Who should have information in regards to the decision that we're making? … What I see too often is both at the district level, and generally at the state and federal level, is that people jump to programs and performance. So, we skip the two most vital pieces, the people and the process and they say, "Well, your performance isn't good, so here's a program for you." – Cicero

Cicero proceeded to explain how it is no surprise when such programs fail, because the people involved did not feel respected or valued in the decision-making process.

Because of this belief in collective efficacy, the participants intentionally build positive relationships within both the organization and the community at large because they believe it is an essential part of making sustainable decisions that are likely to succeed. For example, each superintendent described ways of working with the surrounding community or the importance of business partnerships. Most of the participants intentionally meet with external stakeholder groups and develop partnerships centered on the academic well-being of their schools.

> We have monthly meetings with the [tribal community] and officials from the [local] tribe called an Education Summit where we go to the tribe chambers and present about our schools. – Gaius

Furthermore, involvement from external groups and businesses is seen as an asset rather than a liability.

> I just try to, you know, maximize the culture of learning in the community and the school… I'd like to see what's happening now with maybe some of the business community getting involved in this *Move On Idaho* program and getting kids to that next level… The vast majority of our kids that go to college don't finish. And that to me is a huge, huge concern… So I'm glad to see agencies and private industry getting involved in that. – Cicero

The superintendents also placed great emphasis on the importance of the dynamic between themselves and the elected representatives of the community, the Board of Trustees. A supportive, collaborative relationship with the Board was described as essential. Thus, the participants are intentional about maintaining that dynamic.

> I'd say I have a healthy relationship with my school board, and it didn't start out like that… My relationship with the trustees is such that I meet with them all individually monthly. We usually meet, some of them I meet with more than once. We meet collectively in a work session usually before a board meeting, usually for two hours, so that we're prepped and they understand the issues so that when they talk about it publicly they're up to speed… I don't agree with them all the time, and they don't agree with me. But I think that's the value in diversity and the value in the collective wisdom of the group. The one thing we can usually get to a consensus through the wisdom of our trustees and me. School board members change. The cool thing is that if you're given the opportunity to keep them together and the community can see the value of what you're trying to do, and you can keep them together long enough to drive change that's good to great, the Collin's approach, you can go that extra mile. Then you can really have an impact on an organization and the community. – Martial

By having this solid, ongoing relationship with the Trustees, the superintendents feel empowered to do the hard work of improvement. In a follow up email, during the member-checking process, the concept of a collective approach was addressed in this way:

> My experience has shown me the collective endeavor is the key to success, and a major player in this success is the professional relationships that I have with the Board of Trustees and my administrative team. I would not be able to have much success if my Board was not in tune with my philosophy and approach. Due to this positive working relationship I have the flexibility to reach out and expand programs. My administrative team sees this team approach with the board and has a greater sense of support than they would otherwise. – Cicero

The superintendents thus view relationships as a foundational piece to the improvement process. Strong relationships make change possible because of the trust that is inherent. From the students knowing their teachers care, to the district leader with the supportive Board of Trustees, the relationships become the "grease that drives change" when challenging issues or tough decisions are faced.

Collective response to accountability. The participants intentionally utilize collaboration at multiple levels to foster collective thinking and a collective response to continuous improvement. Collaboration occurs not just in the traditional sense of teacher collaboration, but is also apparent in the ways that they work with their district office staff, their principals, and their communities. Rather than being autocratic decision-makers about key aspects of the improvement process, the superintendents either plan collectively with a district leadership team or, at minimum, gather staff input in some manner. Speaking of himself and his three principals, one participant said:

> We're so much focused on academic goals, not just AYP related goals and, …we invested a ton a TON of time last year… We started in January; we met every week for 3 hours from January through the end of March putting together the district's improvement plan using the WISE Tool. – Suetonius

Another superintendent changed the schedule and adjusted the teacher contract based on collective input from a survey on perceptions developed by the Center for Educational Effectiveness (CEE). Gaius shared that in the Verona School District:

> It was very clear in the elementary CEE surveys that teachers wanted more time for collaboration. Not only with their grade level teams but school-wide. We actually changed in response to that survey data. We changed the teacher work day to enable collaboration time every Wednesday morning for an hour… That's one of the nice things about the school improvement process is that it does encourage participation and a positive attitude about the process.

Interestingly, the attitude of the work being a collective endeavor even showed up in the nuances of the superintendents' speech patterns. Without exception, they all used first person

plural language (e.g., "we") with approximately equal frequency to that of first person singular (e.g., "I"), with each occurring 1,048 and 1,189 times respectively. This was very interesting to note and seemed to subconsciously demonstrate that they truly believed the work was a collaborative balance between their roles and that of others. As Martial put it, by demonstrating openness to communication, input, and collaborative problem solving, the participants "try to create an environment where we're all accountable for each other's success."

The resource of public opinion. Public opinion outside of the bounds of the superintendents' staff members is seen as an important source of accountability and support for the task of continuous improvement. The participants see these opinions represented in and through their Board of Trustees, their local businesses and government structures (e.g. city council, local state representatives, etc.), and their students' families, and see such opinions as sources of information that have the potential to contribute to decision-making processes. For example, on the one hand, public opinion brings accountability for high quality programs.

> Well, I think students hold us accountable, their parents hold us accountable; the community in general holds me accountable. My Board of Trustees holds me accountable. – Cicero

Yet, on the other hand, when the positive relationships described above are in place, this external accountability can be leveraged to gain necessary support for change.

> So, when we start presenting data on our kids, where we are and how we're doing, the Board will need to provide me with the resources and direction I need so as to go about making some changes. And they realize that to make the improvements we need to make, we may need to add some additional staffing or modify some job assignments … [to] put in place those instruments that will hopefully facilitate that improvement. – Cicero

This concept extends beyond just the context of the Board as is demonstrated in the example of the Verona School District above. In addition to the involvement and accountability that comes through Verona's Board, the community is actively engaged in the well being of the system.

> One of the things I've learned to love about Verona and the community is they have a high involvement in their children's' education. I just met yesterday with an Indian Parent Committee. There are members from the [local] tribe who have formed a committee and they're involved in the education of the children of Verona. – Gaius

This in turn manifests itself in such things as financial support (e.g., a sizeable matching grant) and support with academic concerns such as supporting the district with attendance issues among the community's children. When seen in the positive light of good relationships, the superintendents are able to capitalize on the strength of public opinion and leverage it as a tool for improvement.

A Superintendent's Primary Responsibility

While the participating superintendents see the managerial components of their work as critical to the success of their districts, they view their ultimate role as being leaders who are responsible for the academic success of all students in their district. They are driven by a deeper moral purpose to ensure that all students are successful, whatever it takes, but recognize that it will require the continuous improvement of a very complex system. To move forward in decisions related to continuous improvement, they utilize research and external partnerships. Furthermore, they focus their efforts on effective leadership within their buildings and have high performance expectations of every teacher and principal.

Continuous improvement in a Mega-System. The superintendents are driven to ensure that all students succeed. And, as Martial puts it, all means all: "I talked about student achievement for all kids, and I mean that literally for all kids." However, success is not just measured by the state test (ISAT).

> Well, when we've conducted staff meetings and looked at our data and our successes, I've tried to have a much broader view than just ISAT and AYP. – Cicero

While they maintain goals for the state tests, such as IRI and ISAT, they actually measure students' success and progress, or rather the success of their system in many different ways. For example, one measure of success is found in high school ACT and AP exam score comparisons.

> One aspect of the AP course that I like is that there's a standardized national exam for that course. It gives us an idea of how our kids are measuring up, how our program, our instruction is measuring up, so I like that. – Suetonius

Another method of evaluation one participant used was in relation to how their instructional program impacts the quality of life in the community at large.

> Well, we've had lots of success… We have moved in all grade levels in all content areas forward academically in a dramatic fashion… So that's probably the number 1 success is we've really improved student achievement for all kids in all subgroups in the Sparta School District … And I would say as a result of those primary things, we've been able to change the culture and the climate throughout the district and the community. Gangs and criminal behaviors in school is almost nonexistent. Student learning is a priority for kids and adults alike. The incarceration rate for kids is dramatically lower. What I mean by that is the juvenile detention center when I got here 6 years ago was 150 kids with a waiting list, now I think it's 18 or 19 kids in the juvenile detention center. These types of things translate into a different lifestyle, which in essence allows them to live and leave here with hope for a better future. – Martial

All of them defined success primarily in terms of preparing kids for life beyond their system. They value graduation rates, college placement, college readiness (i.e., not needing remediation), and college completion, with their greatest goal being that each student graduates and is prepared for whatever choice he or she wants to make beyond 12th grade (e.g., college, technical school, etc.). A colleague of mine stated this quite simply as seeing not a K-12 system, but rather a 12-K system. The participants seek to graduate kids from grade 12 and, in turn, map the system backward from that end goal. This focus on the end goal was demonstrated by an emphasis on graduation.

> There's pressure to reach this certain percentage or bar [on the state test], but that's not what it's all about. It's, when that kid walks off the stage with his or her diploma, they're ready. We've gotten them ready. That's been a big indicator for our success is that they are ready, and they are successful when they leave. – Cicero

Yet graduation alone was not enough, the superintendents truly valued college placement and completion thereof as a means to know that students had been adequately prepared.

> We've been as high as 92% positive placement out of our high school… There was a study done in Idaho about moving on into and completing postsecondary programs … They compared our area to national trends, and the highest states in the country are 57% what they call *moving on,* which means 19-24 year olds are still in an educational program. Idaho is 32%; my high school is 58%. – Cicero

Evidence of college readiness was in fact so important that one superintendent described it as embarrassing that he did not have better data and was striving to improve in that particular area.

> You look at what data a school district can provide readily, and that tells you what they think is important… Can I tell you where every one of our kids is now? Can I tell you if they're going to college? … The fact that I can't tell you that (and we're working on it) really embarrasses me… One thing we have tried, though, is we called back all the college freshmen, invited 'em to the high school in December after they got a Christmas break, and we do a focus group with 'em. We meet with 'em to say: How's it going? How's college going? Were you adequately prepared? Yes or no? What should we have done differently to help you? – Suetonius

The participating superintendents thus see their school districts as complex systems and use data sources that are both formal (e.g., academic tests, college placement) and informal (e.g., community data, people's input, etc.) to evaluate how well their systems are working. They view the improvement process as continuous and make adjustments as needed.

> If you're not making adequate progress what do you do? You correct your actions, relook at it, redesign it, take it in a direction that you know. One should learn and make a difference; you don't keep riding the same horse. – Tacitus

When they see a component of their system that is not adequately preparing students for post-secondary life or which could be improved upon, they respond by continuously refining their practices in order to "chase the lodestar of student success" (Redding, 2006).

Resources for decision making. To obtain success for all students, the participating superintendents view themselves as responsible for ensuring strong practices in the Instructional Core (Elmore, 2008) of every classroom. When they make adjustments and decisions in

response to the needs within their system, they do so in light of what they believe constitutes good teaching and learning, building leadership, and other components. Such decisions are based largely on what they learn from research sources (e.g., articles, books, the WISE Tool, institutes, etc.). What I found particularly interesting was that references to research findings were infused seamlessly into the course of their conversation. The following quotes demonstrate just a few examples of this.

> If you haven't looked at a copy of that [college placement] study, you might want to see if you can get a copy of it. – Cicero
>
> Yeah, and *The Nine Characteristics of High Performing Schools,* and the WISE Tool, and all the goal setting; it's all best practice stuff. – Gaius
>
> Do they understand what engagement really is? Like Schlechty's work. Do they understand assessment for learning? Do they understand highly effective questioning like Hannel and Hannel talk about, or Bloom's Taxonomy? – Martial
>
> And so I'm kind of reading a lot more than I used to about some of the ACT literature and research, and what the ACT means, and how we can be using the results of the ACT to evaluate our system. – Suetonius
>
> At any rate, CRISS is just research-based literacy strategies… – Tacitus

By referencing research literature and resources so fluidly in the interviews, it was quite apparent that the practice was natural for each of them and just a part of the way they thought about decision-making and continuous improvement.

In addition to using research to inform their decisions, the participants have all intentionally accessed outside technical assistance partners that support and blend well with their vision for instructional leadership, such as university partnerships and state sponsored programs. State programs that were specifically mentioned were Reading First, the Idaho Building Capacity (IBC) Project, and the Superintendents Network of Support, each of which are or were designed to approach instructional leadership and systemic school improvement. Specifically, every participant's district has been involved in one or more of these projects: three were in Reading

First, four have been or are in IBC, and three are currently in the Superintendents Network. Having myself been professionally involved in all three of these state projects, I perceived that these superintendents are very intentional consumers of these offerings; the programs meet a specific need for which they are looking.

> I think it's a little easier in our elementary; in our high school and our middle school we struggle… That's why our middle school is in the capacity builder project to try to show some improvement…– Cicero

These outside partnerships connect to the larger attribute they each demonstrated of understanding current educational research and are seen as a support for instructional decision-making that directly impact the system. For example, when speaking of a change in which the Caesarea School District has now begun to regularly report specific progress to the Board, Suetonius says this:

> Why are we doing that? Because that was one of the research-based indicators in the WISE Tool. That's what good schools do, school districts do, successful school districts do, and so we're trying to do that ourselves.

Ultimately, the superintendents want to know what the best practices are, they pursue those practices, and then they implement them in a manner that suites their local context.

High expectations. It is often noted that high performing schools have high expectations of their students (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007). An interesting extension of this seems to be that each participating superintendent has high expectations not only for all the students in their district; they also have high expectations of every teacher and principal. As mentioned above, they expect teachers to implement strong practices in the Instructional Core (Elmore, 2008), and provide opportunity to improve and correct them when necessary through the monitoring of teaching and learning. However, this invariably comes through an expectation of effective leadership from their principals. The participants expect their principals to be the instructional

leader in each building who monitors and ensures high quality work from every staff member. Such effective leadership traits seemed to be distilled down to two primary things.

First and foremost, participants expect their principals to conduct meaningful classroom observations for the sake of ensuring high quality practices in the Instructional Core. Tacitus described the emphasis on this well when he said: "The highest priority for me for principals is to know how to structure their time so they can do classroom observation." Similarly, of his own observations, Gaius stated: "If I did see a concern that needed to be addressed in a teacher, I would address it through the building principal." And Suetonius simply relies on the fact that it's happening: "I've got a great elementary principal…I just have complete confidence in her; she knows how kids learn, she knows how to supervise instruction, she knows how to coach."

However, observation alone is not enough. Understanding and evaluating the impact the Instructional Core has on student learning data is held as equally important, because the data is seen as a tool that links back to decisions about what needs to be adjusted. The tension between high expectations for leadership and what occurs when that understanding of the data is not there is expressed well by Suetonius in the following:

> My success in Caesarea School District is going to be [that] a whole lot has to do with those principals and the kind of quality leaders they are. It really is. And I want to work well with them…And I will support them, but it's hard to support them when I feel like I care more than they do about their school and how students are achieving in their school. That is not a good thing… I like principals that come to me with the data before I bring it to them, 'cause that's an indication that they've got their nose in it. They understand the value of understanding this achievement data. They're working with it. They're trying to understand it and what they can do with that information… That's an important part of their job.

When probed about why effective principals were so important to the monitoring of teaching and learning, the reason was this:

> It's real easy for me to see. Here's what it boils down to. If you take a high performing school, and you put a crappy principal in that school, instantly you'll see student achievement drop off. You'll see teacher retention drop off. You'll see the culture

> change, the climate change; you'll see the thing fall apart. If you take a highly effective leader, and put him in a low performing school, you'll see exactly the opposite. And yet we don't make the correlation out loud that what we're really missing in public education is leadership at the building level and at the district level. – Martial

Therefore, because effective building leadership is a high expectation of each participant's principal, a natural question is: What happens when it isn't there? What it came down to in the participants' responses is that they first have the hard conversations necessary. This is in an attempt to fix the leadership attributes and obtain the characteristics that they would like to see.

> When you've got a school that hasn't made AYP for 5 or 6 years, and there doesn't seem to be the level of concern that you'd like to see, then you've got to have pretty pointed conversations with leadership. "What's going on?" And, "Here's what I expect to happen." – Suetonius

But when hard conversations don't get the desired results, they remove the leader. When Tacitus was asked if he ever saw the idea of replacing staff, an option within the NCLB restructuring clause, as necessary, the answer was yes.

> If a principal, for example, is struggling that much – that the school was not making academic growth, or progressing adequately I mean, would you wait that many years? That action should have been taken before then. So, yeah there are times when that needs to happen, and with teachers as well. I would hope that districts would take care of that and wouldn't have to rely on AYP sanctions. – Tacitus

Because of the fact that they want all students to succeed, the participating superintendents place high expectations on their staff, especially building principals. These expectations center on the quality of the Instructional Core, and principals are expected to work with teachers to monitor and adjust as indicated by data. When principals do not live up to this, the participants try to first work with the leader, but when push comes to shove, they are not afraid to cut their losses, move on, and change personnel in order to better serve students.

Deeper moral purpose. As I progressed through the conversations with these superintendents, I often wondered what motivated them. The work is challenging, to be sure. Especially considering the hard conversations and difficult decisions, why do they do what they

do? The answer to this was stated very explicitly by Martial, but I interpreted the same belief structure to be true with the others (which was confirmed during the member-checking process). It comes down to the fact that, while the participants view the work of continuous improvement to be a collective endeavor, they actually balance that with a sense of individual responsibility. In other words, they take the successes and failures of their districts as a personal reflection on their own leadership. As such, the drive that each superintendent demonstrates is based in both a sense of responsibility for the success of their system and also on a deeper moral purpose or the greater good. They view successes and failures in their system very personally.

> Well in my role as the top person in the organization, administratively, I have to be accountable to myself first. What I say, I have to do… I'm accountable to a greater good, and what I mean by the greater good is I'm accountable to help make this country a better place to live… I really think the accountability is the deeper moral purpose of what we're doing. You know Fullan talks a lot about deeper moral purpose, and that's really the thing that we're gonna have to get down and dirty as to why we're doing this. Who are we trying to help and why? – Martial

It is this internal sense of purpose that in turn leads them to make the difficult decisions and have the hard conversations that are necessary to ensure that their principals and each school go back, evaluate where they are at, and work to continuously improve. What may make the difference between these leaders and less effective ones is that they harness that deeper moral purpose as a motivator for themselves. Yet, as Fullan (2007) also pointed out:

> The key, then, [to "reframing change"] is how to help people feel and be better. If feelings and emotions are the key factors, one would think that an appeal to moral purpose in situations of terrible failure would be a great motivator. Not so. Even in extremely difficult circumstances, moral purpose by itself is insufficient. One also must feel and see that there is a means of moving forward. (p.43)

It seems, then, that the participating superintendents have this deeper moral purpose. And while not sufficient in and of itself, together with other actions they take, the deeper moral purpose motivates their workforce because they as leaders help people see a means for moving forward

by connecting to research, following through on high expectations, and using the many other mechanisms that they put in place in order to succeed.

The Superintendent's Political Balancing Act

To this point, the themes that have been identified have related more to the beliefs and actions that the superintendents take in order to impact their system directly. For the most part, these all entail conditions that are more or less under the direct authority of their position. However, another theme emerged from the interviews in which the participants view themselves as the primary person responsible in their district for mediating or balancing things that impact their district's ability to improve, but which are outside of their locus of control. A primary example of this came out in relation to school finance.

Each superintendent believes that stewardship and an appropriate amount of financial resources are absolutely critical to the improvement of their system. However, school districts operate within a federal system, in which the power to govern is divided up among local, state, and national domains. Thus, because their districts' financial resources are influenced by local, state, and federal agencies (and by extension the politics at those levels), they see themselves in roles that can be described as political. This in large part relates back to financial resources because they find themselves needing to advocate for more or adequate funding in order to improve various aspects of the system. Advocating in this way can occur either at the local level (e.g., bonds and levies) or the state level (e.g., the state legislature's budget). An interesting feature of this is that, though it entails working and collaborating with others, it is not in the same sense of believing the work is a "collective endeavor" as is described above. Rather, without this political advocacy, they believe the work of improvement would be hindered for lack of

resources. On the one hand, political success, such as that achieved by getting a bond or levy passed, is seen as approval by the community and support for the work that is being done.

> I guess on the other hand we must be doing something right because we just had 77% approval on a bond. During these tough times that must show something. – Tacitus

On the other hand, the politics represent a dilemma, especially in relation to the state domain where the largest portions of the districts' budgets are set via formula allocations. While this theme may not have been as pronounced before the economic recession of the past few years, it is nonetheless true that districts are always dependent upon the State Legislature's decisions about taxation and spending.

Martial was the last participant to be interviewed, and the notion of resources had already begun to emerge in the first four interviews as a potential theme. I didn't specifically ask him about it. However, I ended the interview with a very general question about if there was anything else important to school improvement endeavors that we had not covered. Without hesitation, he indentified resources, as situated within the context of politics:

> Yeah, we haven't talked about resources at all. You know, I'm not a big fan of throwing money at a problem… But there is a fundamental basic need that you have to have in place… We're about ready to break the camel's back, and what I mean by that is, as a State, we're so proud of our fiscal conservative nature that we are not coming to grips with the potential devastation to economic development, to stability, to our livelihood in Idaho with the cuts that are projected for public education this session…

He continued by focusing on the relationship between the political mechanisms that drive school funding and the threshold for being able to maintain a trajectory of improvement. He stressed that the political environment could ultimately derail his ability to maintain a basic system, let alone make the needed changes in his schools. Martial made a point to say that his district has been doing an incredible job at improving, despite far fewer resources the past two years, but conjectured the following:

> So you see, we've been driving improvement with less resources. But, here's what's going to happen, if I anticipate what's going to happen correctly. If we're going to have to cut another 8-15% out our budget next year, the very thing that is driving school improvement will be – it'll just be demolished. It won't look the same, it won't feel the same, and it won't provide the same results.

Martial's response to this political issue is that he sees the need to be the primary political advocate for his district. He said that by the time the Legislature convenes, he will be able to entrust the majority of operations to his staff in order for him to be freed up to testify at the state hearings. His message of advocacy hinges on the fact that he as a leader must balance the moral purpose of ensuring every child gets a quality education with the managerial facts of what it takes to get the job done, while at the same time being dependent on external political forces in order to do both. On the one hand, there is a question of sufficiency of funding:

> My caution to the legislature, elected officials, and conservative groups is: "Let's be careful about our fiscal conservancy, 'cuz I don't think you'll meet a more conservative person than me." Understanding that, and knowing what it takes to actually do what people want us to do; there's this disconnect between what it takes and what we're going to provide. I think we are the verge of making some potentially really bad choices for the sake of having a balanced budget, or for the sake of not increasing taxes. And I think people just need to have an honest, open conversation. – Martial

On the other hand, one can see that his concern is truly about the students and what will become of their educational experiences, though each of his concerns is inexplicably linked to the other.

> I don't want my taxes raised either, I don't. But if you're just going to keep me to the same right now, and you're going to put 40-50 kids in my kids' and grandkids' classes, and there won't be transportation, there won't be athletics and activities, there won't be choir or orchestra, music, art, shop (all of the great things that really add to the value of education in America); if you're going to take all of those away, then I might rethink my position on what I'm willing to do. If I have to cut $8 million out of my budget, 10 days of cutting teacher contracts saved $1 million. I'd have to cut 80 days of school… Now those are the same people that are getting us this result making less money. Now you see what I'm saying, you get to this place where it falls off. – Martial

His description of the current context is dire, to say the least. The Sparta School District is one that by all measures is performing fairly well. They survived the first year of the recession. They made major cuts in the second year, and continued to improve. During that year, 2009, the

State Legislature found some stop-gap measures to ease the full impact of the recession and the US Congress allocated stimulus funds through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act that helped stabilize the State's budget and bolstered Title I and IDEA funding. However, the economic outlook for the coming year is what Martial is referencing, in which none of these extra funding sources will be available, and the State does not anticipate a significant increase in tax revenue. Hence, all of the commitment, sense of moral purpose, creativity, and resourcefulness that is evident in the school improvement efforts described throughout, ultimately come to an intersection with the political decision-making process. Though, the outcome of the political process is outside of Martial's locus of control, he sees it as a crucial component of his work to try and exert influence:

> Political leadership is one that historically, and even currently, most superintendents will just sit back and point fingers and place blame: "They're going to vote how they vote." You know who's elected? Farmers, businessmen, housewives – just people like you and I – professionals… They're representatives at large because they have an interest in the common good; they don't know the intimate details of the complicated nature of all aspects of government. It's our responsibility to make sure they know… This time will be a true test of our ability to make sure our elected officials are educated on the decisions that they're going to make that could change what we do forever. And I'm not saying for the better. So, I do have a critical, political responsibility in my school district, and in my state.

While, Martial was the only participant to go into this great of depth and explicitly made the connection between politics and the resources necessary for continuous improvement, other participants confirmed during the member checking process that this coincides with how they view their roles. They see themselves as responsible for advocating and educating the political agencies that directly impact their ability to serve students. And, while I would contend that this is amplified by the current national economic downturn, it would seem to be just as important during normal economic conditions. Either way, the participating superintendents indicate that

they have to negotiate balance in the realm of politics, especially as it relates to financial resources. This political balancing act is critical to their district's ability to succeed.

Conclusion

The findings of this study confirm the characteristics described in the greater body of research literature on effective district leadership. Just as Fullan (2007) found, these successful superintendents exhibit educational leadership, political leadership, and managerial leadership. Their primary goal is that all of the students in their system will graduate from 12th grade fully prepared for the world before them. They understand and are deeply involved in the academic business of their schools, and are very mindful of the power of a strong Instructional Core (Elmore, 2008). In order to accomplish their goals, they intentionally build collective efficacy and collaboration in the iterative process of continuous improvement. And, they recognize that, in order to support the success of their district, they must involve themselves in the political arena and try to influence and balance external forces that would otherwise impact their ability to get the job done.

The voices of these Idaho superintendents demonstrate the fact that effective academic outcomes can indeed be accomplished. Regardless of whether districts are rural or urban, large or small, highly at risk or not; our schools and districts can improve and can perform higher and better than many people believe. With the current national trends targeting teachers as the scapegoats for school improvement, this study confirms the latent truth of what Schmoker (2006) said: "If you put a good teacher up against weak system, the system wins every time." In these districts, there are good teachers – in good systems. It takes both. Good systems require excellent leadership. Excellent district leaders are skilled in the area of traditional management, but they are also highly knowledgeable of good pedagogy and are keenly aware of the

interpersonal dynamics required to build capacity both outside of and within the human capital of their systems.

From the perspective of someone, such as myself, who is concerned with policy and programs at the state level as they relate to the support systems our schools and districts need, this study also confirms the direction that is needed. Fullan (2007) talks about the importance of building capacity within the district system to have the collective knowledge necessary to promote continuous improvement. By deduction, this is true for state and national leaders as well. We work in a profession in which most people seem to be working the hardest they know how, and most also seem to be guided by a deeper moral commitment to serve the best interest of students. What we seem to be lacking as a profession is the capacity to implement and sustain change based on "collective knowledge" and leadership that balances shared and hierarchical decision-making.

The work of school and district improvement is complex, more than most policy makers seem to understand. Prescriptive models are insufficient to result in improvement. Legal, programmatic, and financial sanctions are insufficient motivators of change. As a result of this study, I contend that the relationship between state and federal accountability systems and the resulting impact on school districts should take into consideration the vast complexity related to the function of district leadership that is necessary to accomplish improvement at scale. Since the intent of my study was to learn more about how districts can be supported in this challenging work, I recommend that state and national policy consider the following in order to increase the likelihood of large scale improvement:

1. Substantial improvement requires a collective and collaborative relationship between all of the stakeholders involved in educational outcomes. States should pursue school and district improvement strategies that directly support the development of such relationships.

2. Substantial improvement requires district leadership with the capacity to lead in the educational and political realms, as well as the managerial. State and federal policy should proactively differentiate school and district accountability and support programs along these lines. One of the State's primary roles should be building the capacity of all district leaders, with punitive sanctions reserved for those who are unwilling to change. The federal role should primarily be to build the capacity of State leaders to support improvement at scale.

3. In the reauthorization of the ESEA, federal policy makers should focus more on districts as the unit of analysis for accountability and use schools as an indicator for, not a focal point of, where state and federal support and intervention should be provided. Accountability systems must better differentiate between systemic issues (e.g., district environments that inhibit improvement) and targeted issues (e.g., need for improvement of a single school or subset of the workforce).

4. State and federal policy makers should identify, learn from, and take heed of the political concerns voiced by successful school district leaders. Whether it be related to financial resources or other aspects of governance that are directly impacted by policy makers, successful school district leaders have unique insights into what it takes to improve an entire organization that could serve to improve policy at large.

No Child Left Behind has been a powerful tool in raising the national conversation around school improvement to a higher, more productive level. The five participating superintendents are a case study in possibility. They and their organizations demonstrate that students who are traditionally underserved and underperforming can in fact be given hope. The schools in which those students are served can break the habit of low performance. More importantly, this hope for higher achievement can occur across an entire district as a result of effective leadership. It is borne out of leaders who are attuned to the academic, relational, managerial, and political aspects of improving schools. There is not an endless supply of human capital readily available to do what these superintendents have accomplished. However, we as a nation do have an abundant resource of teachers and leaders who are passionate, committed to their school systems, and generally willing to learn how to improve themselves. As leaders at the national, state, and local levels, and if we are to truly meet the needs of all learners, it is imperative that we develop wise

policies and practices that support continuous and substantial improvement within our systems by using each of our respective roles and resources to build capacity for greater educational leadership among current and future school superintendents.

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