

# Opportunity to Learn: The Role of Professional Learning in Understanding and Addressing Educational Inequities

Authors: Sujan Talukdar White, Ann Allwarden, Phillip John Potenziano, Karen J. Zaleski

Persistent link: <http://hdl.handle.net/2345/3784>

This work is posted on [eScholarship@BC](#),  
Boston College University Libraries.

---

Boston College Electronic Thesis or Dissertation, 2014

Copyright is held by the author, with all rights reserved, unless otherwise noted.

BOSTON COLLEGE

Lynch School of Education

Department of  
Educational Leadership and Higher Education

Professional School Administrator Program (PSAP)

OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN: THE ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL  
LEARNING IN UNDERSTANDING AND  
ADDRESSING EDUCATIONAL INEQUITIES

Dissertation in Practice

by

SUJAN S. TALUKDAR

with Ann F. Allwarden, Phillip J. Potenziano, and Karen J. Zaleski

submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education

May 2014

© Copyright by Ann F. Allwarden, Phillip J. Potenziano, Sujan S. Talukdar, and Karen J. Zaleski  
2014

© Copyright by Sujan S. Talukdar, Chapter 5  
2014

# **Opportunity to Learn: The Role Of Professional Learning in Understanding and Addressing Educational Inequities**

by

Sujan S. Talukdar

Dissertation Chairperson: Diana Pullin, J.D., Ph.D.

## **Abstract**

As district- and school-level leaders face increasing pressure from federal, state, and local accountability mandates, there has been increased dependence on using and analyzing student data to help improve student performance. While the reporting of disaggregated data by student subgroup confirms that achievement gaps exist, it does not provide district- and school-level leaders with the descriptive data needed to identify key factors inhibiting student performance. Identifying and understanding factors hindering student performance is critical knowledge for leaders to cultivate as they work to address elements within their school or district that may need to change if student learning is to improve. This research study examined specific ways district- and school-level leaders go about challenging and helping their community to face the problem of student performance disparities, as well as specific aspects of the situation that may be contributing to the community's collective capacity, to address student performance disparities.

Without proper district-level leadership, effectively addressing operational conditions that may lead to disparities in student learning is unlikely. Currently, few studies exist about district-level leaders' use of professional learning to support the development of school-level leaders. However, a review of the literature revealed that

some district-level leaders have turned to professional learning to transform school-level leaders' practice in their effort to understand and address disparities, as well as their knowledge about and skills related to working with diverse students. This qualitative single case study in a diverse urban district utilized interview and document data to further understanding on the use of professional learning by district leaders with school leaders. Findings revealed that district-level leaders sought to leverage and foster professional learning for school-level leaders as an action to further learn about, understand, and address the barriers that may be inhibiting students' opportunity to learn.

# Opportunity to Learn: Understanding and Addressing Educational Inequities

## **Executive Summary Dissertation in Practice**

Ann F. Allwarden, Phillip J. Potenziano,  
Sujan S. Talukdar, and Karen J. Zaleski

March 2014

## Context and Background

The release of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 marks a defining moment in the history of American education, heralding the advent of standards-based educational reform. Whereas previous reform efforts worked to provide *equal* access to education for minority groups (e.g., *Brown v. Board of Education*, Civil Rights Act of 1964, Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Amendments of 1966, Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975), the standards-based reform movement focuses on *excellence* for *all*. Providing the same to all may at times create unfair and unjust circumstances leading to greater levels of inequity and injustice. As a result, there are times when “persons may be treated

*PROVIDING THE SAME TO ALL MAY AT TIMES  
CREATE UNFAIR AND UNJUST CIRCUMSTANCES  
LEADING TO GREATER LEVELS OF INEQUITY  
AND INJUSTICE.*

and rewarded unequally and also justly” (Green, 1983, p. 324). While some examples of inequalities are in fact just, inequities are never just.

In the pursuit of excellence, the role of standards continued to gain strength, culminating in the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, now commonly referred to as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). With bi-partisan support for the enactment of NCLB, standards-based educational reform emphasizing standards, assessments, and accountability “was catapulted into national policy” (Foorman & Nixon, 2006, p. 163). In order “to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education” (20 U.S.C. 6302 § 1001), NCLB established a test-based accountability system (Hamilton, 2003; Hamilton & Koretz, 2002). Test-based accountability systems include four major components: goals (i.e., rigorous standards), measures (i.e., high-stakes state tests), targets (i.e., adequate yearly progress), and consequences (i.e., school transfer options, supplemental services, corrective actions, and restructuring) (Hamilton & Koretz, 2002).

Since the authorization of NCLB in 2001, there is little evidence to suggest that the current accountability system is having a positive effect on long-standing equity issues (Harris & Herrington, 2006). Even though the ultimate effectiveness of current federal and state policy is yet unknown, policymakers continue to

show unwavering support for the pairing of rigorous standards to test-based accountability. Most recently, support for this pairing was demonstrated by the provision of federal funding to the assessment consortiums of SMARTER Balanced and Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) to support the development of a national testing system that will assess the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) adopted by 45 out of the 50 United States of America (Achieve, Inc., 2013; Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2011; SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

While efforts to raise standards and improve assessments deserve thoughtful consideration in the “landscape of educational policy, they are not effective drivers toward significantly changing the conditions for students who are in need....For a student, or to a parent whose child is academically drowning, simply moving the shoreline further away is not compelling” (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012, pp. 10-11). Instead, attention must turn towards formulating “a support-based reform agenda focused on creating the learning environment and condition in which...all children will have an opportunity to learn and succeed” (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012, p. 11).

### **Purpose of Study**

The most recent “report cards” from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) highlight enduring and substantial achievement gaps. In these reports, disaggregated data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reveal statistically significant discrepancies between the performance of African-American and Hispanic students and their White, non-Hispanic peers (NCES, 2011a, 2011b). Equally large performance gaps separate low-income from middle- to high-income students (NCES, 2011a, 2011b). And, although less attention has been focused on measuring, monitoring, and reporting changes experienced by English language learners (ELL) and students with disabilities (SD), considerable performance gaps also exist for these student populations (NCES, 2011a, 2011b). Equally alarming, national data exposes sizable differences in graduation rates when presented by race/ethnicity. These on-going, statistically significant disparities raise critical questions regarding educational equity and students’ opportunity to learn within the public school system.



Addressing long standing disparities in student performance calls for systemic change, a theme that resounds throughout and across the work of many educational practitioners, scholars, researchers, and advocacy groups. Igniting such a transformational change requires “step[ping] outside the situation, make[ing] sense of it, and reframe[ing] the problem” (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011, p. 54). Part of reframing the problem involves a collective shift in thinking that moves away from viewing disparate outcomes as an “achievement gap,” which too often reinforces the beliefs and attitudes of some that the root cause of widely discrepant outcomes stems from underperforming students’ lack of ability to achieve at high levels, and towards seeing disparate outcomes as an “opportunity gap,” which places the onus for divergent outcomes squarely upon the educational system. This essential shift in thinking emphasizes that disparities in outcomes for students are absolutely “not a reflection of their potential nor their abilities—but a direct result of denying them equitable supports and resources they need to be fully engaged and succeed” (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012, p. 2). In an effort to further explore the “opportunity gap” that exists for many students, the purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore how district- and school-level leaders’ understanding of the “nature of the gap” influences the work of leadership focused on addressing disparities in student performance related to race/ethnicity, class, and/or disability.

***THIS STUDY SOUGHT TO ANSWER TWO OVERARCHING RESEARCH QUESTIONS:***

- *HOW DO DISTRICT- AND SCHOOL-LEVEL LEADERS UNDERSTAND DISPARITIES IN STUDENT PERFORMANCE RELATED TO RACE/ETHNICITY, CLASS, AND/OR DISABILITY?*
- *HOW DO THESE UNDERSTANDINGS THEN INFLUENCE THE WORK OF LEADERSHIP FOCUSED ON ADDRESSING DISPARITIES IN STUDENT PERFORMANCE RELATED TO RACE/ETHNICITY, CLASS, AND/OR DISABILITY?*

## Methodology

Under the umbrella of qualitative research designs, a case study approach was selected, “which focuses on understanding the dynamics present within single settings” (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 534). Yin (2008) explains “a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 18). Conducting a single case study allowed the research team the opportunity to fully analyze all aspects of the study in depth.

**Sample and participant selection.** This qualitative case study began by identifying a school district and superintendent through the review of district profiles on the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education website. Once a district was identified, the strategies of purposeful and snowball sampling were used to identify school-level leaders, as well as additional district-level leaders. To mitigate the risk of coercion, the superintendent of the district was asked to name more people than needed for the research study sample, and research team members have kept confidential who was, in fact, approached for recruitment. To further assure confidentiality, an administrator’s decision regarding whether or not to participate in the research study was not shared with the superintendent.

**Data collection.** Data was collected primarily through semi-structured interviews and then supplemented by the gathering of documents recommended by participants during their interviews. The researchers used purposeful sampling for the identification and collection of relevant school and district documents. The collection and analysis of document data offered researchers the opportunity to crosscheck and verify interviewee responses, as well as the conclusions being drawn by the researchers as they engaged in data analysis. This process of verification supported the triangulation of data and thus strengthened the trustworthiness of the study’s findings and final conclusions.

**Data analysis.** This research study followed the three components of data analysis described by Miles and Huberman (1994): (a) data reduction, (b) data display, and (c) conclusion drawing/verification. Once data was entered into a

data display, several tactics were used to both draw and verify conclusions. Ultimately, the researchers aimed to draw conclusions that have been rigorously tested for “their plausibility, their sturdiness, their ‘confirmability’—that is, their validity” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.11).

## **Findings and Discussion**

The fourteen participants involved in this study shared their perspectives and revealed that they engaged in interactions that contributed to their understanding of the nature of the achievement gap. Some leaders in the New Hope School District recognized that disparities in student outcomes was “not a reflection of their potential nor their abilities—but a direct result of denying them equitable supports and resources they need to be fully engaged and succeed” (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012, p. 2). In turn, this understanding influenced their work focused on addressing disparities in student performance related to race/ethnicity, class, and/or disability. This was evident in both participant responses and a full review of documents.

This research study applied the distributed leadership theoretical framework to explore the following research questions: How do district- and school-level leaders understand disparities in student performance related to race/ethnicity, class and/or disability? How do these understandings then influence the work of leadership that focuses on addressing disparities in race/ethnicity, class, and/or disability? The distributed leadership framework allowed for a focus on interactions and the practice of leadership (Spillane, 2006; Spillane et al., 2004; Spillane et al., 2009, Spillane & Sherer, 2011). Specifically, the practice of leadership focused on the interactions of district- and school-level leaders and aspects of their work such as the tools and routines utilized to address disparities in student performance and broaden students’ opportunity to learn (Spillane, 2006; Spillane & Sherer, 2011).

In this study four researchers (Allwarden, 2014; Potenziano, 2014; Talukdar, 2014; Zaleski, 2014) explored how district- and school-level leaders’ understanding influenced the work of addressing barriers inhibiting students’ opportunity to learn. In an attempt to answer the overarching research questions,

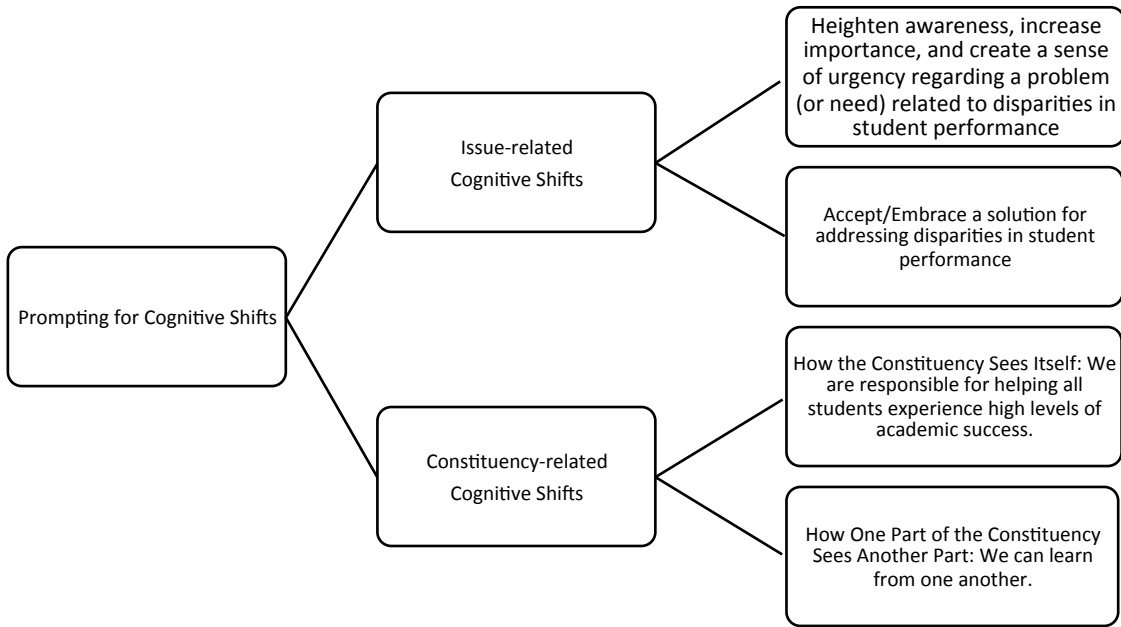
each researcher examined separate aspects of the central phenomenon, including:

- The specific shifts in thinking that district- and school-level leaders identified as needed before disparities in student performance related to race/ethnicity, class, and/or disability could be effectively addressed, as well as the strategies district- and school-level leaders used in their attempts to prompt these shifts in thinking (Allwarden, 2014).
- The professional learning leveraged by district-level leaders for school-level leaders as an action to further learn about, understand, and address the barriers that may be inhibiting students' opportunity to learn (Talukdar, 2014).
- The data analysis structures and routines that district- and school-level leaders perceived to be essential in understanding and addressing disparities in student performance related to race/ethnicity, class, and/or disability, as well as promoting students' opportunity to learn (Potenziano, 2014).
- The influence that interactions between district- and school-level leaders had on their understanding of barriers to students' opportunity to learn, as well as the influence that existing ties between district- and school-level leaders had on their practice aimed at improving students' opportunity to learn (Zaleski, 2014).

**Prompting cognitive shifts.** The findings from this portion of the case study include (a) district- and school-level leaders used a range of framing strategies to prompt a common set of issue- and constituency-related cognitive shifts and (b) a correlation existed between leaders' use of particular framing strategies and their "level" of leadership (Allwarden, 2014). The cognitive shifts that district- and school-level leaders were attempting to prompt are presented in Figure 1 and have been divided into two broad categories: issue- and constituency-related cognitive shifts.

Issue-related cognitive shifts focus on the problems and solutions related to student performance disparities. When attempting to prompt for issue-related cognitive shifts, district- and school-level leaders' choice of framing strategies revealed similarities and differences. Whereas both district- and school-level

**Figure 1.** Prompting for Cognitive Shifts



leaders used data to quantify and clarify the magnitude of a problem in order to heighten awareness, increase importance, and create a sense of urgency (e.g., data war rooms, data walls, excel spreadsheets—all color-coded to emphasize the distribution of students by achievement level), district- and school-level leaders differed in their use of framing strategies for getting their audience to accept a solution. District-level leaders focused on offering proof that an idea worked. For example, they frequently leveraged the success of the Level 1 school with implementing inclusive practices. District-level leaders also focused on explicitly establishing the direction (e.g., schools had to establish a data war room; principals had to spend 2.5-3 hours a day in classrooms). School-level leaders, on the other hand, concentrated on presenting solutions as best practice (e.g., students analyze their own data, set individual goals, and track their progress; teachers use performance data to inform their instruction and select appropriate interventions). Furthermore, data collected from leaders of Level 1 and Level 2 schools revealed that these leaders also focused on framing issues as having leverage (e.g., being strategic, focusing on and prioritizing the “right things”) and connecting solutions to their school’s mission.

Constituency-related cognitive shifts involve a change in how an audience views themselves, their work, or others within the school district. The framing strategies that district- and school-level leaders used to prompt constituency-related cognitive shifts were the same. In order to foster a sense of responsibility for helping *all* children experience high levels of academic success, leaders focused on redefining and re-envisioning the constituency's role and responsibilities within the organization (e.g., district-level leaders working side by side principals; principals spending 2.5-3 hours a day in classrooms; using data to inform instruction). In order to promote the idea that we can learn from one another, leaders concentrated on building and acknowledging the competency and capacity present within the constituency. While the framing strategies used by district- and school-level leaders were the same, important differences were noted regarding the cognitive shift that emphasized learning from one another. Whereas district-level leaders spoke of the schools learning from one another (e.g., communicating regularly, sharing successful practices), school-level leaders spoke of learning from individuals, or groups of individuals, within their school (e.g., data meetings, common planning time). Another notable difference emerged with the disaggregation of data collected from leaders of Level 1 and Level 2 schools. These leaders used the framing strategy of redefining the students' role and responsibility within the organization to prompt the following cognitive shift among students: we are capable (e.g., knowing their data, setting goals, tracking their progress).

**Social ties among leaders.** Social capital theory reminds us that the structure of ties relate to how knowledge and resources flow to individuals in the network (Daly & Finnigan, 2011), and are considered to be a determinant in actions (Daly & Finnigan, 2010, 2012; Leanna & Pil, 2006), and that trusting, cohesive, partnerships are an essential element to the tie relation (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Daly & Finnigan, 2011, 2012; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Therefore, strengthening

*"I WISH WE COULD COME TOGETHER MORE AS A COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP GROUP IN THE DISTRICT. WE'RE UNABLE TO. IT'S NOT THE CULTURE... YOU HAVE TO BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU SAY AND HOW YOU SAY IT AND WHEN YOU SAY IT; IT SOMETIMES CAN COME BACK AND GET YOU."*  
BUILDING LEADER JAYDEN

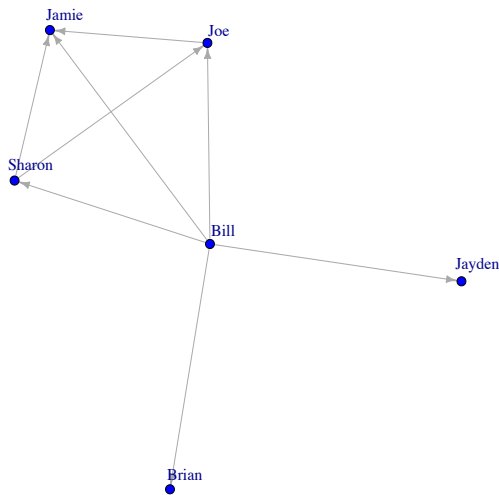
social ties is one way to improve collaboration among district- and school-level leaders. After analyzing the data, the existing social ties and their influence on leadership practice as it relates to students opportunity to learn became clearer. As such, the following findings emerged: (a) lack of trust hinders building level leader ties with one another, (b) district leaders have greater ties and reciprocity among themselves than building leaders, (c) despite specific building and district relations, ties are evident between district- and school-level leaders, and (d) regardless of tie relations, all leaders engage in tasks to enhance student learning (Zaleski, 2014).

***Lack of trust hinders building-level leader ties with one another.*** Figure 2 displays the first analysis of tie relations, which is the social network among building leaders. Each node represents one of the six interviewed building leaders and the arrows reflect the direction of the connection. Participant responses revealed that there are no mutual ties indicated in the group. Mutual ties in this study refer to an aspect of tie strength that involves a reciprocal sharing of information (Granovetter, 1973).

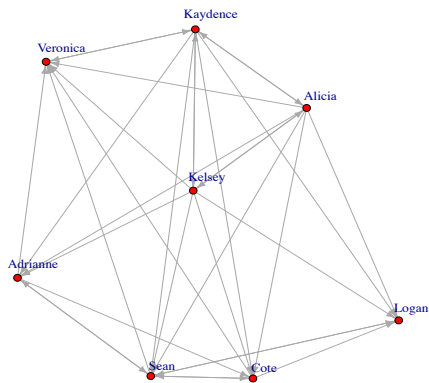
***District leaders have greater ties and reciprocity among themselves than building leaders.*** Relationships between district leaders are represented in Figure 3. Here, it is noted that there are greater ties than in the building leader network as well as greater reciprocity. However, of the eight district leaders interviewed, there are no more than three mutual ties between them. Trust was mentioned as a factor among half of the district leadership team. Further interview data reveals that despite the nature of building or central office specific relations, this does not hinder the interactions between school and district level leaders.

*“YEAH, I THINK PART OF IT YOU BUILD TRUST AS YOU GET TO KNOW PEOPLE...I ALREADY KNEW VERONICA COMING INTO THE POSITION ALREADY, AND I’VE LEARNED OVER THE PAST TWO YEARS TO HAVE A LOT MORE TRUST FOR SEAN, LOGAN, AND COTE...I THINK THIS GROUP HAS A GOOD WORKING DYNAMIC. I MEAN, DO WE GO BACK AND FORTH WITH EACH OTHER SOMETIMES ON SOME MATTERS, OF COURSE WE DO, BUT JUST OUT OF FRUSTRATION FOR THE WHOLE JOB AND LACK OF RESOURCES.”*  
DISTRICT LEADER ADRIANNE

**Figure 2.** Sociogram for School-Level Leaders



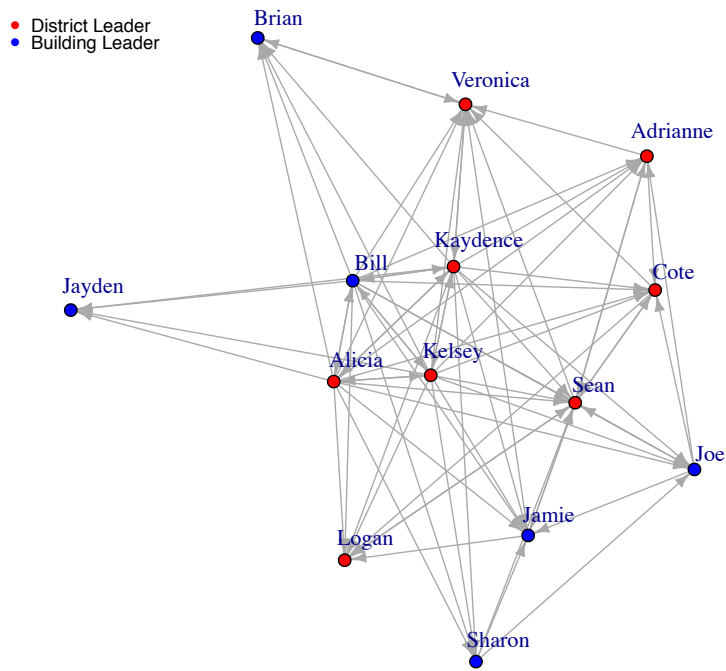
**Figure 3.** Sociogram for District-Level Leaders



***Despite specific building and district relations, ties are evident between district- and school-level leaders.*** Despite the fact that trust impacts at least half of the relations at the school and district level, Figure 4 highlights that all building leaders have incoming ties from at least three district leaders. Figure 4 also highlights that more than half of the district leadership team is actively seeking out building leaders. Also, all five-district leaders engaging with principals share at least one mutual tie with a building leader. Similarly, four of the six building



**Figure 4.** Sociogram for District- and School-Level Leaders



leaders (with the exception of Sharon and Jayden) revealed that they are seeking out district leaders to exchange knowledge, ideas, and seek advice. The two leaders not seeking out district leaders attribute this to a perception that central office has too much on their plate and other resources are more easily accessible at the building level.

*"I GUESS PART OF IT IS THEY ARE PEERS OF MINE AND IT'S A NATURAL WAY FOR ME TO KIND OF EXPAND THE KNOWLEDGE THAT I NEED BY WORKING WITH THEM, AND PROBABLY PART OF IT IS PROXIMITY. THEY'RE HERE IN THE SAME OFFICE WITH ME, I CAN SIT IN MY OFFICE AND SCRATCH MY HEAD AND TRY TO FIGURE IT OUT OR I COULD WALK DOWN THE HALL AND TRY TO BRAINSTORM AND TRY TO BRAINSTORM IT WITH THEM."*

DISTRICT LEADER COTE

## Complementary Findings

The following discussion synthesizes insights drawn from the four individual studies. These insights were gained by searching for complementary results based on the “complementarity model of triangulation” (Erzberger & Kelle, 2003, p.469). Applying the complementarity model of triangulation involved reviewing the individual studies for findings that complemented one another. Because the complementary findings were drawn from individual studies that highlighted different aspects of the central phenomenon, these findings offer a stronger depiction of the topic being analyzed (Erzberger & Kelle, 2003) and further inform current understandings about the work of leadership focused on addressing disparities in student performance and enhancing students’ opportunity to learn.

**Level 3 status: Catalyst for change.** Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) emphasized that initiating change often triggers cyclical patterns of acquiring knowledge and taking action. Insights from across the studies revealed that the designation of Level 3 state accountability status served as a catalyst for change in the New Hope School District. The assignment of Level 3 status led to the development of new organizational structures and routines, which, in turn, supported patterns of acquiring knowledge and taking action (Allwarden, 2014; Potenziano, 2014; Talukdar, 2014; Zaleski, 2014). Specifically, the development of new organizational structures and routines led to (a) increased opportunities for leaders to interact with one another (Zaleski, 2014) and (b) enhanced opportunities for leaders to engage in professional learning (Talukdar, 2014). Furthermore, since the structures and routines described by district- and school-level leaders occurred regularly (e.g., weekly, monthly, quarterly), leaders were provided with ongoing support as they grappled with understanding—or further developing their understanding—of barriers hindering students’ opportunity to learn (Allwarden, 2014; Potenziano, 2014; Talukdar, 2014; Zaleski, 2014). Additionally, the development of new

*“THE DSAC TEAM ASSISTED THE DISTRICT BY MEETING WITH SCHOOL AND DISTRICT LEADERS MONTHLY, AND SOMETIMES MORE OFTEN, AND HAS SUPPORTED AND ASSISTED US WITH COLLABORATING, ANALYZING DATA, AND CREATING THE ACCELERATED IMPROVEMENT PLAN.”*  
DISTRICT LEADER SEAN

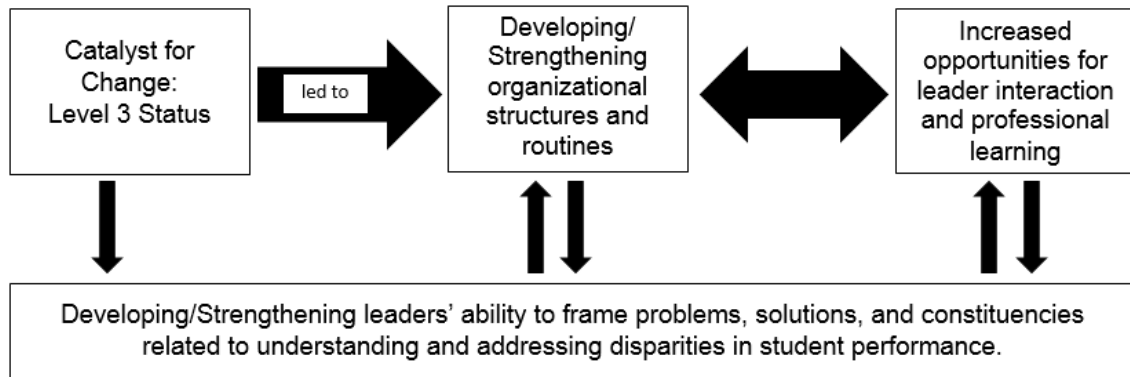
organizational structures and routines provided leaders with a forum for presenting their plans for addressing disparities in student performance, as well as presenting the outcomes that resulted from actions taken.

Figure 5 depicts the relationship between the catalyst for change, the development of organizational structures and routines, and the increased opportunities for leader interaction and professional learning (Potenziano, 2014; Talukdar, 2014; Zaleski, 2014). Figure 5 also illustrates the relationship between these three elements and leaders' ability to frame problems, solutions and constituencies related to disparities in student performance (Allwarden, 2014). While the individual researchers of this study looked at specific aspects of leadership in isolation, Figure 5 offers a broader, more complete picture of how these elements interacted and influenced one another in real life.

As a result of the Level 3 status, district-level leaders sought out and established a partnership with the District and School Assistance Center (DSAC), a state sponsored organization. This partnership led to the establishment of new structures and routines which afforded on-going opportunities to conduct in-depth analyses of (a) disparities in student performance, (b) barriers in the learning environment, and (c) organizational challenges related to students' opportunity to learn. Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) emphasize the importance of analyzing situations in an objective fashion and framing issues from a different perspective when working to address long-standing disparities in student performance. The partnership with DSAC led to the construction of structures and the development of routines that supported this aspect of leadership work.

As leaders came together to analyze disparities in student performance, barriers in the learning environment, and organizational challenges related to students' opportunity to learn, the professional learning environment within the district was further enhanced. The interactions that took place within this learning environment between district- and school-level leaders were examined as a critical element relating to school improvement (Daly & Finnigan, 2010, 2011, 2012). The superintendent's statement captures the value of these interactions when he offered, "The DSAC team assisted the district by meeting with school

**Figure 5.** The Interrelationship of Elements Studied



and district leaders monthly, and sometimes more often, and has supported and assisted us with collaborating, analyzing data, and creating the Accelerated Improvement Plan (AIP).” Frequently, interactions between district- and school-level leaders occurred during Administrative Council (ADCO), Full Administrative Council (FADCO), and traveling cabinet meetings (Zaleski, 2014). These meetings offered leaders regular opportunities to engage in professional learning that enhanced their capacity to (a) identify and describe gaps in student performance and (b) consider and explore potential barriers to student learning (Talukdar, 2014). In other words, these meetings offered leaders opportunities “to engage in continuous and sustained learning about their practice in the setting where they actually work...confronting similar problems of practice” (Elmore, 2004, p. 127).

Finnigan and Daly (2010) remind us that sharing knowledge and mobilizing resources embedded in individual interactions is critical to influencing practice and enhancing success in “purposive action” (p. 180). The assignment of Level 3 status triggered the mobilizing of resources to develop new structures and routines, which then enhanced leaders’ ability to share knowledge and take purposive action (Allwarden, 2014; Potenziano, 2014; Zaleski, 2014). The actions taken were deliberate (thought about and discussed), developmental (designed to assist with growth and bring about improvement), and progressive (kept moving forward), always with the intent of ensuring that students’ opportunity to learn was enhanced. These actions supported understanding student

performance disparities and informing solutions to address barriers to students' opportunity to learn.

The leaders in New Hope School District also used organizational routines and structures to help distribute leadership responsibilities (Spillane, 2006). Prior to the Level 3 designation, structures and routines were in place that required district- and school-level leaders to meet. However, leaders were not required to collectively identify and develop a shared understanding of achievement disparities. Following Level 3 designation, enhanced and newly created structures and routines helped promote collaboration and build robust intra-organizational ties (Chrispeels, 2004; Honig, 2004; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). The use of the structures and routines also played a critical role in guiding the New Hope School District in their development of a clearly aligned vision and mission (Harris, Leithwood, Day, Sammons & Hopkins, 2007; Waters & Marzano, 2006).

**Structures and routines led to shared understandings and collective action.** New Hope School District leaders described specific structures and routines that had been set in place to support collaboration between district- and school-level leaders, as well as to support data use practices. The Administrative Council (ADCO), Full Administrative Council (FADCO), traveling cabinet, DSAC meetings, and the Accelerated

## PARTICIPANT QUOTES

*"AS AN ADMINISTRATIVE LEADERSHIP GROUP... WE'VE DONE, LET'S SEE MONTHLY MEETINGS.... CERTAINLY TALKING ABOUT THE DATA, TALKING ABOUT THE IMPLICATIONS OF DATA....THEN, OKAY, HOW DOES THIS TRANSLATE INTO WHAT YOUR TEACHERS ARE DOING IN THE CLASSROOM."*  
BUILDING LEADER BILL

*"IF I'VE LEARNED ANYTHING IN MY TIME HERE, EACH SCHOOL IS A FUNCTION OF THEIR PRINCIPAL, THE LEADERSHIP CULTURE AT THEIR SCHOOL....I THINK NOW WITH THIS ACCELERATED IMPROVEMENT PLAN WHICH WE ARE IN YEAR TWO OF, I THINK IT WILL HELP MOST OF THESE LEVEL 3 SCHOOLS MOVE UP AT LEAST ONE LEVEL....I'M CONFIDENT THEY CAN MOVE UP FROM AT LEAST THREE TO TWO."*  
DISTRICT LEADER LOGAN

Improvement Plan (AIP) are examples of structures and routines put in place to support collaboration and data use among district- and school-level leaders (Allwarden, 2014; Potenziano, 2014; Zaleski, 2014). In addition, these structures allowed leaders to engage in ongoing professional learning (Talukdar, 2014). Spillane (2006) describes this leadership practice as “a product of the joint interactions of school *leaders, followers*, and aspects of their *situation* such as tools and routines” (p. 3).

According to the distributed leadership framework, the structures used within the New Hope School District can be thought of as tools and routines because they involved recurring patterns of “interdependent actions, involving multiple actors” (Feldman & Pentland, 2003, p. 311). For instance, the traveling cabinet structure supported the routine of leaders meeting regularly to engage in ongoing professional learning that involved the frequent review and analysis of student performance data (Potenziano, 2014; Talukdar, 2014). Established structures and routines also sought to allow district-and school-level leaders to develop an understanding of the opportunity gaps present in the learning environment (Allwarden, 2014; Zaleski, 2014). The action planning template and the AIP that leaders created in partnership with DSAC facilitated this understanding (Zaleski, 2014). As a result, leaders’ ability to recognize barriers was evident in the areas of leadership skills, curriculum alignment and implementation, and instructional practice. More specifically, leaders identified barriers specific to students with disabilities, students from low-income households, Latino/a students, and English language learners (ELL). Additionally, the implementation of enhanced and newly developed structures and routines helped to expose inequitable practices in the New Hope School District.

*“THE SCHOOLS WE’RE STILL STRUGGLING WITH, YOU MAY HEAR [PRINCIPALS] SEPARATE OUT ONE POPULATION OF STUDENTS FROM ANOTHER, BUT THE SCHOOLS THAT WERE A SUCCESS, LIKE I SAID WITH THE DATA, THEY’RE ALL INCORPORATED IN; IT’S ALL STUDENTS ALL THE TIME. AND THERE’S A BIG SHIFT IN THE DISTRICT AROUND INCLUSIVE TEACHING.”*

DISTRICT LEADER ADRIANNE

District- and school-level leaders interviewed consistently referred to students receiving special education as the sub-group most impacted by the achievement gap in the New Hope School District. Research findings revealed that one of the barriers to student learning for students with special needs was inequitable access to the general education curriculum (Allwarden, 2014; Potenziano, 2014; Talukdar, 2014; Zaleski, 2014). Greene (1983) explains that equality in education focuses on “inputs” and ensures that the same is provided to all, while equity places emphasis on “outputs” and focuses on achieving the same outcomes for all. Lindsey et al. (2009) contend accommodations that account for differences, such as race and ethnicity, language, and ability are sometimes needed in order to achieve educational equity.

Students receiving special education services in the New Hope School District were often educated in separate settings. Research evidence revealed there were some schools that deliberately encouraged equitable learning environments for special education students. When comparing schools across the district, data indicated that schools utilizing co-teaching and inclusion models earned higher state accountability ratings than those that did not. By focusing on differentiating instruction to meet the needs of all students within the general education classroom, leaders within the New Hope School District believed that school staff were moving closer to creating educational equity while improving students’ opportunity to learn.

When examining how district-level leaders sought to leverage professional learning opportunities in the New Hope School District, leaders took advantage of improved structures and routines resulting from the DSAC partnership (Potenziano, 2014; Talukdar, 2014). Knapp (2003) reported “professional learning could involve changes in one’s capacity for practice (i.e., changes in professionally relevant thinking, knowledge, skills, and habits of mind) and/or changes in practice itself (enacting the new knowledge and skills in one’s daily work)” (pp. 112-113). New structures and routines, such as traveling cabinet meetings, not only resulted in increased interaction between leaders, but also offered occasions for leaders to build their data analysis and decision-making capacity (Talukdar, 2014; Zaleski, 2014). Further, structures and routines promoted sustained, job-embedded professional learning (e.g., ADCO, FADCO, and traveling cabinet

meetings, learning walks, and 9-day instructional coaching cycle) and allowed for frequent collaboration and discussion of factors influencing teaching and learning (Potenziano, 2014; Talukdar, 2014; Zaleski, 2014). Given the evidence of deficit thinking that existed among some school staff, particularly as it related to special education students, district leaders also sought to leverage professional learning to prompt cognitive shifts (Talukdar, 2014).

As district- and school-level leaders' understanding developed, so did their ability to influence how others understood factors contributing to disparities in student performance related to race/ethnicity, class, and/or disability. Influencing how others understand a situation is a critical aspect of leadership work, and the ability to effectively frame the problems, solutions, and constituencies related to disparities in student performance becomes a powerful means for shifting the thinking of others. After all, when effectively done, influencing how others understand a situation can positively impact individuals' perceptions of their work and provide a powerful source of inspiration and motivation (Awamleh & Gardner, 1999; Foldy, Goldman & Ospina, 2008).

The interactions and professional learning that occurred among leaders as a result of the structures and routines that were in place not only led to an understanding of the nature of the gap, it also led to an influence on their work, which focused on addressing disparities in student performance (Potenziano, 2014; Talukdar, 2014; Zaleski, 2014). Specifically, leaders recognized that ongoing data analysis was critical to teaching and learning improvements. The task of analyzing data was distributed among all leaders for the specific purpose of improving the professional capacity to identify gaps in learning with the goal of eliminating barriers. For instance, when looking at data, one building leader recognized that low-income and Latino students lacked opportunities pertaining to course placement; it was then brought to the attention of a district leader who subsequently mandated that all students take at least one Advanced Placement course prior to graduation. Similarly, as a result of student performance data analysis, several building-based accelerated improvement plans were strategically created and utilized as tools across the district to enhance the learning environment.



The Accelerated Improvement Plans included specific initiatives and objectives that were designed by school and district leaders as tools to guide their work in an effort to eliminate identified barriers and enhance student opportunities to learn. Harris, Leithwood, Day, Sammons, and Hopkins (2007) remind us that school improvement based on a distributed leadership model is not automatic, rather, “much depends on the way in which leadership is distributed, how it is distributed and for what purpose” (p. 9). The strategic approach utilized to address barriers in the learning environment in the New Hope School District as mentioned above reinforces that they subscribed to a distributed leadership model. It is clearly indicated that school and district leaders have gained an understanding of barriers in the learning environment pertaining to low-income students, as well as students with disabilities, as a result of their interactions with one another. However, further data reveals that despite these interactions some school leaders need additional support as they work to continually understand and address barriers in the learning environment.

**School leaders need more central office support.** During interviews some of the school level leaders indicated that they need more support from district level leaders regarding data analysis. District leader Kelsey acknowledged that district level leaders tend to assume everyone including administrators knows how to use data, and she further offered:

We need to make sure that everybody understands what it is that we're analyzing, and exactly what a particular tool is able to do for us. So if we're looking at benchmarks in fluencies, people need to be aware that we are looking at fluency, and just fluency, and then extrapolating from that what that means, okay, that people need to understand what that can do for you and what it can't do for you.

Daly and Finnigan (2010, 2011) emphasize that schools are rooted in the wider efforts of the district, and district-level leaders may have a direct influence on change initiatives and outcomes through the development of network ties between district- and school-level leaders. In an effort to examine leader connectedness and its relation to the performance of leadership tasks (Borgatti, Jones, & Everett, 1998), ties and relations among leaders was examined.

**Student learning is enhanced regardless of tie relations.** District- and school-level leaders revealed that they are engaging in a variety of practices to enhance students' opportunity to learn at the school and district level. This was evident regardless of whether or not trusting ties were formulated and existent between individuals (Zaleski, 2014). For example, to prompt shifts in thinking and practice among principals and school staff, district leaders fostered and leveraged professional learning activities (Talukdar, 2014). Interview responses suggested professional learning played a role in the way some thought about and in-turn approached their work with particular sub-groups of students (e.g., students with disabilities).

In addition, some district- and school-level leaders appeared more willing to learn from the best practices of schools realizing academic growth. One of the ways in which these educators were able to learn more about successful schools was through professional learning activities (e.g., book studies, belief surveys, case studies, and resource sharing) (Talukdar, 2014). For example, although Jamie shared no outgoing tie connections with building leaders, she acknowledged that she engaged in efforts with Bill and Joe to create a school within her school to address students and subgroups with risk factors such as poor attendance, retention, and high discipline referrals (Zaleski, 2014).

The systems and structures (ADCO, FADCO, traveling cabinet) are supporting leaders with enhancing students' opportunity to learn across the district. One school in the district did move from a Level 2 to Level 1 status last year; this is the highest performance rating assigned by the state. District leaders are diligently working with principals to close gaps in performance via the structures in place, and district leader Sean is working with principals on improvement planning at the building level. District leader Alicia also works with principals on attendance, dropout rates, and graduation rates within a four-year period of time. Although there was a lack of tie relations at the building and district level, this did not result in initiatives being stalled (Zaleski, 2014). Rather, despite the nature of relations in the New Hope School District, the organizational structures in place resulted in both building and district leaders being actively engaged in practices that were intended to support enhancing students' opportunity to learn (Allwarden, 2014; Potenziano, 2014; Talukdar, 2014; Zaleski, 2014).

## **Recommendations for Practice**

First and foremost, we recommend that the New Hope School District keep organizational structures intact. ADCO, FADCO, and the traveling cabinet offer building leaders direct oversight and support from central office leaders. Spillane (2013) states that the advantages of organizational structures and routines are that they “allow efficient coordinated action; [provide] a source of stability; and reduce conflict about how to do work”. Furthermore, the use of organizational structures and routines that district- and school-level leaders institute has significant potential to enhance students’ opportunity to learn. This was best evidenced in the New Hope School District when district- and school-level leaders analyzed student data with uniformity resulting in at least one school narrowing achievement gaps and advancing to Level 1 status. School districts that embrace these types of structures and routines increase the likelihood that interaction among administrators will take place which will allow knowledge and resources to flow through the network of leaders, ultimately informing the work of practitioners (Daly & Finnigan, 2010). Sustainability is also likely enhanced when these structures and routines are in place. Hargreaves and Fink (2006) emphasize “sustainable leadership matters [as it] preserves, protects, and promotes deep and broad learning for all in relationships of care for others” (p. 23). In an effort to enhance relations, increase support from central office leaders to building leaders, and enhance success at the building level, it is recommended that the district consider creating prescribed structures/routines that require school-level leaders to visit each other’s schools to analyze data together and share successful practices. In doing so, school-level leaders are also less likely to feel unsupported and isolated from one another.

Varying tie relations may be a result of competitive pressure at the local level to perform and meet accountability demands (Zaleski, 2014). Daly (2009) points out that as a result of high stakes accountability, relations between school and district leaders tend to become less collaborative and more official and organized. One way to remedy this is by fostering the professional growth of leaders and differentiating supports for principals depending on their needs as instructional leaders. Daly and Finnigan (2010) highlight that “leadership development programs both outside and within districts have the unique opportunity to create the space for reflection and dialogue for leaders to explore these tensions and

how they may be brought into balance” (p. 520). Therefore, it is essential that school districts add a component to their existing professional development plans that specifically promote the building of relationships among leaders across the district in a way that supports collaboration (Talukdar, 2014; Zaleski, 2014). The National Institute for School Leadership Program (NISL) is one example of a program designed to assist leaders with collaborating and enhancing their skills in the face of accountability demands (NISL, 2013). Participation in the NISL program also holds the potential to increase the social capital among leaders and assist with policy implementation at the local level (Daly & Finnigan, 2010).

District-level leaders should also consider creating opportunities for school-level leaders to strengthen relations and formulate new ties (Zaleski, 2014). Allowing leaders’ time to meet and discuss building based concerns without a central office driven agenda may enhance relations as well. Daly and Finnigan (2010) point out in a related study “district[s] will have to avoid the trap of merely providing time and directives to work together as this does not necessarily result in meaningful collaboration between leaders” (p.128). Therefore, practitioners should heed the advice of DuFour and Burnette (2002) by insisting that principals develop improvement plans demonstrating the collective efforts of the team and not merely the work of individuals.

Enhancing connections at the district level will assist with building relations across the district, ultimately improving the overall school climate (Zaleski, 2014). Curtis and City (2009) agree that collaboration is critical and begins at the central office level stating:

Central office departments create teams to do their work most effectively. The superintendent convenes a senior leadership team to shape and drive the direction of the system’s work. Effective collaboration is critical to success at all levels of the organization. Yet the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for collaboration are seldom taught. It is deeply ironic that a skill students need to ensure their future opportunities is one that the adults responsible for their education often do not possess and have not had the opportunity to learn (p. 38).

In order for the central office team to be considered high functioning, there must be a “high level of trust, a willingness to be vulnerable, and comfort with conflict” (Curtis & City, 2009, p.56). District leaders are encouraged to implement and facilitate team-building activities to work on strengthening partnerships with each other. Incorporating time on meeting agendas for district- and school-level leaders to engage in activities focused on developing authentic relationships is a suggested activity (Curtis & City, 2009). For instance, Curtis and City (2009) suggest leaders complete the Meyers & Briggs Personality Inventory and share results in an effort to enhance relations and build trust. Hargreaves and Fink (2006) emphasize that “investing resources in training, trust building, and teamwork” (p. 267) is a function of sustainable leadership that has long lasting effects.

District leaders should consider expanding liaison support to all principals, and not limit this resource to struggling schools alone (Zaleski, 2014). Honig et al. (2010) point out that central office staff can engage in efforts to support the teaching and learning environment entirely by “taking the case management and project management approaches to their work”(p. 7). Honig et al. (2010) emphasize that the case management approach enables district leaders to utilize their expertise to fully support “the specific needs, strengths, goals, and character of each individual school in their case load” with the goal of working to provide “high-quality, responsive services appropriate to their individual schools”(p. 8). Likewise, the project management approach results in district leaders directly “solving problems that promised to help schools engage in teaching and learning, even if those problems cut across multiple central office units” (p. 8).

District-level leaders should also consider expanding professional learning opportunities intended to eliminate deficit thinking within the district (Talukdar, 2014). The New Hope School District superintendent took positive steps to support principals in their efforts to dismantle deficit thinking and enhance some of the skills needed to assume responsibility for teaching and learning improvements. Moving forward, the superintendent must deepen the dialogue around instructional issues beyond data review. In light of the success of schools that ensured students with disabilities had full access to the curriculum,

consideration should be given to expanding the full-inclusion teaching model across the district.

Consideration should also be given to implementing multicultural and anti-racist professional learning opportunities in order to continue to prompt shifts in teacher beliefs. While anti-racist and multicultural education are closely related in the goal to improve student outcomes, Kailin (1998) believes that multicultural education is a non-threatening way to address gaps in student performance because it is focused around building teachers' and students' cultural awareness rather than tackling structural aspects of racism. Kailin (1998) further argues that an anti-racist approach to education must focus on the deliberate dismantling of racism whereas multicultural education strives to broaden teachers' understanding of the diverse histories of students they serve as a means to empower them. It is important to note, however, that ultimately multicultural education and anti-racism both seek raise the academic achievement of students of color while nurturing the growth of all students. By implementing multicultural and anti-racist professional learning opportunities, administrators of the New Hope School District will be better equipped to learn about, understand and address the undeniable correlation between students' race and ethnicity and disparities in student performance.

There are prevailing approaches to multicultural and anti-racist professional development and learning that espouse to reduce the achievement gap while transforming teacher beliefs (Ferguson, 2007; Howard, 2007; Singleton & Linton, 2006; Skrla, McKenzie & Scheurich, 2009). Ferguson (2007) is responsible for putting forth a conceptual framework titled the Tripod Project, which aims to close the achievement gap by addressing the three legs of the "tripod": content, pedagogy and relationships. He argues that in order to reduce achievement gaps, content must be accessible and culturally relevant, pedagogy must involve varied approaches to meeting students' needs, and teachers must develop meaningful relationships with students while maintaining high expectations for ALL students. Skrla et al. (2009) describe the need to use Equity Audits as a means to creating equitable and excellent schools. They contend that by assessing the equity and inequity of programs, as well as teacher quality and achievement, school leaders will be better prepared to develop an action plan that uncompromisingly

promotes educational equity. They describe particular skills teachers must develop to improve their practice that include clearly communicating expectations, stimulating students with high-level tasks, and using an asset-based approach when working with diverse populations.

While experienced, high-quality teachers within the New Hope School District may already possess many of the skills needed to serve most students effectively, Singleton and Linton (2006) argue that in order to reduce the “racial” achievement gap, educators must be willing to engage in courageous conversations about race. Additionally, they and many others (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Gay & Howard, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Lawrence & Tatum, 1997; Nieto, 2000; Tatum, 1997) believe it is critical for teachers to explore their own racial identities and consider how it affects their teaching of students, particularly students of color (i.e., Asian American, Hispanic/Latino, Black/African-American, Multiracial and Native American). The research of Singleton and Linton (2006) indicates when white teachers were able to relate to their diverse students experiences, and as they developed cultural awareness or competence, a narrowing of the achievement gap occurred. Given over 90% of administrators and teachers in the New Hope School District are white while over 60% of students identify as students of color, and in light of the existing racial achievement gap as measured across three performance indicators (i.e., state achievement tests, graduation rates, and SAT performance reports), serious consideration should be given to implementing multicultural and anti-racist professional learning opportunities.

### **Recommendations for Policy Makers**

Cohesive relations between school and district leaders are often hindered by accountability policy demands (Daly 2009). This often complicates the job of leaders trying to effect change in schools (Zaleski, 2014). Daly and Finnigan (2010) point out that “effectively responding to state and federal accountability policies at the local level may require a more collaborative relationship among and between central office and school administrators to allow for the diffusion of innovation and knowledge”(p.131). In an effort to strike this balance, district leaders need to develop systems and structures to enhance collaboration within school districts (Potenziano, 2014; Zaleski, 2014). New Hope School District

leaders implemented structures to support collaboration in an effort to enhance students' opportunity to learn. Their efforts yielded evidence that some schools were making progress. This supports the research claim that school culture, namely interactions, is a valuable consideration when enhancing student opportunities to learn. Policy makers should be mindful of this consideration and recognize that accountability demands alone do not promote equitable student opportunities to learn (Harris & Herrington, 2006).

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

While this study contributed to theoretical knowledge and provided a practical contribution to the field of education, future research areas must be noted. First, conducting an exploration of interactions among leaders using an external social capital lens (Leana & Pil, 2006) may prove beneficial. The external partnership with DSAC in this study was instrumental in assisting leaders with responding to accountability demands beyond standardized testing through the development of the Accelerated Improvement Plan. A deeper exploration of external partnerships may yield findings in relation to the importance of these relations when attempting to enhance students' opportunity to learn. Second, an examination of which structures and routines district- and school-level leaders perceive to be important when analyzing student data in multiple districts on a larger scale may prove beneficial. Third, future research should include multiple districts with similar demographics in an effort to gain a more comprehensive and generalizable understandings of how district- and school-level leaders seek to understand and address disparities in student performance.

Finally, because the research team members sought to understand how district- and school-level leaders learned about, understood, and addressed barriers to students' opportunities to learn, interviews were limited to district- and school-level leaders. This had potential implications for the overall conclusions drawn. Future research efforts involving staff at all levels could help to address this limitation and assist in uncovering the true impact of efforts aimed at eliminating barriers to students' opportunity to learn.



## **Conclusion**

The literature portrays a multifaceted depiction of how many factors have the potential to impact district- and school-level leaders understanding of the nature of the gap and how these understandings then influence the work leadership focused on addressing disparities in student performance. It was the intent of the research team to enhance insight in this area for practitioners. It is evident that leaders' interactions and framing of events coupled with how they practice has the potential to enhance the school climate and increase students' opportunities to learn (Allwarden, 2014; Potenziano, 2014; Talukdar, 2014; Zaleski, 2014). Additionally, the purposeful distribution of leadership work provides the opportunity to enhance collaboration and collective action (Allwarden, 2014; Potenziano, 2014; Talukdar, 2014; Zaleski, 2014). Conversely, without proper district-level leadership and leader distribution, effectively addressing disparities in student performance may be hindered.

## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to extend deep gratitude to my greatest cheerleaders in life, my parents, Sabiha and Dulal Talukdar, and my sister, Nadina Talukdar. From as early as I can remember, my parents emphasized the value of education; repeatedly driving home the message that it would be the key to success in life and would continuously open doors for my sister and me. It is because of my parents that I ultimately decided to pursue a career in education as well as doctoral studies. My success has been in great part due to the unrelenting support of my parents and sister. Whether it was watching my son when I attended class, sending home cooked meals so I could save time and focus on my studies, or simply asking how things were going, your love was unconditional and unparalleled. For all of that and more, I am eternally grateful.

I thank the greatest love of my life, my son Jonathan D. White, Jr. who serves as my inspiration and motivates me to be the best person, mother, and learner I can be. I hope someday you will understand that anything worth having must be approached with dedication, passion, respect, care, honesty, and discipline.

None of this would have been possible without my dissertation committee. To my chairperson, Dr. Diana Pullin, possibly one of the smartest, most intellectually intimidating, yet down to earth and witty person I know who provided me with the guidance and expertise needed to reach the finish line; Dr. Maryellen Brunelle who provided endless words of encouragement and, through her role as a superintendent, served as a reminder of the practical value of my research; and Dr. David Scanlon for his constructive and thoughtful feedback during the multiple phases of the writing process. Thanks to you all for helping me keep my eyes on the prize.

I would like to thank my dissertation team members, Ann F. Allwarden, Phillip J. Potenziano and Karen J. Zaleski. I have learned so much from each one of you about determination, hard work, collaboration, and perhaps most importantly perseverance. Each one of you brought particular skills and experiences that made learning and working together not only meaningful, but a joy. Indeed, this dissertation in practice is a culmination of our collective efforts over a long period of time and would not have reached completion without you.

Finally, thank you to my “support team”—my extended family and closest friends who I turn to for friendship, love and support, and also to keep me grounded so I can successfully reach my personal and professional goals. You each know who you are, and I understand I would not have reached the end of this doctoral journey without each one of you.

## Table of Contents

Chapter One, Introduction .....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	1
Research Questions.....	4
Chapter Two, Literature Review.....	7
Historical Context.....	7
Opportunity to Learn (OTL).....	10
The Challenge of Defining and Measuring OTL.....	12
Theoretical Framework.....	15
Chapter Three, Methods.....	20
Qualitative Research .....	20
Case Study .....	22
Sample and Participant Selection.....	23
Data Collection .....	31
Data Analysis .....	36
The Use of Triangulation .....	43
Reliability and Validity.....	45
Researcher Bias and Assumptions .....	46
Chapter Four, Description.....	47
Overview of the New Hope Public School District .....	48
Disparities in Student Performance .....	52
Chapter Five, Opportunity to Learn: The Role of Professional Learning .....	61

Statement of Purpose .....	61
Relevant Background.....	61
Methods.....	69
Research Participants .....	70
Data Collection .....	70
Data Analysis .....	73
Results.....	75
Superintendent Initiated Capacity Building.....	75
Third-Party Capacity Building.....	83
Encouraging Responsibility for School Success.....	92
Collaboration.....	101
Discussion.....	103
Chapter Six, Discussion and Recommendations .....	112
Complementary Findings.....	114
Recommendations for Practice .....	123
Recommendations for Policy Makers.....	129
Recommendations for Future Research .....	130
Overarching Study Limitations.....	131
Conclusion .....	132
References.....	133
Appendix A.....	169
District-level Leader Interview Questions .....	169

School-level Leader Interview Questions..... 170

## List of Tables and Figures

### Tables

<b>Table 3.1.</b>	Tactics for Drawing and Verifying Conclusions	42
<b>Table 4.1.</b>	New Hope District- and School-level Leaders	50
<b>Table 4.2.</b>	Percentage of Students Scoring Proficient or Higher on the State Test	51
<b>Table 4.3.</b>	Four Year Graduation Rate	58
<b>Table 4.4.</b>	Performance of New Hope Students in Reading and Mathematics on the SAT	60
<b>Table 5.1.</b>	Interview Questions for Professional Learning	72
<b>Table 5.2.</b>	Sample Description of Codes	74
<b>Table 5.3.</b>	Professional Learning Opportunities Available to District- and School-Level Leaders	76

### Figures

<b>Figure 1.1</b>	Developing an In-depth Understanding of the Central Phenomenon	5
<b>Figure 3.1</b>	Single-case Study (Yin, 2008, p.18)	24
<b>Figure 3.2</b>	Sequence of Interview Process	33
<b>Figure 3.3</b>	Traditional Data Analysis Sequence	44
<b>Figure 3.4</b>	Modified Traditional Data Analysis Sequence	44
<b>Figure 4.1</b>	PPI Scores from the 2012-2013 School Year	52
<b>Figure 4.2</b>	New Hope School District's ELA MCAS Results	54
<b>Figure 4.3</b>	New Hope School District's Mathematics MCAS Results	54
<b>Figure 6.1</b>	The Interrelationship of Elements Studied	115

# Chapter One<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

### Statement of the Problem

The most recent “report cards” from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) highlight enduring and substantial achievement gaps. In these reports, disaggregated data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reveal statistically significant discrepancies between the performance of African-American and Hispanic students and their White, non-Hispanic peers (NCES, 2011a, 2011b). Equally large performance gaps separate low-income from middle- to high-income students (NCES, 2011a, 2011b). And, although less attention has been focused on measuring, monitoring, and reporting changes experienced by English language learners (ELL) and students with disabilities (SD), considerable performance gaps also exist for these student populations (NCES, 2011a, 2011b).<sup>1</sup> Equally alarming, national data exposes sizable differences in graduation rates when presented by race/ethnicity. For example, while the graduation rate for White, non-Hispanic students reaches 82%, the graduation rates for African-American and Hispanic students are at 63.5% and 65.9% respectively (Stillwell, Sable, & Plotts, 2011). These on-going, statistically-significant disparities raise critical questions regarding educational equity and students’ opportunity to learn within the public school system.

While the reporting of disaggregated data by student subgroup ensures “a focus on the extent to which an achievement gap exists” (Shaul & Ganson, 2005, p. 152), it fails to provide district- and school-level leaders with the descriptive, diagnostic data

---

<sup>1</sup> Chapter One was co-authored by Ann F. Allwarden, Phillip J. Potenziano, Sujan S. Talukdar, and Karen J. Zaleski.



needed to identify key factors inhibiting student performance (Braun, 2005; Stecher, 2005). Identifying and understanding factors hindering student performance is critical knowledge for leaders to cultivate as they work to address elements within their school or district that may need to change if student learning is to improve. Boykin and Noguera (2011) also emphasize the need for educators to develop a deep understanding of these underlying complexities, warning:

Before undertaking efforts to eliminate the disparities in outcomes that, in most districts, correspond to the race and class backgrounds of students...it is essential that educators understand the nature of the gap and why it exists. Absent a clear understanding of the causes of the gap, it is easy for schools to adopt strategies that either do not work or, in some cases, even exacerbate the problem (p. 1).

Addressing long standing disparities in student performance calls for systemic change, a theme that resounds throughout and across the work of many educational practitioners, scholars, researchers, and advocacy groups. Igniting such a transformational change requires “step[ping] outside the situation, make[ing] sense of it, and reframe[ing] the problem” (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011, p. 54). Part of reframing the problem involves a collective shift in thinking that moves away from viewing disparate outcomes as an “achievement gap,” which too often reinforces the beliefs and attitudes of some that the root cause of widely discrepant outcomes stems from underperforming students’ lack of ability to achieve at high levels, and towards seeing disparate outcomes as an “opportunity gap,” which places the onus for divergent outcomes squarely upon the educational system. This essential shift in thinking emphasizes that disparities in outcomes for students are absolutely “not a reflection of their potential nor their

abilities—but a direct result of denying them equitable supports and resources they need to be fully engaged and succeed” (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012, p. 2). In regards to the notion of providing equitable supports and resources, Katie Haycock, director of The Education Trust, contributed the following quote to a press release entitled “A Dream Deferred: 50 Years after Brown vs. Board of Education”:

We have never made good on the promise of equal opportunity in public education....The fact is, we have organized our educational system in this country so that we take children who have less to begin with and then turn around and give them less in school, too. Indeed, we give these children *less* of all of the things that both research and experience tell us make a difference (The Education Trust, 2004).

In an effort to further explore the “opportunity gap” that exists for many students, the purpose of this qualitative research study will be to explore how district- and school-level leaders’ understanding of the “nature of the gap” influences the work of leadership focused on addressing disparities in student performance related to race/ethnicity, class, and/or disability. In this study, the “work of leadership” will be defined as “influencing the community to face its problems....leaders mobilize people to face problems, and communities make progress on problems because leaders challenge and help them do so” (Heifetz, 1996, p. 14). Based on this description, challenging and helping communities to make progress on addressing an identified problem is a key outcome of leadership. Therefore, this study will examine specific ways leaders go about challenging and helping their community to face the problem of student performance disparities (i.e., prompting changes in thinking, leveraging professional learning), as well as specific

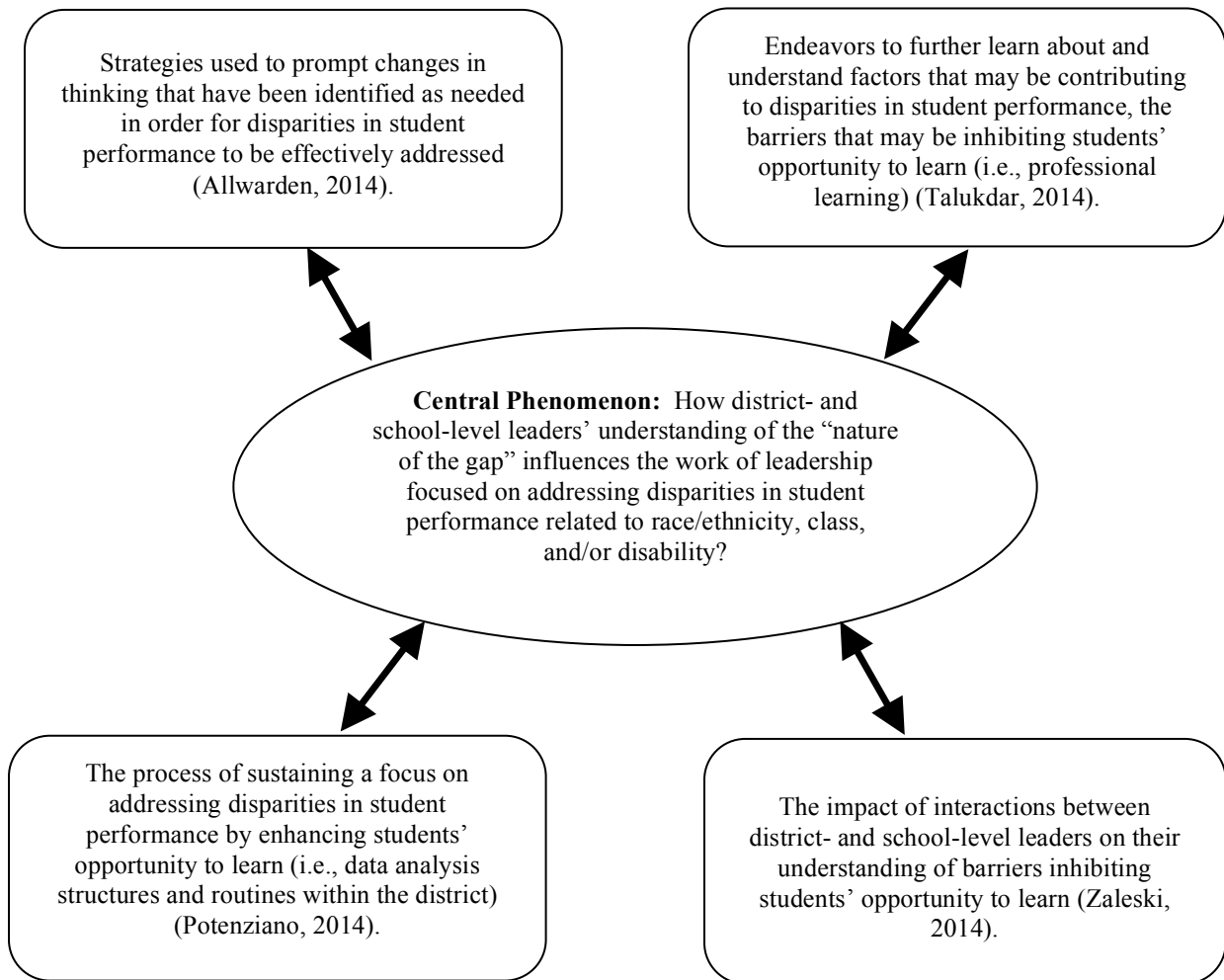
aspects of the situation that may be contributing to the community's collective capacity to address student performance disparities (i.e., data analysis structures and routines, relationships between district- and school-level leaders) (see Figure 1.1).

### **Research Questions**

Facing problems often involves initiating change, and initiating change often triggers cyclical patterns of acquiring knowledge and taking action (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). In order to better understand the actions of district- and school-level leaders, the following research will be explored:

- How do district- and school-level leaders understand disparities in student performance related to race/ethnicity, class, and/or disability? How do these understandings then influence the work of leadership focused on addressing disparities in student performance related to race/ethnicity, class, and/or disability?
- What specific shifts in thinking do district- and school-level leaders identify as needed before disparities in student performance related to race/ethnicity, class, and/or disability can be effectively addressed? What specific strategies do district- and school-level leaders use to prompt shifts in thinking about disparities in student performance related to race/ethnicity, class, and/or disability (Allwarden, 2014)?
- How do district-level leaders leverage professional learning for school-level leaders as an action to further learn about, understand, and address the barriers that may be inhibiting students' opportunity to learn?
- What data analysis structures and routines do district- and school-level

**Figure 1.1.** Developing an In-depth Understanding of the Central Phenomenon



leaders perceive to be essential in understanding and addressing disparities in student performance related to race/ethnicity, class, and/or disability, as well as promoting students' opportunity to learn (Potenziano, 2014)?

- How do interactions between district- and school-level leaders influence their understanding of barriers to students' opportunities to learn (Zaleski, 2014)?

In general, this study aims to further inform the work of district- and school-level leaders by helping them to examine and evaluate specific leadership practices that focus on understanding and addressing disparities in student performance. Spillane and Diamond

(2007) point out that “knowing what leaders do is one thing, but a rich understanding of how, why and when they do it, is essential if research is to contribute to improving the practice of leading and managing schools” (p.5). Understanding how, why, and when to engage in specific leadership practices will allow district- and school-level leaders to more effectively and strategically address disparities in student performance—ultimately enhancing students’ opportunity to learn.

The concept of opportunity to learn has an interesting, as well as controversial, history. The following section will explore a range of policies and scholarship from which the notion of opportunity to learn emerged and developed. This review of relevant policies and scholarship also serves to illuminate the incredibly complex and challenging work of leadership, specifically the work of leadership focused on understanding and addressing the seemingly entrenched discrepancies in student performance.

## Chapter Two<sup>2</sup>

### Literature Review

#### Historical Context

The release of *A Nation at Risk (NAR)* in 1983 marks a defining moment in the history of American education, heralding the advent of standards-based educational reform. While previous reform efforts worked to provide *equal* access to education for minority groups (e.g., *Brown v. Board of Education*, Civil Rights Act of 1964, Elementary and Secondary Education Act Amendments of 1966, Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975), the standards-based reform movement focuses on *excellence* for *all*. Recommendations identified in the *NAR* report included (a) developing rigorous and measurable standards, (b) lengthening the amount of time spent in school, (c) increasing the requirements for high school graduation, (d) improving teacher preparation and salaries, and (e) strengthening educational leadership (NCEE, 1983). These recommendations, which called for a significant investment of resources, were put into motion in an effort to regain “our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technology innovation” (NCEE, 1983, p. 1).

Published during the same year as *NAR*, “Excellence, Equity, and Equality” by Thomas F. Green (1983) offers further insight into the thinking that surrounded and informed policymakers’ decision-making processes during this time period. Green (1983) explains how the quest for one educational ideal (i.e., excellence, equity, or equality) may inhibit the development of another (p. 381). In particular, Green (1983) clarifies that the

---

<sup>2</sup> Chapter Two was co-authored by Ann F. Allwarden, Phillip J. Potenziano, Sujan S. Talukdar, and Karen J. Zaleski.

principles of equality and equity differ in significant ways. For example, the ideal of equality focuses on “inputs” and denotes providing the same to all, disregarding differences such as race/ethnicity, language, age, gender, and ability (Green, 1983; Lindsey, Nuri Robins, & Terrell, 2009). Providing the same to all may at times create unfair and unjust circumstances leading to greater levels of inequity and injustice. As a result, there are times when “persons may be treated and rewarded unequally and also justly” (Green, 1983, p. 324). While some examples of inequalities are in fact just, inequities are never just. This is a critically important distinction. The ideal of educational equity is based upon fair treatment through “justified inequality” (Green, 1983, p. 331). Equity acknowledges and promotes the notion of providing accommodations “for differences so that the outcomes are the same for all individuals” (Lindsey et al., 2009, p. 166).

After describing, comparing, and contrasting the ideals of excellence, equity, and equality, Green (1983) goes on to carefully consider “which of the ideals should have priority in the formulation of policy” (p. 318). He concludes:

Policies in pursuit of educational excellence are more likely to produce gains in equity than policies in pursuit of equality are likely to produce gains in excellence. Thus, it is better to pursue the ideal of equity through the pursuit of excellence than to pursue excellence through the advancement of equality. If this is true, then it is better to formulate policy for the advancement of excellence than to formulate policy for the advancement of equality (p. 331).

Therefore, even though the *NAR* report was not particularly concerned with strengthening educational equity (Harris & Herrington, 2006), Green (1993) concluded that through the

development of policies that pursue excellence of education, the interests of educational equity would also be served. In their analysis of the implementation of *NAR* recommendations, Harris and Herrington (2006) offer further support for Green's conclusion, stating that the "reforms recommended in *NAR*...had a significant positive impact on achievement equity" (p. 213). Yet, initial gains credited to *NAR* recommendations, which focused on providing more resources and better content, slowed as the attention of policymakers turned to the development of an accountability system.

In the pursuit of excellence, the role of standards continued to gain strength, culminating in the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, now commonly referred to as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). With bi-partisan support for the enactment of NCLB, standards-based educational reform emphasizing standards, assessments, and accountability "was catapulted into national policy" (Foorman & Nixon, 2006, p. 163). In order "to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education" (20 U.S.C. 6302 § 1001), NCLB established a test-based accountability system (Hamilton, 2003; Hamilton & Koretz, 2002). Test-based accountability systems include four major components: goals (i.e., rigorous standards), measures (i.e., high-stakes state tests), targets (i.e., adequate yearly progress), and consequences (i.e., school transfer options, supplemental services, corrective actions, and restructuring) (Hamilton & Koretz, 2002).

Since the authorization of NCLB in 2001, there is little evidence to suggest that the current accountability system is having a positive effect on long-standing equity issues (Harris & Herrington, 2006). Even though the ultimate effectiveness of current federal and state policy is yet unknown, policymakers continue to show unwavering



support for the pairing of rigorous standards to test-based accountability. Most recently, support for this pairing was demonstrated by the provision of federal funding to the assessment consortiums of SMARTER Balanced and Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) to support the development of a national testing system that assesses the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) adopted by 45 out of the 50 United States of America (Achieve, Inc., 2013; Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2011; SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

While efforts to raise standards and improve assessments deserve thoughtful consideration in the “landscape of educational policy, they are not effective drivers toward significantly changing the conditions for students who are in need. . . . For a student, or to a parent whose child is academically drowning, simply moving the shoreline further away is not compelling” (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012, pp. 10-11). Instead, attention must turn towards formulating “a support-based reform agenda focused on creating the learning environment and condition in which...all children will have an opportunity to learn and succeed” (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012, p. 11).

### **Opportunity to Learn (OTL)**

The punitive nature of current policy and legislation increases pressure on school leaders to address educational inequities and narrow existing achievement gaps—or suffer the consequences of not making adequate yearly progress. This increased focus on students’ achievement, as measured by standardized tests, heightens an awareness of and concern for the consequences of high-stakes tests on students (Darling-Hammond, 1994, 2004; Guiton & Oakes, 1995; Porter, 1994, 1995). Critics of accountability measures

argue that it is unfair to hold schools and students accountable for content and skills they have not had the opportunity to learn (Darling-Hammond, 1994, 2004; Guiton & Oakes, 1995; Traiman, 1993; Ysseldyke, Thurlow, & Shin, 1995). Therefore, while NCLB outlines the legal responsibilities that accompany the current test-based accountability system, there remain important ethical considerations regarding increased accountability and high expectations.

Starratt (2003) argues “imposing...accountability systems without fully addressing the issue of OTL is a violation of social justice” (p. 298). Have all students had the opportunity to learn? Darling-Hammond (2007) emphatically disputes the notion that standards and testing alone will improve schools or guarantee equitable opportunities to learn, emphasizing that “the biggest problem with the NCLB act is that it mistakes measuring schools for fixing them” (p. 9). Instead, school reform efforts need to focus on ensuring access to high-quality teaching and providing equitable opportunities to learn rigorous curriculum (Darling-Hammond, 2004, 2007).

Although a recurring theme of current school reform, a focus on truly providing equitable opportunities to learn rigorous curriculum struggles to gain—and hold—center stage. As a result, prominent individuals within the field of education have called for the inclusion of data beyond results from high-stakes state tests. In her testimony for the House Education and Labor Committee on the reauthorization of NCLB, Darling-Hammond (2007) emphasized the need for multiple indicators of learning and school performance in order to “build a more powerful engine for educational improvement by understanding what is really going on with students and focusing on the elements of the system that need to change if learning is to improve” (p. 72). Darling-Hammond goes on

to present and describe an indicator system that includes measures of (a) student learning (e.g., state and local assessments), (b) additional student outcomes (e.g., data on attendance, promotion/retention, and graduation rates), and (c) learning conditions (e.g., school climate, instructional practices).

Part of the intent behind the development of school process indicators, or a complete “indicator system,” is that they offset the deficiencies arising from an over-focus on school inputs (i.e., standards) and school outputs (i.e., test scores). School process indicators measure “services the education system is actually providing” (Stecher, 2005, p. 4). The intent of school process indicators is to “monitor the nature of schooling: the curriculum students study, the instruction teachers provide, and the environment in which teaching and learning take place” (Porter, 1991, p. 13). Consequently, data from school process indicators offer district- and school-level leaders opportunities to evaluate their school reform efforts and strengthen their decision-making process, which could ultimately lead to more effective and equitable school improvement planning and implementation.

### **The Challenge of Defining and Measuring OTL**

Threaded throughout much of the available research is the ongoing challenge of defining and measuring a variable, or set of variables, which represent a valid and reliable measure of a school’s contribution to students’ learning. The challenge resides in the fact that school systems are inherently complex organizations. Therefore, identifying, isolating, and measuring school factors that contribute to students’ learning remains an on-going difficulty. As a result, the thinking of scholars and researchers who have actively confronted these challenges differs considerably. In an effort to illustrate

noteworthy differences, two contrasting perspectives will be presented. The work of Andrew Porter represents a traditional view of OTL, and the work of James Paul Gee represents a sociocultural view of OTL.

**A traditional perspective of OTL.** Porter (1994) discusses how OTL has historically been defined as “the enacted curriculum as experienced by the student” (p. 427). Porter (1994) also points out that enacted curriculum encompasses both the content of instruction and “the pedagogical quality of instruction” (p. 427). “The content and pedagogy of instruction are the two best school-controlled predictors of student achievement” (Porter, 1994, p. 427). Therefore, Porter (1991, 1994) presents for consideration a theoretical model that focuses on the content of instruction as a school process indicator. The model predicts a causal relationship between the level of curriculum alignment and student outcomes. In other words, stronger curriculum alignment leads to better student outcomes.

Efforts aimed at strengthening curriculum alignment focus on increasing the degree of alignment between (a) instruction, (b) standards, (c) assessments, (d) curriculum materials and resources, and (e) professional development opportunities (Porter, Smithson, Blank, & Zeidner, 2007). Yet, whereas efforts that focus on curriculum alignment have the potential to significantly improve student outcomes (Porter, 1991, 1994), “alignment is only good for education if the target for alignment is of sufficient quality” (Porter, Smithson, Blank, & Zeidner, 2007, p. 29).

**A sociocultural perspective of OTL.** Gee (2008), in contrast, argues against definitions of OTL based on a traditional view of knowledge, which focuses on quantifying exposure to instructional content that is aligned with standards and

assessments. These definitions are built upon the assumption: If students are exposed to the same instructional content, then they have been provided with an equal opportunity to both (a) learn the instructional content and (b) demonstrate their learning on an assessment. Embedded within this notion are underlying “complexities” (Gee, 2008, p. 77). These underlying complexities relate closely to the concept of equality and justice discussed earlier. Providing equal opportunities does not ensure equal outcomes. Instead, students need to be provided with equitable opportunities to learn instructional content and demonstrate their learning. This shift in thinking significantly complicates measuring students’ OTL. The difference between measuring equal and equitable opportunities to learn is the difference between a teacher covering instructional content and a student learning instructional content. Yet, if these underlying complexities are ignored, Gee argues that the resulting measure of OTL offers an incomplete picture.

Gee (2008) defines OTL from a sociocultural perspective, which examines the relationship between learners and their environment. Gee describes the “action possibilities” (p. 81) that exist within learners’ environments. Gee then discusses the impact of learners’ abilities, or lack thereof, to first recognize action possibilities available to them, and then to convert those action possibilities into “actual and effective” (p. 81) actions. This pairing of action possibilities with learners’ capacity to take meaningful action broadens the traditional view of what it means to offer opportunities to learn.

**Common ground.** The distinct perspectives embraced by Porter and Gee illustrate the challenges and limitations that accompany defining and measuring OTL. Yet, interesting to consider is the motivation behind both Porter and Gee’s work.

Although Porter and Gee provide very different ways of thinking about and conceptualizing OTL, both share a common focus on examining what is happening in schools. What is the nature of schooling, and how does it enhance or inhibit students' opportunities to learn? This emphasis on the part of researchers and scholars to untangle complexities inherent within the process of schooling provides further incentive for looking more closely at the specific actions of district- and school-level leaders as they grapple with these very challenges. Additionally, Boykin and Noguera (2011) put forth for consideration: "It is essential that educators understand the nature of the gap and why it exists" (p. 1). Therefore, this research study will focus on how district- and school-level leaders' understanding of the "nature of the gap" influences their actions as they work to address disparities in student performance related to race/ethnicity, class, and/or disability, including (a) the use of strategies to prompt shifts in thinking, (b) the leveraging of professional learning, (c) the use of data analysis structure and routines, and (d) the relationships between district- and school-level leaders.

### **Theoretical Framework**

A useful theory helps you *organize* your data....A useful theory also *illuminates* what you are seeing in your research. It draws your attention to particular events or phenomena and sheds light on relationships that might otherwise go unnoticed or misunderstood (Maxwell, 2008, p. 227).

The researchers of this study (Allwarden, 2014; Potenziano, 2014; Talukdar, 2014; Zaleski, 2014) viewed the process of identifying and reviewing potentially useful theories, which ultimately led to the final selection of a useful theory, as an important part of developing an appropriate research design. The researchers recognized that a

useful theory would influence the methods of data collection and would also become an important instrument for generalizing the results of the case study (Yin, 2009). Therefore, researchers believed the identification and selection of a useful theory would further support and enhance their ability to thoroughly investigate the research questions and draw valid and reliable conclusions. At the same time, the researchers considered the disadvantages to using existing theory. Maxwell (2008), referring to the work of Becker (1986), follows the benefits of using an existing theory with the following warning:

Existing literature, and the assumptions embedded in it, can deform the way you frame your research, causing you to overlook important ways of conceptualizing your study or key implications of your results....Trying to fit your insights into this established framework can deform your argument, weakening its logic and making it harder for you to see what this new way of framing the phenomenon might contribute (Maxwell, 2008, p. 227).

After reviewing both the beneficial and detrimental effects of using existing theory, the advice of Becker (1986) ultimately guided the selection and implementation of existing theory in this study. “‘A serious scholar ought routinely to inspect competing ways of taking [*sic*] about the same subject matter,’ and warns ‘Use the literature, don’t let it use you’” (Becker, 1986 as cited in Maxwell, 2008, p. 227). Therefore, the researchers explored various existing frameworks in their efforts to both (a) identify an existing theory that appropriately aligns with the research focus and will allow the research team to reap the potential benefits and (b) examine existing theories in an effort to help them “routinely inspect” competing ways of seeing and understanding the same subject matter.

Since this research study will be examining district- and school-level leaders' understandings and how these understandings then influence the work of leadership, the researchers determined that the distributed leadership theoretical frame, with its focus on interactions and the practice of leadership aligns most closely with this study (Spillane, 2006; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004; Spillane, Healey & Parise, 2009). Spillane (2006) states distributed leadership practice is defined as "a product of the joint interactions of school *leaders, followers*, and aspects of their *situation* such as tools and routines" (p. 3). Tools can be defined as outer portrayals of ideas that multiple leaders use in their practice, such as lesson plans, student work samples, observation protocols, and student assessment data (Spillane, 2006). Spillane (2012) uses the definition of routines created by Feldman and Pentland (2003): "a repetitive, recognizable pattern of interdependent actions, involving multiple actors" (p. 311). As this theoretical frame is applied to the present study there will be focus on both leaders' interactions and aspects of their situations as defined from this perspective.

A distributed leadership perspective is primarily about interactions and leadership practice (Spillane, 2006; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004; Spillane, Healey & Parise, 2009). According to this framework, decisions are not made in isolation, rather, the interactions between many individuals involved in shared activities contribute to the decision making process. "These collaborative dialogues are a key component of what Spillane et al. (2004) have defined as the social distribution of leadership" (Scribner, Sawyer, Watson, & Myers, 2007, p.71). Leadership from a distributed perspective is defined as individuals, officially or unofficially assigned to leadership roles, taking responsibility for the work of leadership (i.e., leadership activities) (Spillane, 2006).



Distributed leadership is more than leaders interacting and assuming responsibilities. Instead, it is the interactions among these individuals that specifically contribute to the practice of leadership that is critical to this theoretical framework (Harris, Leithwood, Day, Sammons, & Hopkins, 2007; Spillane, 2006).

The distributed leadership framework highlights the potential and opportunity for any individual within a school district to engage in the work of leadership, strengthening the collective capacity of individuals to change and improve schools (Harris, 2002). Examining this shared aspect of leadership work, as well as how it can be intentionally distributed across individuals as they work to address disparities in student performance, offers the researchers greater insight into the topic being studied as they seek to answer the research questions.

The development of distributed leadership is also believed to enhance school improvement by building the capacity of employees to achieve goals collectively (Copland, 2003; Harris, 2004). However, it is important to note that school improvement based on a distributed leadership model is not automatic, rather, “much depends on the way in which leadership is distributed, how it is distributed and for what purpose” (Harris, Leithwood, Day, Sammons, & Hopkins, 2007, p. 9). Specific consideration will be given to these factors when examining leadership practices at the district and school levels.

Spillane (2006) and Spillane et al. (2004) further state that distributed leadership offers an analytic perspective that is designed to allow school leaders to reflect on and diagnose the distribution of leaders, the practices employed, and the impact on outcomes, which enhances the design process. Spillane (2006) describes three governing design principles:

- The practice of leadership should be a central focus in efforts to improve school leadership because it is a more proximal cause of instructional improvement than leadership roles, processes or structures.
- Intervening to improve leadership necessitates attention to interactions, not just actions, because leadership practice takes shape in the interactions between leaders and followers.
- Intervening to improve leadership practice requires attention to the design and redesign of aspects of the situation, such as routines and tools, because the situation helps define leadership practice (p. 93).

The distributed leadership framework will inform this study and assist in identifying and assessing the routines and tools utilized in practice and distributed among district- and school-level leaders as they work to address disparities in student performance. Additionally, the framework will assist us in exploring the significant nature of relations between district- and school-level leaders. This framework also supports the individual portions of this study, which examine related but distinct aspects of leadership work—cognitive shifts, professional learning, data structures and routines, and leader interactions.

## **Chapter Three<sup>3</sup>**

### **Methods**

The focus of this study was on investigating how district- and school-level leaders understand disparities in student performance due to race/ethnicity, class, and/or disability, and how their understandings of those disparities then influence the work of leadership focused on addressing disparities in student performance related to race/ethnicity, class, and/or disability in a culturally diverse school district. Therefore, the design of this research sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do district- and school-level leaders understand disparities in student performance due to race/ethnicity, class, and/or disability?
2. How do these understandings then influence the work of leadership focused on addressing disparities in student performance due to race/ethnicity, class, and/or disability?

Because the researchers were interested in “not only the physical events and behavior taking place, but also how the participants in [the] study make sense of these and how their understandings influence their behavior” (Maxwell, 2008, p. 221), qualitative methods offered the greatest opportunity to gain an in-depth understanding.

### **Qualitative Research**

Maxwell (2008) outlines five broad research goals which he believes are especially well-suited to qualitative research. Three of the five goals identified by Maxwell (2008) were particularly relevant to the researchers’ proposed inquiry:

---

<sup>3</sup> Chapter Three was co-authored by Ann F. Allwarden, Phillip J. Potenziano, Sujan S. Talukdar, and Karen J. Zaleski.

- Understanding the meaning, for participants in the study, of the events, situations, and actions they are involved with, and of the accounts that they give of their lives and experiences.
- Understanding the particular context within which the participants act and the influence this context has on their actions.
- Understanding the processes by which events and actions take place (Maxwell, 2008, p. 221).

The researchers wanted to hear richly detailed, first-hand accounts of events, situations, and actions that have influenced district- and school-level leaders' understanding of existing disparities in student performance. In other words, they wanted to "achieve an understanding of how people make sense out of their lives, delineate the process (rather than the outcome or product) of meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience" (Merriam, 2009, p. 14). Furthermore, the researchers hoped to gain insight into how these understandings then influence the work of leadership focused on addressing disparities in student performance. As a result, they believed the characteristics, or features, which distinguish qualitative research, provided them with the greatest opportunity to develop and share an in-depth understanding of the research focus.

Eisner (1991) describes six features that make a study qualitative. First, qualitative studies are "field focused." Researchers "observe, interview, record, describe, interpret, and appraise settings as they are" (Eisner, 1991, p. 33). Next, researchers consider themselves to be the main "instrument." This is important because "the features that count in a setting do not wear labels on their sleeves: they do not announce themselves. Researchers must see what is to be seen...it is not a matter of checking

behaviors, but rather of perceiving their presence and interpreting their significance” (Eisner, 1991, pp. 33-34). The third feature of a qualitative research identified by Eisner (1991) is its “interpretive character.” Interpretive character refers to a researcher’s ability to make sense of and explain a situation, including the significance it holds for those involved in the situation. A fourth feature of qualitative research is “*the use of expressive language* and the presence of voice in text....We display our signatures. Our signature makes it clear that a person, not a machine, was behind the words” (Eisner, 1991, p. 36). The fifth feature is its “attention to particulars.” This allows the readers to “gain a feeling for the distinctive characteristics of the case. The classroom, the school, the teacher are not lost to abstraction” (Eisner, 1991, p. 39). The final feature detailed by Eisner (1991) involves the criteria used to evaluate qualitative research. “Qualitative research becomes believable because of its *coherence, insight, and instrumental utility*” (Eisner, 1991, p. 39).

The researchers believed the six features of qualitative research, as described by Eisner (1991), captured the type of inquiry in which they needed to engage to successfully address both the research goals and questions. Under the umbrella of qualitative research designs, the researchers selected the case study approach “which focuses on understanding the dynamics present within single settings” (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 534).

### **Case Study**

Creswell (2012) defines a case study as “an in-depth exploration of a bounded system (e.g., activity, event, process, or individuals) based on extensive data collection (Creswell, 2007). Bounded means that the case is separated out for research in terms of

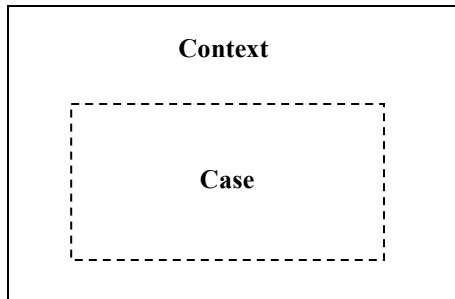
time, place, or some physical boundaries” (p. 465). Yin (2008) explains “a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 18) (see Figure 3.1).

Case studies rely on multiple sources of evidence (Creswell, 2012), and both single and multiple case studies are used in case study research (Yin, 2008). Yin (2008) explains that case study research is quite challenging and should not be underestimated. The single case study allows the researcher to devote more time to exploring the case in depth (Creswell 1998, 2012). Conducting a single case study allowed the research team the opportunity to fully analyze all aspects of the study in depth.

### **Sample and Participant Selection**

The study began with the identification of a school district and superintendent through purposeful sampling. Patton (2002) contends that, “the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting *information-rich* cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry” (p. 230). Similarly, Maxwell (1998) describes purposeful sampling as “a strategy in which particular settings, persons, or events are deliberately selected for the important information they can provide that cannot be gotten as well from other choices” (p. 235). Merriam (2009) further explains that, “purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 77). As a result, purposeful sampling allows “for the

**Figure 3.1.** Single-case Study (Yin, 2008, p.18)



examination of cases that are critical for the theories that the study began with or that have been subsequently developed” (Maxwell, 1998, p. 235). In other words, the sampling for this study was theoretically-driven. “Choices of informants, episodes, and interactions are being driven by a conceptual question, not by a concern for ‘representativeness’” (Miles & Huberman, 2004, p. 29). The researchers’ main goal was to select a site and individuals who could help them gain an in-depth understanding of the central phenomenon to be studied. Therefore, the researchers established criteria that guided their selection of the school district. The following sections outline three “stages” of sampling. During each successive stage, established criteria were applied to further narrow the pool of potential research sites to include only districts that would provide a strong case for this research study.

**District selection: Stage one.** Researchers visited the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's (DESE) website to review school district profiles. School districts that met the following criteria were noted: (a) a K-12 public school district, (b) a small to medium-sized school district (i.e., five to ten schools), and (c) a school district with identifiable, measurable disparities in student performance related to race/ethnicity, class and/or disability.

According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2012):

A difference in scores between two groups of students (for instance male and female, Black and White, or Hispanic and White) can only be considered an achievement gap if the difference is statistically significant, meaning larger than the margin of error.

As such, in stage one of district selection the researchers adhered to this definition in order to identify measurable disparities in student performance. When reviewing school district profiles on the DESE website, particular attention was paid to MCAS scores and graduation rates disaggregated by race/ethnicity, class, and/or disability. Further, the researchers sought to understand disparities in performance across student sub-groups within a single-school district. Disparities within the district were not compared to the performance of students across the state or the nation.

The first criterion, a K-12 public school district, and the third criterion, a school district with identifiable, measurable disparities in student performance related to race/ethnicity, class and/or disability, relate directly to the educational issue that this research study identified as concerning: On-going, statistically significant disparities raise critical questions regarding educational equity and students' opportunity to learn within the public school system.

The second criterion, a small to medium-sized school district (i.e., five to ten schools), was pre-determined to provide the research team with an opportunity to conduct both comprehensive and in-depth interviews of district- and school-level leaders. Since qualitative studies require researchers to “define aspects of your case(s) that you can study within the limits of your time and means” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 27), a



small to medium-sized district allowed the researchers to conduct in-depth interviews of most of the district- and school-level leaders. Furthermore, interviewing most of the district- and school-level leaders provided a richer, more insightful understanding of the case, as well as increased the credibility of the study. Comparing and contrasting data collected from individuals with different perspectives is a form of triangulation, which is an important strategy for strengthening the internal validity of a research study (Merriam, 2009).

**District selection: Stage two.** During the second stage of sampling, the criteria for selection shifted to identifying school districts whose administrators (a) believed they were committed to addressing disparities in student performance related to race/ethnicity, class, and/or disability and (b) thought they were actively engaged in work that focused on eliminating performance gaps related to at least one of the following areas: race/ethnicity, low income, and/or disability. The research team reviewed school district websites for evidence relating to one or more of the following areas:

- The district thought it was investing resources (e.g., time, money, people) in an effort to address disparities in student performance related to race/ethnicity, class, and/or disability.
- The district thought it was implementing a strategic change effort that targeted addressing student performance related to race/ethnicity, class, and/or disability.

The criteria for this stage of sampling were directly related to the study's overarching research questions. In order for the researchers to examine how district- and school-level leaders understand disparities in student performance due to race/ethnicity,

class, and/or disability, as well as how their understandings of these disparities then influence the work of leadership focused on addressing disparities in student performance, the school district ultimately selected believed that they were committed to and actively engaged in addressing student performance disparities.

In addition to visiting and reviewing the websites of the school districts, the strategy of reputational sampling was relied upon heavily during this stage. Reputational sampling involves seeking out recommendations from experts or key informants (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The researchers asked experts and key informants in the field (e.g., superintendents, principals, university professors, and researchers) to suggest school districts that they believed met the pre-determined criteria. Therefore, while the review of district websites served as a source of useful information, it was not a requirement for this stage of sampling.

**District selection: Stage three.** Once the research team narrowed down a list of potential research sites that met the pre-determined criteria, additional sampling was conducted to ensure that the superintendents or assistant superintendents of the school districts met the following established criteria: (a) had provided the district with stable, consistent leadership and (b) thought they were providing school-level leaders with a professional learning opportunity that focused on addressing student performance related to race/ethnicity, class, and/or disability. With regard to stable and consistent district-level leadership, the research team sought out a district that had either employed their superintendent or assistant superintendent for at least two years and/or had a district-level leadership team that had provided consistent leadership over the course of at least two consecutive years in the area of addressing disparities related to race/ethnicity, class,

and/or disability.

Although the state and district websites provided evidence indicating that a superintendent or assistant superintendent met the pre-determined criteria, the researchers relied more heavily upon reputational sampling as a strategy during this stage. Once a district that seemingly met all of the established criteria was identified, initial contact was made with the superintendent. The initial contact was made by an individual who was known to the research team and was also a colleague of the superintendent. After talking with the superintendent, this individual connected the research team with the superintendent through email. Through email the superintendent asked the research team to send a description of what the proposed study would entail. A member of the research team responded:

Thank you for your email and interest in our study. On behalf of our research team, I have attached a brief overview of what our study entails. We would love the opportunity to discuss this with you, and it is our hope to set up a date/time to meet with you at your convenience. We look forward to your response and please do not hesitate to contact us with any specific questions you may have regarding our study.

The overview sent to the superintendent included (a) the study's research questions, (b) the purpose of the research study, (c) a description of how and what data would be collected, and (d) the amount of time research participants would need to commit to the study. After the superintendent read the overview of the proposed study and indicated that he was interested in talking further with the research team, the team provided the superintendent with a number of potential meeting dates and times, the superintendent

selected a date and time that worked best for him and a face-to-face meeting was scheduled.

Three out of the four researchers were able to meet with the superintendent. At this meeting the superintendent began by sharing some of his personal history, including where he grew up and where he had lived as an adult. He expressed that living in different areas of the state strengthened his lens and passion to serve all students regardless of their socio-economic background. The superintendent then went on to briefly describe the current focus of the district- and school-level leaders' work. The superintendent described the role of data in their efforts to improve student achievement. He also emphasized the importance of collaboration between district- and school-level leaders. Lastly, the superintendent expressed interest in participating in the proposed study but stated he would need to consult with the leaders making up the Full Administrative Council (FADCO), as they would be asked to participate.

The superintendent asked the research team to attend the next FADCO meeting and present to the other district- and school-level leaders. The research team agreed and returned to the district two weeks later to provide members of FADCO an overview of the proposed study. After the presentation, the superintendent asked the members of FADCO to let him know if they had any hesitations or questions. He later sent an email to the research team that read "I asked people to get back to me if they had any hesitations or questions and the only feedback I have gotten are yes."

**School-level leaders and additional district-level leaders.** The strategies of purposeful and snowball sampling were used to identify school-level leaders, as well as additional district-level leaders. All building principals were asked to participate in the

study. In order to identify additional district-level leaders to interview, the researchers relied on the superintendent and assistant superintendent to recommend individuals whom they felt could best describe efforts aimed at impacting students' opportunity to learn and performance gaps. This strategy of sampling is referred to as snowball sampling. Creswell (2012) defines snowball sampling as "sampling procedure in which the researcher asks participants to identify other participants to become members of the sample" (p. 628). Merriam (2009) further elaborates by stating that snowball sampling "involves locating a few key participants who easily meet the criteria you have established for participation in the study. As you interview these key participants [i.e. the superintendent and the assistant superintendent] you ask each one to refer you to other participants" (p. 79). Thus, the interview snowball grew to include additional district-level leaders who played a critical role in efforts aimed at understanding and addressing barriers inhibiting students' opportunity to learn.

Additionally, under specific conditions the use of snowball sampling would have been extended. For example, if a building principal had stated to an interviewer that he or she should interview another building-level leader because this individual played a critical role in the school's efforts to understand and address barriers inhibiting students' opportunity to learn, the researchers would have considered extending the use of snowball sampling. This recommendation would have needed be freely offered during the interview. The researcher would not have actively sought out this information. Furthermore, the research team would have met to discuss and debate the usefulness and appropriateness of including the recommended interviewee in the sample. Using snowball sampling to reach additional individuals that otherwise would have been

excluded would have potentially allowed the research team to gain further information that may have helped strengthen the triangulation of interview data. Furthermore, the use of snowball sampling aligned with both the type of research being conducted (i.e., qualitative) and the study's theoretical framework (i.e., distributed leadership) because it would have used the social or personal knowledge of the individual being interviewed (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). Although extending the use of snowball sampling was part of the initial research design, none of the participants interviewed recommended interviewing individuals beyond central office leaders and building principals.

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected primarily through semi-structured interviews and then supplemented by the gathering of documents recommended by participants during their interviews.

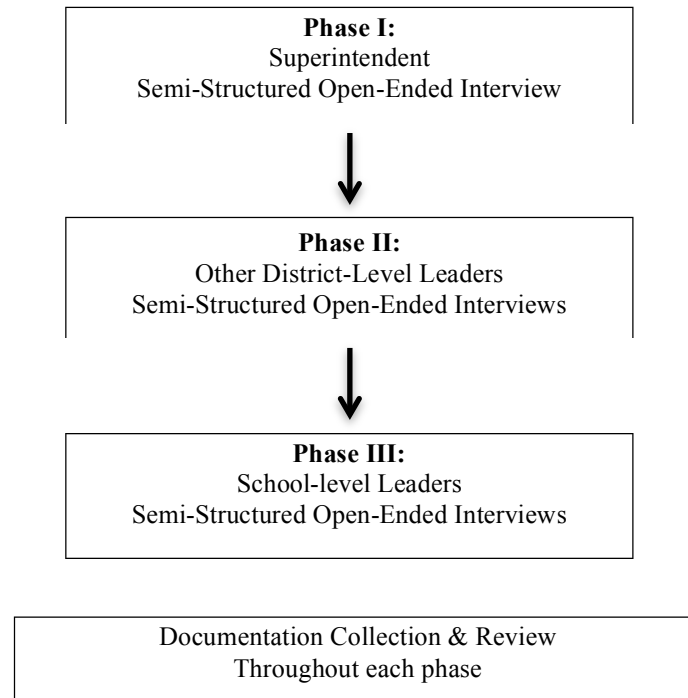
**Interview.** DeMarrais (2004) defines the research interview as “a process in which a researcher and participant engage in a conversation focused on questions related to a research study” (p. 55). Merriam (2009) provides a continuum of three types of interviews: highly structured/standardized, semi-structured, and unstructured/informal (p. 89). Open-ended semi-structured individual interviews served as the primary method of data collection for this case study. Falling in the middle of the “interview structure continuum” (Merriam, 2009), a semi-structured interview method provides a researcher the opportunity “to enter into the other person’s perspective” (Patton, 2002, p. 341), and to respond flexibly to new information that may surface related to topic being studied (Merriam, 2009).

Semi-structured interviews allow the opportunity to digress from the primary question and probe a response to understand more clearly what is seen as a provocative remark on the part of the interviewee. Such remarks may come in two categories: (1) the researcher has not heard that position stated before or (2) what has been said seems to be in contradiction to comments others have made previously (James, Milenkiewicz, & Bucknam, 2008, pp. 73).

While semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility, they also provided for some uniformity among the researchers during data gathering. Additionally, having a pre-determined list of questions enhanced the researchers' ability to efficiently gather needed information. More open-ended, less focused interview protocols can lead to collecting "too much superfluous information...An overload of data will compromise the efficiency and power of the analysis" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 35). Interviews assisted researchers in answering the study's overarching research questions, as well as provided insight into the researchers' individual portions of the study. Figure 3.2 provides a conceptual design that illustrates the order of interviewing. The interview process also assisted the researchers in determining "what services the education system is actually providing" (Stecher, 2005, p.4).

Interviews were conducted in-person within the school district setting, in as natural an environment as possible, most frequently at each interviewee's office, unless an alternate location was mutually agreed upon. Privacy was a factor in determining the location to ensure the session was uninterrupted, and in the hopes that this would enhance the participants' attentiveness and willingness to respond in a fashion that was open and honest. In an effort to minimize intrusion upon the interviewees' ability to perform their

**Figure 3.2.** Sequence of Interview Process



professional duties, all interviews were arranged at a time convenient for the interviewees. Specific interview protocols for this study were used and are located in Appendix A. All participants were asked to sign a Consent to Participate form. This consent reviewed participants' rights, details of confidentiality and record keeping procedures, and offered them the information necessary to make an informed decision prior to agreeing to participate.

Each interviewer allowed for approximately one hour per interview. All four research team members conducted interviews individually or in pairs with interview assignments predetermined. All interviews were recorded in their entirety unless a participant asked otherwise. If an interviewee preferred that the interview not be recorded, the interviewer proceeded with the interview by taking hand-written notes. This happened only once during the collecting of data. One participant asked that the audio recording be



stopped in the middle of an interview. The participant wanted to share information that he or she was not comfortable having audio recorded. The participant agreed to the interviewer taking notes by hand during this portion of the interview. Following this portion of the interview, the recording of audio resumed for the remainder of the interview.

The research team piloted the research questions. Each member of the research team piloted the interview protocol a minimum of two times and reported back to the research team on what was learned from those interviews and how to improve upon them (Merriam, 2009). Merriam (2009) stresses the importance of piloting interview questions:

Not only do you get some practicing interviewing, but you also quickly learn which questions are confusing and need rewording, which questions yield useless data, and which questions, suggested by your respondents, you should have thought to include in the first place” (p. 95).

Research team members used the strategy of conducting pilot interviews in pairs to ensure that the interview protocol was sufficiently covered, as well as to ensure that there was consistency across researchers regarding how interviews were conducted. In addition, during the interview piloting process, the researchers attempted to mitigate any issues that the presence of a digital voice recorder may have caused by practicing with the recording devices they planned to use (McMillian, 2004). A professional transcriptionist, who was required to sign a confidentiality agreement, was hired to transcribe some of the interview recordings. In an effort to further strengthen the reliability of the study, secondary sources of data were also sought out, including archived schools documents (Creswell, 2012).

**Documents.** The researchers used purposeful sampling for the identification and collection of relevant school and district documents. Creswell (2012) extols that the use of “documents represent a good source for text data for a qualitative study” (p. 223). Furthermore, Stake (1995) states that using a variety of data sources such as archival documents will reduce the potential for misinterpretation and help produce greater reliability. Yin (2009) also states the benefit of using documents in case studies, explaining that documents are not the case study but rather help explain and corroborate details of the study.

In an effort to collect relevant documents, each participant was asked during his or her interview if there were specific documents that he or she viewed as particularly germane to the researchers’ areas of focus (i.e., prompting shifts in thinking, professional learning, data analysis structures and routines, interactions) and would recommend that the researchers collect for analysis. Researchers also sought out additional documents that they believed were pertinent to the case, including:

- District Improvement Plan
- School Improvement Plans
- Documents outlining and detailing professional learning opportunities relevant to the study topic offered by the district

The collection and analysis of document data offered researchers the opportunity to crosscheck and verify interviewee responses, as well as the conclusions being drawn by the researchers as they engaged in data analysis. This process of verification supported the triangulation of data and thus strengthened the trustworthiness of the study’s final conclusions and findings.

## **Data Analysis**

This research study followed the three components of data analysis described by Miles and Huberman (1994): (a) data reduction, (b) data display, and (c) conclusion drawing/ verification.

**Data reduction.** The first component of data analysis, data reduction, involves “selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the data” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 10). For this study, the process of data reduction began with the identification of a theoretical framework (i.e., distributed leadership) and the development of specific research questions (i.e., How do district- and school-level leaders understand disparities in student performance related to race/ethnicity, class, and/or disability? How do these understandings then influence the work of leadership focused on addressing disparities in student performance related to race/ethnicity, class, and/or disability?). The process of data reduction continued with the selection of specific strategies for sampling (i.e., criterion-based selection and snowball sampling). Decisions regarding the choice of a theoretical framework, the development of research questions, and the selection of sampling strategies served as important mechanisms for focusing and narrowing (or reducing) the data that was ultimately collected. Miles and Huberman (1994) refer to these decisions as “anticipatory data reduction” (p. 10) because they are made before the collection of data has begun.

The process of data reduction continued throughout the study. During (and after) the data collection period of the study, data reduction occurred as researchers engaged in the coding process. Creswell (2011) defines coding as a “qualitative research process in which the researcher makes sense out of text data, divides it into text or image segments,

labels the segments, examines codes for overlap and redundancy, and collapses these codes into themes” (p. 618). Similarly, Miles and Huberman (1994) describe coding as “a way of forcing you to understand what is still unclear, by putting names on incidents and events, trying to cluster them, communicating with others around some commonly held ideas, and trying out enveloping concepts against a wave of observations and conversations” (p. 62). In other words, as researchers engaged in the process of coding, they identified and assigned labels to “chunks,” in essence highlighting and extracting sections of data that seemed particularly relevant. The process of coding, therefore, was inherently analytical and served as another important mechanism for further reducing the data collected.

***Creating codes.*** Prior to entering the research site, each researcher created a “start list” of codes based on the study’s theoretical framework and their specific research questions. In order to ensure the consistent application of codes across interview transcripts and documents each researcher developed clear definitions for each of their master codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Definitions for master codes were theoretically based and drawn from the literature. The analysis of collected data began with the coding of the transcript from the interview with the superintendent. The process of coding continued through subsequent phases of analyzing different “sets” of interviews (i.e., district-level leaders, school-level leaders). These successive sets of data were analyzed using the constant comparative method. The constant comparative method “involves comparing one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences. Data are grouped together on a similar dimension. The dimension is tentatively given a name; it then becomes a category” (Merriam, 2009, p. 30). The use of the constant

comparative method—constantly comparing the data for similarities and differences—further refined each researcher’s initial set of codes. (Information regarding how each researcher’s initial list of codes changed across the course of the study is detailed in the researcher’s individual section of the study.) Miles and Huberman (1994) cite the work of Lincoln and Guba (1985) as they describe the different ways in which codes can be revised as a study progresses:

- Filling in: adding codes, reconstructing a coherent scheme as new insights emerge and new ways of looking at the data set emerge
- Extension: returning to materials coded earlier and interrogating them in a new way, with a new theme, construct, or relationship
- Bridging: seeing new or previously not understood relationships within units of a given category
- Surfacing: identifying new categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 62)

***Coding procedures.*** The process of coding began following the first trip to the field to collect data. Researchers first independently read and coded interview transcripts and any collected documents. Then, after the researchers completed their independent coding of the data (i.e., interview transcripts, documents), the researchers met in pairs to share how each coded the data. The researchers then worked to reach consensus regarding interpretations. Additionally, the researchers had planned to follow the recommendation of Miles and Huberman (1994) which encourages researchers to code data collected during each visit to the site before returning to the site to collect more. This cycle would have supported researchers’ emerging understanding by “working through iterative cycles of induction and deduction to power the analysis” (Miles & Huberman,

1994, p. 65). The scheduling of interviews did not provide the researchers enough time to code a data set before returning to the field. Yet, following the collection of data, coding procedures still involved iterative cycles of induction and deduction as the researchers refined and revised their list of codes and then recoded previously coded data.

***Marginal remarks.*** As researchers coded multiple pages of text, they interspersed coding with written remarks in the “margins.” Since researchers used web-based qualitative research software, marginal remarks were recorded by clicking on and opening a comment window. These remarks included the researchers’ thoughts and reactions to the data. Miles and Huberman (1994) emphasize that, “these ideas are important; they suggest new interpretations, leads, connections with other parts of the data” (p. 67). Miles and Huberman (1994) also suggest that recording marginal notes may “point to important issues that a given code may be missing or blurring, suggesting revisions in the coding scheme” (p. 67). In addition to noting marginal remarks early in the coding cycle, researchers were also able to retrieve and review “chunks” of text that share a common code and add new marginal remarks.

***Memoing.*** Glaser (1978) describes memoing as “the theorizing write-up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst while coding” (p. 83). The content and focus of memos varies. Memos can be written when a researcher is confused or surprised. Memos can also be written in response to another researcher’s memo, sharing an alternative perspective. Other memos may focus on proposing a new code (or set of codes). Memos are frequently written to explore emerging patterns and themes. While the content and focus of memos varies, the writing of each memo provides

researchers important opportunities to gain further clarity and insight. The researchers of this study followed the memoing advice of Miles and Huberman (1994):

- Always give top priority to memoing.
- Memoing should begin as soon as the first field data start coming in, and should usually continue until right up to production of the final report.
- Keep memos “sortable.”
- Memos are about ideas...Simply recounting data examples is not enough.
- Don't standardize memo formats or types, especially in a multi-researcher study.

***Data storage and management.*** As data was collected, it was compiled into a “case study database” (Yin, 2008). A case study database refers to the collection and organization of data. The storage and organization of the data was critically important. A well-organized case study database allowed for the easy retrieval of relevant data during analysis. For this reason, a “code-and-retrieve” computer software program was used to ensure the development of a well-organized case study database. Code-and-retrieve programs allowed researchers to “divide text into segments or chunks, attach codes, and find and display all instances of coded chunks (or combinations of coded chunks)” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 312). This coding scheme allowed for the easy retrieval of relevant data to support the work of determining (a) the frequency of themes and patterns, (b) the intersection of themes and patterns, and (c) the comparisons of themes and patterns.

**Data displays.** The second component of data analysis, data displays, involves displaying the data as “an organized, compressed, assembly of information that permits

conclusion drawing and action” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 11). The use of data displays further supported the work of comparing and contrasting data, identifying patterns and themes, detecting trends, and ultimately enabling researchers to draw valid conclusions. The process of creating data displays involved transforming multiple pages of text into a visual format that fit on a single page and displayed data in ways that:

- show the data and analysis in one place,
- allow the analyst to see where further analyses are called for,
- make it easier to compare different data sets, and
- permit direct use of the results in a report, improving the credibility of conclusions drawn (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 92).

The researchers of this study used data displays within their individual research sections.

**Conclusion drawing and verification.** The third component of data analysis, conclusion drawing and verification, involves deciding “what things mean...noting regularities, patterns, explanations, possible configurations, casual flows, and propositions” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 11). Once data has been entered into a data display, several tactics can be used to both draw and verify conclusions. The researchers of this study began by applying tactics appropriate for drawing initial conclusions; the researchers then selected from a different set of tactics to verify those conclusions. Table 3.1 lists the range of tactics used by the research team as they worked to draw and verify both individual and group conclusions. The tactics used by individual researchers as they worked to answer questions specific to their portion of the research study are further detailed within each researcher’s individual section. The main tactics used by the research team as they worked together to answer the research study’s overarching



**Table 3.1.**

*Tactics for Drawing and Verifying Conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 1994)*

<b>Tactics for Drawing Conclusions</b>	<b>Description</b>
Noting patterns, themes	Note recurring patterns, themes, or “gestalts” (p. 246)
Seeing plausibility	Jot down what some plausible conclusions seem to be, and then check them with other tactics (p. 248)
Clustering	Grouping and then conceptualizing objects that have similar patterns of characteristics (p. 249)
Counting	“See” the general drift of the data more easily and rapidly by looking at distribution (p. 253)
Making contrasts/comparisons	How does X differ from Y (p. 254)
Noting relations between variables	Once you are reasonably clear about what variables might be in play in a situation...How do they relate to each other (p. 257)
<b>Tactics for Verifying Conclusions</b>	<b>Description</b>
Triangulating to ensure reliability and validity	Triangulating: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• By method (i.e., interview, document)</li><li>• By source (i.e., persons to be interviewed)</li><li>• By researcher (i.e., investigator A, B, C, and D) (p. 267)</li></ul>
Following up on surprises	Follow up on surprises: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reflect on the surprise to surface your violated theory</li><li>• Consider how to revise it</li><li>• Look for evidence to support your revision (p. 271)</li></ul>
Making if-then tests	Make if-then statements on data about which you: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Are increasingly puzzled or blocked</li><li>• Feel on the brink of an Aha! (p.272)</li></ul>
Checking out rival explanations	During the final analysis, first check out the merits of the “next best” explanation you or others can think of as an alternative to the one you preferred at the end of the field work (p. 275).

questions, which involved drawing and verifying conclusions based on the findings from each of the researchers’ individual sections, included (a) noting patterns and themes, (b) making comparisons and contrasts, (c) triangulating to ensure reliability and validity.

Ultimately, the researchers aimed to draw conclusions that have been rigorously tested

for “their *plausibility*, their *sturdiness*, their ‘*confirmability*’—that is, their *validity*” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.11).

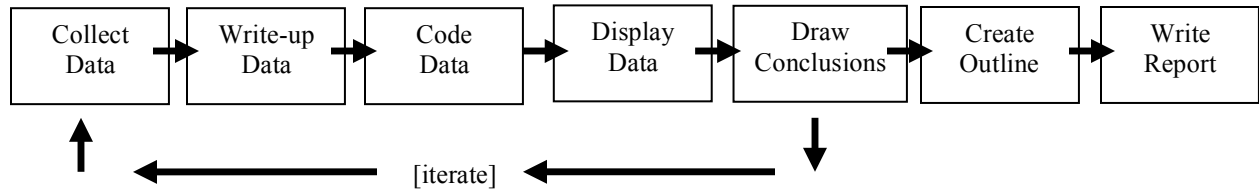
**Traditional analysis sequence.** The process of data analysis followed a slightly modified “traditional analysis sequence” (see Figures 3.3 and 3.4). The traditional analysis sequence includes (a) conducting interviews, (b) transcribing the interviews, (c) coding the interview data, (d) displaying the interview data, (e) drawing conclusions, (f) creating an outline for the final report, and (g) writing the final report. Whereas a traditional data analysis sequence involves multiple cycles of conducting interviews, transcribing interviews, coding data, displaying data, and drawing conclusions before moving on to creating an outline and writing the final report, the sequence of this study involved multiple cycles of coding data, displaying data, and drawing conclusions before moving on to creating an outline and writing the final report.

This modification to the traditional data analysis sequence resulted from the limited amount of time available between trips to the field. The research team conducted three full days of interviews. The three days were evenly spread across a three week time span. The researchers discovered that a week was not enough time to transcribe the data (write up the data), code the data, display the data, and draw conclusions before the next trip into the field. Therefore, all the data was collected and written up before any significant coding, displaying, or conclusion drawing occurred. Yet, valuable and iterative cycles of induction and deduction occurred as researchers refined and revised their list of codes, which led to the recoding of previously coded data.

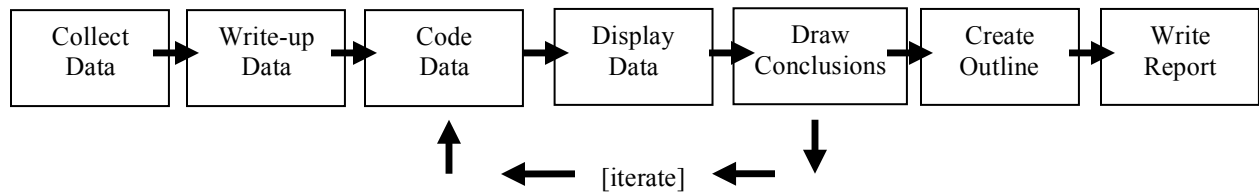
### **The Use of Triangulation**

Researchers of this study applied two distinct understandings regarding the role

**Figure 3.3.** Traditional Data Analysis Sequence (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 85)



**Figure 3.4.** Modified Traditional Data Analysis Sequence



and purpose of triangulation. The first understanding views triangulation as a way to ensure reliability and validity. In qualitative studies, reliability refers to “whether the results are consistent with the data collected” (Merriam, 2009, p. 221). Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe reliability in terms of “dependability” and “consistency.” Ultimately, the reliability of a study depends on the likelihood that others, “outsiders,” would draw the same conclusions given the data collected (Merriam, 2009). If yes, then the study’s results are consistent with the data collected and therefore reliable, as in dependable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Validity, in qualitative studies, speaks to the credibility of a study’s findings (Merriam, 2009). “Do the findings capture what is really there” (Merriam, 2009, p. 213)? Do the findings emanate accuracy and truthfulness? If yes, then the study’s results are considered valid, as in credible.

The second understanding views triangulation “less as a strategy for validating results and procedures than an alternative to validation...which increases scope, depth, and consistency” (Flick, 1998, p. 230 as cited by Erzberger & Kelle, 2003, p. 461).

Within the researchers’ individual sections, the first understanding of triangulation was

applied (see the following section entitled “Reliability and Validity”). Then, as the researchers brought together the understandings and findings that emerged from their individual sections in order to address the overarching research questions of the larger study, the researchers shifted to apply the second understanding of triangulation. At this point, the work of the researchers focused on searching for complementary results based on the “complementarity model of triangulation” (Erzberger & Kelle, 2003, p.469), meaning, that as the researchers investigated the central phenomenon of the larger study “different methods highlight different aspects of it” (Erzberger & Kelle, 2003, p.469). As a result, the researchers reviewed and examined understandings and findings from the individual sections looking for findings that complemented each other, ultimately resulting in a stronger depiction of the topics being analyzed (Erzberger & Kelle, 2003).

### **Reliability and Validity**

It is critical to ensure the trustworthiness of findings based on the information gathered and data analysis. Merriam (2009) states, “the most well-known strategy to shore up the internal validity of a study is what is known as triangulation” (p. 215). Creswell (2012) also emphasizes the process of triangulation as ensuring the validity of the findings. Both Merriam (2009) and Miles and Huberman (1994) describe triangulation from Denzin’s (1978) description of the four forms of triangulation, including: by method, by source, by researcher, or by theory. Each form of triangulation serves to verify the study’s findings. The researchers of this study applied the following forms of triangulation within their individual sections: (a) by method (i.e., interviews and documents), (b) by source (i.e., multiple district- and school-level leaders), and (c) by researcher (i.e., multiple researchers collecting and analyzing data).

The process of “check coding” was also used to ensure reliability (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 64). Check coding occurs when more than one researcher codes data, then they review and discuss the results together. Once the data was accurately coded and triangulated, the data was interpreted and written in narrative form (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009).

### **Researcher Bias and Assumptions**

This research team consisted of four doctoral candidates who were all working as administrators in public school districts that were attempting to address disparities in student performance. Each of districts had different approaches to this work and as a result the researchers brought different experiences and perspectives to the analysis process. Because of the varying backgrounds and viewpoints, it is important to note that the researchers may have shared certain characteristics with the research participants. As a result, the researchers may have brought bias regarding the interpretation of leaders’ understanding about the nature of the gap and related actions. Merriam (2009) states that researchers are the primary instrument in the data collection and analysis process, therefore, biases may influence the research study. Rather than trying to remove the biases, it is essential to “identify them and monitor them as to how they may be shaping the collection and interpretation of data” (Merriam, 2009, p.15). Ultimately, this required the researchers to rely solely on the data gathered rather than their bias and assumptions when analyzing the data.

## **Chapter Four<sup>4</sup>**

### **Description**

The city of New Hope, Massachusetts was first settled in the 1700s. The city is positioned on the New Hope River and a railway. Comprised of numerous one-way streets, bridges, and hills, New Hope is divided into several diverse neighborhoods that each have a specific ethnic identity (City of New Hope, 2013). Upon entering the city of New Hope, visitors encounter the downtown area, which is intersected by the river.

A cluster of human service agencies line Main Street and are geared toward providing services in the city and nearby surrounding towns. The downtown business district is deprived of hustle and bustle, foot traffic, and commerce. This once prosperous nineteenth century manufacturing center now consists of numerous derelict factories undergoing conversion for alternate uses such as businesses and residences. The city shows further signs of a troubled economy with many vacant storefronts and apparently abandoned buildings throughout. Despite this sense of hardship, there are undercurrents of revitalization in the city. There is an acknowledgement of the arts in the city in the form of sculptures, and there are numerous restaurants catering to an ethnically diverse palette. A local college recently accredited with University status lies in the heart of the city.

New Hope is governed by a Mayor and is populated with over 40,000 individuals and up to 10,000 families residing in multi-family and single family homes. There is a 50% homeownership rate in the city of New Hope. According to the United States 2010 Census Bureau, the racial makeup of the city was roughly 80% White, 5% African

---

<sup>4</sup> Chapter Four was co-authored by Ann F. Allwarden, Phillip J. Potenziano, Sujan S. Talukdar, and Karen J. Zaleski.

American, 0.3% Native American, 4% Asian, 0% Pacific Islander, 9% from another race, and 4% from two or more races and more than 20% of the population is made up of Hispanic or Latinos of any race. English is spoken as the first language in more than 75% of the homes. The median income for a household in the city averaged just below \$50,000 and the median income for a family was slightly below \$60,000 (United States Census Bureau, 2010). About 15% of families and 19% of the population were below the poverty line, which included almost 30% of those being under age 18 and roughly 13% of those ages 65 or over (United States Census Bureau, 2010). As of 2011 the crime rate was estimated at roughly 400.1 compared with the U.S. average of 213.6 (City-Data, 2011). New Hope has the highest crime rate in comparison to the eight surrounding towns (City-Data, 2011). The New Hope Police Department responds to over 40,000 incidents each year.

### **Overview of the New Hope Public School District**

The city of New Hope has eight public schools, five private/parochial schools, a regional vocational technical school, and a charter school that services students from the city of New Hope (City of New Hope, 2013). Students are registered and assigned to the public schools based on their primary residence; however, parents have the option of requesting their child's school assignment based on their top 3 choices of schools within the district (City of New Hope, 2013). Students are also accepted into the district by school choice. According to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2013), school choice gives parents the option of seeking school enrollment for their children in a school district outside of their hometown. All

application considerations are processed by the New Hope School District's Director of ELL, who also handles registration for the district. Students are accepted into the only charter school in the district via a lottery.

The public school district serves approximately 4,900 students in grades K-12 and of those, approximately 76% qualify for free and reduced lunch and 21% have individualized special education programs. The student population is identified racially as 44.6% Hispanic, 38.2% White, 5.8% Black/African American, 5.5% Asian, 5.7% Multi-Race, Non-Hispanic and the remaining Native American or Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander. There are different home languages, and 32% of the students speak a first language other than English.

Using 2012-2013 district data, there are approximately 282 full time equivalent teachers in the district. Of those, approximately 258 are White, 16 Hispanic, 5 Black/African American, 2 Asian and 1 Multi-Race Non-Hispanic, with the gender breakdown being 221 females and 61 males. The complete district wide staffing data by race, ethnicity, and gender by full time equivalents is as follows: 602 White, 39 Hispanic, 15 African American/Black, three Asian, one Multi Race Non-Hispanic, 116 males and 544 females for a total of 660 staff.

The New Hope School District has eight district-level leaders and eight school-level leaders (i.e., principals). Interviews were conducted with all eight of the district-level leaders and six out of the eight school-level leaders. The following pseudonyms were given to district-level leaders: Sean, Adrienne, Veronica, Kaydence, Cote, Kelsey, Alicia, and Logan. The pseudonyms assigned to school-level leaders included: Ken, Mary, Brian, Jayden, Joe, Bill, Jamie, and Sharon. Table 4.1 offers additional information about



**Table 4.1***New Hope District- and School-level Leaders*

Participant	District/School	Accountability and Assistance Level 2010-2012	Accountability and Assistance Level 2013
Sean	District	Level 3	Level 3
Adrienne	District	Level 3	Level 3
Veronica	District	Level 3	Level 3
Kaydence	District	Level 3	Level 3
Cote	District	Level 3	Level 3
Kelsey	District	Level 3	Level 3
Alicia	District	Level 3	Level 3
Logan	District	Level 3	Level 3
Ken	Elementary School	Level 2	Level 1
Mary	Elementary School	Level 3	Level 3
Brian	Elementary School	Level 3	Level 3
Jayden	Elementary/Middle School	Insufficient Data	Level 2
Joe	Middle School	Level 3	Level 3
Bill	Middle School	Level 2	Level 2
Jamie	High School	Level 3	Level 3
Sharon	High School	Insufficient Data	Insufficient Data

*Note.* Information shaded in gray indicates the district's top performing schools.

each of the leaders interviewed. This table also includes information about the district's accountability and assistance level, as well as each school's accountability and assistance level.

In the state of Massachusetts, each school is assigned an accountability and assistance level. There are five different levels (1-5). Level 1 status is assigned to the highest performing schools, and Level 5 is assigned to the lowest performing schools.

(Districts are assigned a level based on the level of their lowest performing school.)

Currently, the majority of schools within the state of Massachusetts have been assigned Level 1 or Level 2 status (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary

Education, 2013b). A school assigned a Level 3 status indicates that it is among the lowest performing 20% of schools (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2013a).

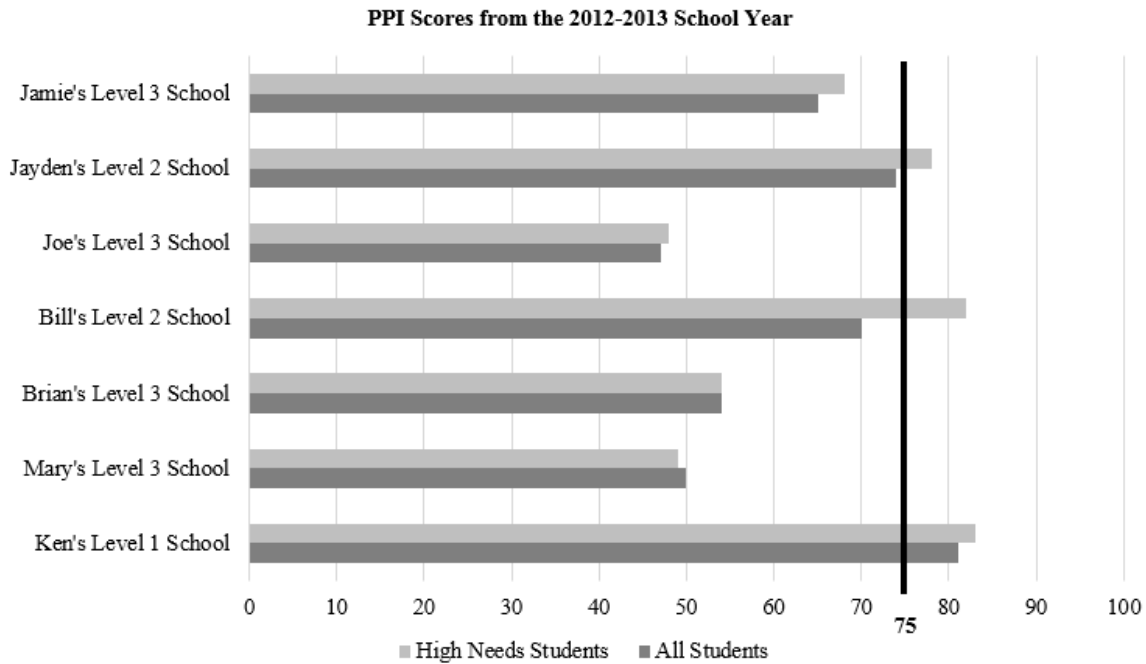
In order to determine the accountability and assistance level for each school, the state uses the Progress and Performance Index (PPI). The PPI “combines information about narrowing proficiency gaps, growth, and graduation and dropout rates into a number between 0 and 100” (MADESE, 2013a, p. 2). A school is considered to be making progress toward narrowing proficiency gaps when the cumulative PPI for both the "all students" group and “high needs” group reaches or surpasses 75 (MADESE, 2013a). The high needs group is comprised of an “unduplicated count” of all students in a school belonging to at least one of the following subgroups: students with disabilities, English language learners (ELL)/Former ELL students, low income students (eligible for free/reduced price school lunch) (MADESE, 2013a, p. 2). The state’s decision to include the high needs group stems from the belief that it will hold “more schools accountable for the performance of students belonging to historically disadvantaged groups” (MADESE, 2013a, p. 2). A school’s level status can change from one year to the next based on their PPI score and their school percentile.

School percentiles (1-99) are reported for schools with at least four years of data.

This number is an indication of the school’s overall performance relative to other schools that serve the same or similar grades. State law requires ESE

[Massachusetts’s Department of Elementary and Secondary Education] to classify a school into Level 3 if it is among the lowest performing 20 percent of schools

**Figure 4.1.** PPI Scores from the 2012-2013 School Year



relative to other schools of the same school type (percentiles 1-20) (MADESE, 2013a, p. 7).

Figure 4.1 illustrates each school's PPI score for "all students" and "high needs" students from the 2012-2013 school year. With the target being 75, some schools seem better positioned to qualify for a move up in accountability and assistance level. The following section will explore further the disparities in student performance at both the district and individual school level.

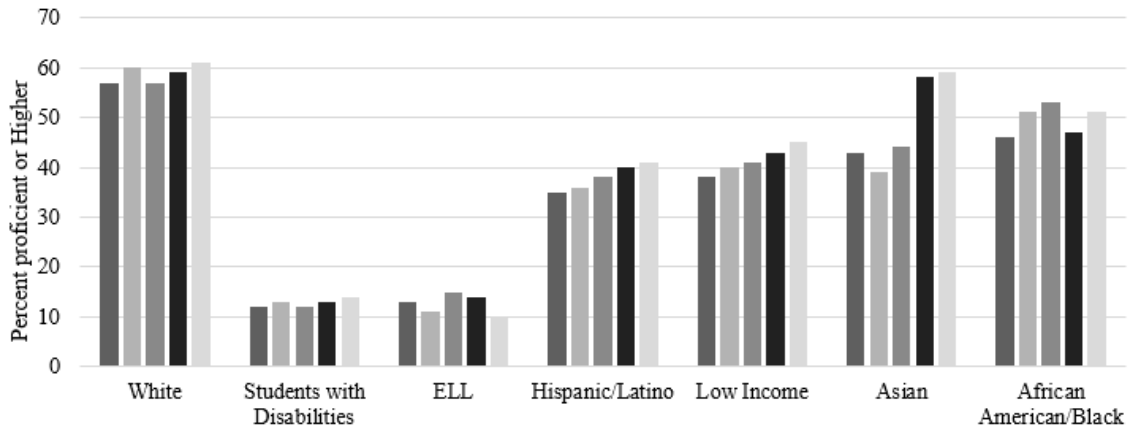
### **Disparities in Student Performance**

In an effort to describe clearly the student performance disparities that exist within the New Hope School District, three key indicators were examined: (a) state achievement tests, (b) graduation rates, and (c) Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) performance reports.

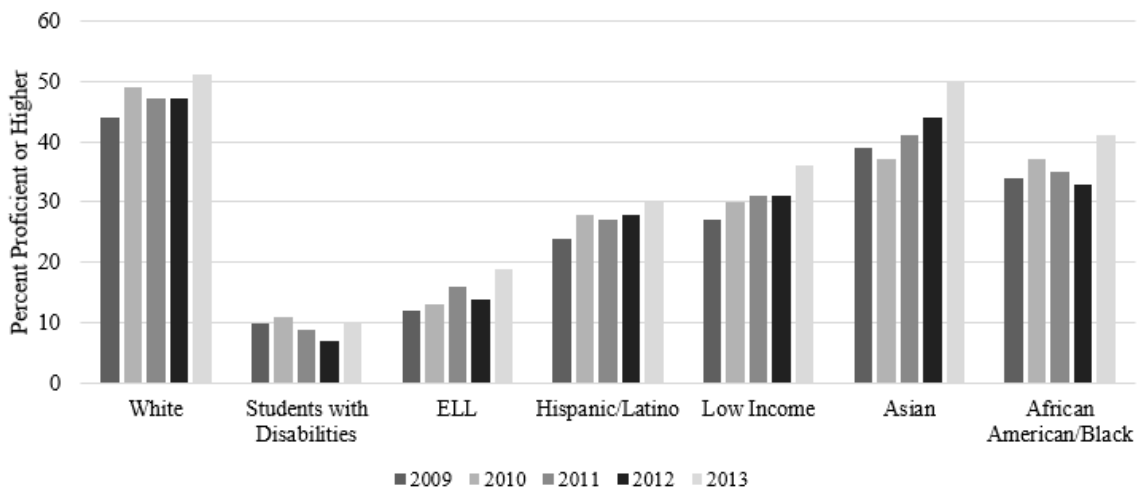
**State achievement tests.** Between the years of 2009 and 2013, an average of 50% of students attending the New Hope School District scored proficient or higher on the English Language Arts (ELA) portion of the state test. On the Mathematics portion of the state test, an average of 40% of New Hope students scored proficient or higher. The disaggregation of this data illustrates the performance differences that exist among the specific student subgroups. As shown in Figures 4.2 and 4.3, the performance of some student subgroups falls substantially below the performance of other student subgroups. The greatest disparities (i.e., “gaps”) in student performance, as measured by the state test, are experienced by Students with Disabilities, ELL students, Hispanic/Latino students, and Low Income students. Discrepancies in performance are evident in both ELA and mathematics for the students in these subgroups.

Table 4.2 provides the same information but disaggregated by school. Similar to district results, the greatest disparities in student performance have been experienced by Students with Disabilities, ELL students, Hispanic/Latino students, and Low Income students. This holds true for student performance in both ELA and mathematics. Table 4.2 also shares the percentage of students statewide who scored proficient or higher on the ELA and mathematics portions of the state test. Comparing individual school results against state results allows for a greater level of analysis. For example, the Students with Disabilities, ELL students, and Low Income students in Ken’s Level 1 elementary school have regularly met or exceeded the state’s performance. This further clarifies why Ken’s school recently moved from Level 2 to Level 1. Another example includes the ELA performance of Low Income students in Bill’s Level 2 school. Students within this subgroup have made steady gains since 2009, culminating in a record high of 52%

**Figure 4.2.** New Hope School District's ELA MCAS Results



**Figure 4.3.** New Hope School District's Mathematics MCAS Results



percent scoring proficient or higher in 2013 which exceeded the state’s performance by two percentage points. Although small, the percentage of Students with Disabilities scoring proficient or higher in Bill’s school has also increased across the last five years. Other “stand outs” include the Students with Disabilities and Low Income students attending Jamie’s Level 3 school. Although the performance of students in these subgroups seems to fluctuate from year to year (rather than demonstrating steady gains), their performance has regularly met or exceeded the state’s performance.

**Table 4.2***Percentage of Students Scoring Proficient or Higher on the State Test*

<b>Ken's Level 1 School</b>										
	<b>ELA Results</b>					<b>Math Results</b>				
	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>
White	45	56	53	62	55	53	49	51	59	53
Asian	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
African American/Black	86	81	69	69	-	71	91	69	69	-
Low Income	40	<b>50</b>	46	<b>56</b>	50	49	41	47	53	49
ELL	18	21	<b>22</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>43</b>
Hispanic/Latino	39	40	36	54	46	43	36	36	47	47
Students w/ Disabilities	22	<b>44</b>	14	23	7	<b>29</b>	<b>28</b>	12	<b>21</b>	<b>24</b>

<b>Mary's Level 3 School</b>										
	<b>ELA Results</b>					<b>Math Results</b>				
	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>
White	49	48	40	41	35	40	55	44	40	43
Asian	13	27	25	55	33	19	9	17	45	41
African American/Black	-	31	47	16	17	-	38	33	23	25
Low Income	24	34	27	27	24	19	<b>37</b>	29	25	34
ELL	12	5	0	0	6	12	9	13	8	21
Hispanic/Latino	30	32	19	16	24	24	31	20	13	30
Students w/ Disabilities	8	6	7	11	5	8	6	7	11	10

<b>Brian's Level 3 School</b>										
	<b>ELA Results</b>					<b>Math Results</b>				
	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>
White	46	50	31	51	51	46	39	44	47	63
Asian	43	21	33	27	40	28	21	33	33	60
African American/Black	31	33	33	36	33	31	25	25	36	41
Low Income	24	30	25	32	33	29	21	27	27	37
ELL	9	14	28	19	16	12	8	10	16	<b>27</b>
Hispanic/Latino	22	29	29	31	28	24	21	26	25	31
Students w/ Disabilities	7	5	2	3	4	9	5	9	3	20

*Note.* Bolded percentages in a high needs category indicate that the percentages were equal to or higher than the state's percentages for that year. <sup>a</sup> A "-" indicates insufficient data. Since data from the state's test was not available for Sharon's high school, her school was not included in the table.

**Table 4.2 (continued)***Percentage of Students Scoring Proficient or Higher on the State Test*

<b>Jayden's Level 2 School</b>										
	<b>ELA Results</b>					<b>Math Results</b>				
	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>
White	-	-	-	-	61	-	-	-	-	50
Asian	-	-	-	-	58	-	-	-	-	50
African American/Black	-	-	-	-	63	-	-	-	-	52
Low Income	-	-	-	-	43	-	-	-	-	37
ELL	-	-	-	-	7	-	-	-	-	13
Hispanic/Latino	-	-	-	-	35	-	-	-	-	32
Students w/ Disabilities	-	-	-	-	12	-	-	-	-	9
<b>Bill's Level 2 School</b>										
	<b>ELA Results</b>					<b>Math Results</b>				
	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>
White	-	53	54	60	63	-	40	36	38	45
Asian	-	39	43	68	65	-	31	34	36	46
African American/Black	-	48	59	48	41	-	24	29	28	26
Low Income	-	40	44	47	52	-	22	23	24	29
ELL	-	21	26	20	7	-	12	15	4	10
Hispanic/Latino	-	39	44	43	49	-	22	25	24	25
Students w/ Disabilities	-	12	17	18	19	-	6	6	9	9
<b>Joe's Level 3 School</b>										
	<b>ELA Results</b>					<b>Math Results</b>				
	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>
White	69	69	68	60	66	51	55	50	47	52
Asian	56	39	42	55	50	43	45	43	37	43
African American/Black	53	54	61	48	45	41	35	29	29	36
Low Income	45	44	47	43	45	31	34	29	30	34
ELL	13	3	6	6	8	7	10	11	6	10
Hispanic/Latino	43	42	43	41	42	27	32	26	27	27
Students w/ Disabilities	16	13	10	7	10	13	14	6	2	6

*Note.* Bolded percentages in a high needs category indicate that the percentages were equal to or higher than the state's percentages for that year. <sup>a</sup> A “-” indicates insufficient data. Since data from the state's test was not available for Sharon's high school, her school was not included in the table.

**Table 4.2 (continued)***Percentage of Students Scoring Proficient or Higher on the State Test*

	<b>Jamie's Level 3 School</b>									
	<b>ELA Results</b>					<b>Math Results</b>				
	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>
White	75	79	85	84	90	62	79	79	76	78
Asian	50	61	78	100	100	57	72	78	83	82
African American/Black	59	71	60	63	88	59	66	53	38	65
Low Income	<b>48</b>	46	<b>63</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>78</b>	44	<b>50</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>58</b>
ELL	25	-	-	-	-	-	<b>60</b>	-	-	-
Hispanic/Latino	41	37	63	58	72	37	43	63	38	51
Students w/ Disabilities	<b>31</b>	14	<b>38</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>54</b>	22	39	38	13	20
	<b>State</b>									
	<b>ELA Results</b>					<b>Math Results</b>				
	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>
White	74	76	77	76	76	63	64	65	66	67
Asian	74	75	77	77	78	73	75	77	77	79
African American/Black	47	47	50	50	51	31	35	34	35	37
Low Income	45	47	49	50	50	33	37	37	38	41
ELL	19	22	22	22	21	22	24	26	24	25
Hispanic/Latino	41	43	45	45	45	30	34	34	34	38
Students w/ Disabilities	28	28	30	31	29	20	21	22	21	23

*Note.* Bolded percentages in a high needs category indicate that the percentages were equal to or higher than the state's percentages for that year. <sup>a</sup> A "-" indicates insufficient data. Since data from the state's test was not available for Sharon's high school, her school was not included in the table.

**Graduation rates.** Between the years of 2009 and 2012, approximately 70% of students attending the New Hope School District graduated. When data on graduation rates is disaggregated by student subgroup, differences once again emerge. Table 4.3 further illustrates the disparities in graduation rates that exist for Students with Disabilities,



**Table 4.3***Four Year Graduation Rate*

	Percentage Graduated				
	<u>2009</u>	<u>2010</u>	<u>2011</u>	<u>2012</u>	<u>Ave.</u>
White	75	74	73	79	<b>75</b>
Asian	79	75	90	93	<b>84</b>
African American/Black	67	70	77	85	<b>75</b>
Low Income	64	62	70	69	<b>66</b>
ELL	55	61	71	74	<b>65</b>
Hispanic/Latino	59	57	63	64	<b>61</b>
Students with Disabilities	55	48	63	65	<b>58</b>

Hispanic/Latino students, ELL students, and Low Income Students when compared to the graduation rates of other student subgroups.

**SAT performance reports.** Reports of students completing the SAT were compiled and reviewed for discrepancies in student performance. The SAT is a college admissions examination that tests skills students have learned while attending school in the areas of reading, writing, and mathematics. In essence, “the SAT provides a trusted, globally recognized indicator of...academic readiness for college” (The College Board, 2013). Upon close examination of the available data regarding the number of high school graduates who completed the SAT between 2009 and 2013, it is interesting to note that in the case of White and Hispanic/Latino, the percentage of students taking the test is inconsistent with the percentage of students that make up these subgroups within the district. In other words, while 40% of the total number of students in the New Hope School District is identified as White, an average of 63% of the SAT test takers were White between 2009 and 2013. Alternatively, while 40% of students are identified as Hispanic/Latino, on average only 17% of students belonging to this subgroup took the

SAT between 2009 and 2013. This also held true when looking at socioeconomic status. While 65% of the total high school population was defined as low income between 2009 and 2013, only 38% of students belonging to this subgroup completed the SAT during those years. Because the number of students who took the SAT that were classified as ELL and Students with Disabilities was so small, performance data was not available for the purpose of making comparisons. When SAT performance data is disaggregated by student subgroup, disparities once again become evident. Table 4.4 illustrates differences among the various student subgroups on the reading and math sections of the SAT.

Across all three indicators (i.e., state achievement tests, graduation rates, and SAT performance reports), discrepancies in the performance of students attending the New Hope School District exist. These disparities in performance correspond to students' race/ethnicity, class, and/or disability.

**Table 4.4.***Performance of New Hope Students in Reading and Mathematics on the SAT*

	<b>SAT Reading Scores</b>					
	<b><u>2009</u></b>	<b><u>2010</u></b>	<b><u>2011</u></b>	<b><u>2012</u></b>	<b><u>2013</u></b>	<b><u>Ave.</u></b>
White	490	483	472	494	469	<b>482</b>
Asian	421	415	387	408	421	<b>410</b>
African American/Black	381	425	426	436	402	<b>414</b>
Low Income	415	427	409	425	415	<b>418</b>
ELL	-	-	-	-	-	-
Hispanic/Latino	423	445	401	412	412	<b>419</b>
Students with Disabilities	-	-	418	-	-	<b>418</b>
	<b>SAT Mathematics Scores</b>					
	<b><u>2009</u></b>	<b><u>2010</u></b>	<b><u>2011</u></b>	<b><u>2012</u></b>	<b><u>2013</u></b>	<b><u>Ave.</u></b>
White	505	481	476	491	474	<b>485</b>
Asian	474	500	431	448	456	<b>462</b>
African American/Black	383	444	413	414	386	<b>408</b>
Low Income	428	446	406	427	412	<b>424</b>
ELL	-	-	-	-	-	-
Hispanic/Latino	420	442	394	420	406	<b>416</b>
Students with Disabilities	-	-	367	-	-	<b>367</b>

## **Chapter Five**

### **Opportunity to Learn: The Role of Professional Learning**

#### **Statement of Purpose**

As a result of discrepancies in academic performance between groups of students (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2010; Education Trust 2010), district- and school-level leaders must determine what influence they can have to rectify this national dilemma. In previous decades, some have described school administrators as ineffective agents of instructional change (Bennett, 1983; Bennett, Finn & Cribb, 1999). However, in the last decade there is an emerging body of research indicating that district-level leaders can have a direct positive impact on student achievement (Honig, 2012; Marzano & Waters, 2009). Persuasive research findings reveal that district-level leaders have the potential to improve teaching and learning in schools and across districts when supporting and partnering with school-level leaders (Honig, 2012; Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, & Newton, 2010; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Skrla & Scheurich, 2003). Copland (2003) supports these findings and adds that through a distributed and shared form of leadership meaningful reform in education can be achieved. Thus, the purpose of this research is to develop an in-depth understanding of how district-level leaders leverage and foster professional learning for school-level leaders as an action to further learn about, understand, and address the barriers that may be inhibiting students' opportunity to learn.

#### **Relevant Background**

Disparities in student learning, particularly for historically marginalized students, are one of the most perplexing challenges for district- and school-level leaders to

effectively address across the United States (Noguera & Akom, 2000; Evans, 2005; Ferguson, 2007; Gardner, 2007). Some have questioned, however, whether district-level leaders can spark the change needed to positively influence student performance. In fact, in his state of education speech in 1987, then U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett described school administrators and school board members as “the blob”—an ineffective group of district leaders that prevented meaningful reform from taking place (Walker, 1987). Superintendents in particular were considered decision-makers and managers responsible to appointed and elected school boards (Alsbury & Whitaker, 2007; Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000). District- and school-level leaders have historically been engaged in activities related to management and viewed as having little impact on instructional improvement (Elmore, 1993; Fink & Resnick, 2001). In fact, some suggested that often they interfere with school improvement efforts (Bennett, 1983; Bennett, Finn & Cribb, 1999). However, by the 1990s and 2000s the evolution of high-stakes accountability systems and district improvement initiatives required a change in the thinking and practice of district- and school-level leaders (Alsbury & Whitaker, 2007; Elmore, 2000; Skrla & Scheurich, 2003). This shift resulted in the emergence of district- and school-level administrators as instructional leaders.

Gay (2004) argues that operational conditions have existed in schools that perpetuate educational inequities following the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision, which mandated equal educational opportunity for all students in a school system free from racial discrimination. One of these operational conditions is the well-documented prevalence of deficit thinking among educators in the United States (Delpit, 1995; Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001; Valencia, 1997; Valencia &

Solórzano, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999). This theory suggests that historically marginalized students and their families are at fault for their own failure in schools. Skrla and Scheurich (2003) suggest that deficit thinking among district school leadership helps to explain why U.S. schools persistently fail to provide students of color, as well as those from low-income backgrounds, fair opportunities to learn. In their study of four Texas school districts, even those district-level leaders who were explicit in their beliefs that all children can learn unknowingly fell victim to deficit thinking. Through the use of accountability systems, inequities based on race and socioeconomic status became undeniable in these districts and students could no longer be entirely blamed for their own failure in schools. As a result, district leaders were forced to acknowledge their unintentional subscription to deficit thinking and abandon excuses previously used to explain underachievement. Once this shift in thinking occurred, shifts in leadership practice followed. While problems relating to achievement gaps did not disappear in these four districts, some improvements were noted. Skrla and Scheurich (2001) contend that when shifts in thinking occur, superintendents are one step closer to learning about, understanding, and addressing the barriers that may be inhibiting students' opportunity to learn. They are also then better positioned to move the entire district toward equity ideals. However, this study left the question of whether superintendents' beliefs and practices influence improvements in student performance unanswered. Though limited, some studies suggest that it can.

In their groundbreaking meta-analysis on quantitative studies of school leadership over the past 25 years, Marzano et al. (2004) concluded that leadership matters and when practiced effectively can have a positive impact on student learning. In fact, they

identified five district-level leadership responsibilities that had a statistically significant correlation with average student achievement. One of these responsibilities was the use of resources to support goals related to achievement and instruction. The authors of this study stated,

It is clear from our analysis that a meaningful commitment of funding must be dedicated to professional development for teachers *and* principals. The professional development supported with this funding should be focused on building the requisite knowledge, skills, and competencies teachers and principals need to accomplish a district's goals. Furthermore, as professional development resources are deployed at the school level, they must be utilized in ways that align schools with district goals (p. 13).

Marzano et al.'s (2004) research further indicates that districts that have advanced success in student performance have done so by establishing what they term as "defined autonomy." This level of independence is characterized as "the expectation and support to lead *within the boundaries defined by the district goal*" (p. 13). Superintendents and other district-level leaders are in a position to systematize district goals in a collaborative manner yet they cannot assume that school leaders will automatically be equipped to carry them out despite their desire to. Therefore, superintendents have a responsibility to support school-leaders' understanding of and efforts to eliminate the achievement gap:

The superintendent who... assures that schools align their use of resources for professional development with district goals, and who monitors and evaluates progress toward goal achievement, is fulfilling multiple responsibilities correlated with high levels of achievement. When this superintendent also encourages strong

school-level leadership and encourages principals and others to assume responsibility for school success, he or she has fulfilled another responsibility; to establish a relationship with school (Marzano et al., p. 13).

Perhaps one of the most notable uses of professional learning with principals took place in Community District 2 in New York City, led by then superintendent Anthony Alvarado (Elmore & Burney, 1997; Fink & Resnick, 2001; Hightower, 2002; Stein & D'Amico, 2002). Alvarado, who spent 10 years as superintendent in District 2, was adamant that all administrators' and teachers' efforts dedicate significant efforts to providing high-quality instruction that would ultimately lead to improvements in student performance. Alvarado viewed principals as change agents and held firm in his belief that principals' capacity would play a strong role in supporting teachers' delivery of instruction in ways that improve learning. Realizing that principals did not automatically possess the skills needed, he devised mechanisms that allowed principals to hone their skills as instructional leaders in order to realize this vision.

In partnership with his newly hired deputy superintendent, Elaine Fink, Alvarado took important steps in developing principals into instructional leaders. They hired and trained principals to serve as instructional leaders that led professional learning communities made up of principals. The communities became known as principal conferences and institutes that provided regular opportunities to discuss reform, share expertise and identify exemplary instructional practice. As described by Fink and Resnick (2001), the district leadership believed "that professional development [at every level was] the centerpiece of administering a district committed to continuous improvement in student learning" (p. 606). Coupled with job-embedded learning



opportunities for teachers, over time these efforts led to district-wide improvement in District 2.

Just as District 2 modeled the way in which district leadership can transform students' opportunities to learn by emphasizing the value of developing the capacity of school-level leaders, research findings by Honig et al. (2010) demonstrate that "school district central office administrators exercise essential leadership, in partnership with school leaders, to build capacity through public educational systems for teaching and learning improvements" (p. iii). By specifically examining the practices of district-level leaders in three large public school systems, they identified five dimensions of central office transformation:

- Dimension 1: Learning-focused partnerships with school principals to deepen principals' instructional leadership practice.
- Dimension 2: Assistance to the central office-principal partnerships.
- Dimension 3: Reorganizing and reculturing of each central office unit, to support central office-principal partnerships and teaching and learning improvement.
- Dimension 4: Stewardship of the overall central office transformation process.
- Dimension 5: Use of evidence throughout the central office to support continual improvement of work practices and relationships with schools (p. v).

It is noteworthy that three of these five dimensions place emphasis on transforming the role of district-level leaders so they may better support the development of school-level leaders as it relates to instructional leadership. Further, these dimensions focus directly on deepening practices of and partnerships between central office and

principals based on evidence that doing so improves student performance substantiated through the districts researched.

Honig et al. (2010) conducted this research in the Atlanta, New York and Oakland school districts, all of which were involved in transforming central office administration practices that explicitly focused on teaching and learning improvement. These districts had strong financial and political support that suggested a greater likelihood that efforts would not be halted due to lack of resources and backing. Though the researchers were able to identify many districts undergoing central office transformation, they were most interested in gleaning practices of districts that demonstrated success as defined by improved teaching and learning that led to gains in student achievement. Through this study, researchers discovered that all three districts reported improvements in student performance, which they contend was due at least in part to the employment of the five dimensions of central office transformation cited previously.

Without proper district-level leadership, effectively addressing disparities in student learning seems unlikely. In fact, Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom (2004) report that existing evidence suggests that the impact of leadership on student learning is second only to classroom teaching and has greater impact on student learning in struggling districts:

While the evidence shows small but significant effects of leadership actions on student learning across the spectrum of schools, existing research also shows that demonstrated effects of successful leadership are considerably greater in schools that are in more difficult circumstances. Indeed, there are virtually no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around without intervention by a

powerful leader. Many other factors may contribute to such turnarounds, but leadership is a catalyst (p. 5).

Some district-level leaders turn to professional learning to transform school leaders' practice in their effort to address disparities in their knowledge about working with diverse students (Spillane, Healey & Parise, 2009). Described as the "ultimate practitioner" (Richardson, 2011), DuFour believes that when leaders recognize their role in developing staff, their approach to professional learning shifts from one-time offerings to ongoing group engagement. It is important to note that this notion of the professional learning community (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Karhanek, 2004) is grounded in the belief that expectations and structures must exist in order for an effective level of staff engagement to occur. Most research on the use of professional learning, however, focuses almost exclusively on principals' use of it with teachers (Spillane et. al., 2009). Currently, only a few studies exist (e.g., Knapp, Copland & Talbert, 2004; Honig et. al, 2010; Leithwood et al. 2004) about district-leaders' use of professional learning to support the development of school-leaders. However, these studies have implications for further research on educational leadership practices. Knapp, Copland and Talbert (2004) highlight five areas of leadership action and other initiatives that may improve student performance and increase professional learning. Honig et al. (2010) also identified specific leadership practices that relate to principals' development as instructional leaders. These practices include, yet are not limited to, engaging in instructional leadership as joint work, differentiating support for principals, modeling the behavior of instructional leaders, and offering job-embedded supports for principal development (Honig et al., 2010). While it is not yet clear whether some or all of the leadership actions identified in

these studies result in student improvements, findings are promising and warrant further exploration. As such, it will be important to examine district-level leaders' use of professional learning to support school-level leaders as a strategy to better understand the factors impacting student performance and in order to create improved opportunities for all students to learn.

### **Methods**

While the overarching focus of our research is to understand the actions of district leaders as they work to address disparities in student performance related to race, ethnicity, class and/or disability, the focus on this specific portion of the study was to develop an in-depth understanding of how district-level leaders leverage and foster professional learning for school-level leaders as an action to further learn about, understand, and address the barriers that may be inhibiting those students' opportunity to learn. As described in our earlier methods section and rationalized through the work of Maxwell (2008), a single qualitative case study was used to learn about the structures, routines and interactions taking place in a small, culturally diverse public school district setting in order to understand the actions of district- and school-level leaders as it related to improving students' opportunities to learn.

A distributed leadership framework was used as a guide to analyze the support school-level leaders received from district-level leaders, and to understand how routines and tools such as professional learning were used to determine the actions necessary to address disparities in student performance. Leithwood et al. (2004) argue that “[n]either superintendents nor principals can do the whole leadership task by themselves. Successful leaders develop and count on contributions from many others in their

organizations” (p. 7). Thus, this research sought to develop an in-depth understanding of how district-level leaders leverage and foster professional learning for school-level leaders as an action to further learn about, understand, and address the barriers that may be inhibiting students’ opportunity to learn.

### Research Participants

The superintendent as well as central office staff and school leaders served as the main participants in this specific portion of the study. As indicated previously, purposeful and reputational sampling was used to identify a superintendent and school district committed to addressing disparities in student learning. Further the sampling included district-level leaders that leveraged professional learning in their attempts to rectify performance gap issues, particularly as they related to disparities in student performance related to race/ethnicity, class, and/or disability. The central office staff in particular included leaders who had explicitly communicated the belief that all students, regardless of their background, can achieve at high levels. Including leaders with this belief system was important because as Skrla and Scheurich (2003) demonstrated in their study of four Texas school districts, when leaders shift away from deficit thinking they are then better positioned to shift leadership practice in order to realize equity ideals. In addition, the district-level leaders included in this study demonstrated through their actions the belief that leaders and organizations can change through learning and effective leadership.

### Data Collection

The superintendent as well as central office and school leaders offered critical information that informed the main research question for this specific portion of the study.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and a review of documents. While all questions offered the potential to yield data that was helpful in understanding how district-level leaders support the professional learning and development of school-level leaders, the interview questions specific to this portion of the research study are listed in Table 5.1.

Once data were gathered, it was coded using an online software tool called Dedoose. In this way, data was readily accessible and was sorted into codes that were relevant for this section of the study. When the larger corpus of data was gathered, specific details collected included:

- a clearly articulated vision, mission and goals communicated by the superintendent of schools;
- actions that demonstrated district- and school-level leaders' beliefs about the value of professional learning, including use of professional learning within their practice or engagement in opportunities available;
- a description of professional development opportunities available to administrators and teachers as outlined in the district Professional Development Plan;
- a record of how frequently and consistency professional learning opportunities were made available, as well as other supports offered to school-level leaders, in order to better understand the value district-level leaders place on it;

**Table 5.1**

*Interview Questions on Professional Learning*

---

**District-Level Leader Questions**

---

How has central office trained school leaders to use student data? (If the interviewee responds that the central office has not trained school leaders, advance directly to question 7.)

- Are there any other supports offered?
- What else helps people to learn how to use data in this district?

What changes have you seen in schools as a result of this training?

Have you seen any changes in the central office as a result of this training?

Do you believe people have changed the way they think about:

- their professional responsibilities?
- collaborating with others?
- student subgroups?

---

**School-Level Leader Questions**

---

How has central office trained school leaders to use student data? (If the interviewee responds that the central office has *not* trained school leaders, advance directly to question 7.)

- Are there any other supports offered?
- What else helps people to learn how to use data in this district?

What changes have you seen in your school as a result of this training?

Have you seen any changes in the central office as a result of this training?

Do you believe people have changed the way they think about:

- their professional responsibilities?
  - collaborating with others?
  - student subgroups?
-

**Interviews.** District- and school-level leaders participated in individual, semi-structured interviews within the school district, which occurred in person. A thorough description of all research participants can be found within the rich description of the city and school district found in the previous chapter of this study. To ensure accuracy, all interviews were recorded using field note-taking and audio devices. Professional transcribing services were used. An interview protocol was used and pre-determined questions were asked. Some questions offered opportunities for district- and school-level leaders to share how professional capacity was strengthened and supported.

**Documents.** In an effort to triangulate data to ensure reliability and trustworthiness, it was important to examine documents that provided information related to district goals and efforts to meet them. The New Hope Public School District's Accelerated Improvement Plan (AIP) and Professional Development Plan, as well as individual school accelerated improvement and sustained improvement plans, proved useful in learning how principals' professional development was supported over time by district-level leaders.

### **Data Analysis**

Once data was collected, it was coded in the way described in the study's overarching methodology section. Coded data was used to identify common endeavors used by district-level leaders to support professional learning for school-level leaders. These endeavors were aimed at strengthening principals' understanding of factors that may be contributing to disparities in student performance as well as the barriers that may be inhibiting students' opportunity to learn. Table 5.2 describes the general codes used for



**Table 5.2***Sample Description of Codes*

---

<b>Code</b>	<b>Description</b>
District Leader Support/Learning Focused Partnerships	Responses describing superintendents' partnering with principals to deepen instructional leadership practice.
District Leader Support/Use of Resources	Responses indicating that the superintendent encourages school principal and staff to assume responsibility for school success through the alignment of resources and professional development with district goals.
District Leader Support/Evidence Use	Use of evidence throughout the central office to support continual improvement of work practices and relationships with schools.
District Leader Support/Defined Autonomy	Responses indicating that the superintendent encourages school principal and staff to assume responsibility for school success through the alignment of resources and professional development with district goals.
Professional Learning/Achievement Gap Understanding	Responses demonstrating administrators' understanding of gaps in student performance or that describe specific steps taken to understand gaps in student performance as a result of professional learning.
Professional Learning/Addressing Achievement Gap	Responses that describe specific steps taken to address gaps in student performance as a result of professional learning.

---

this portion of the study. Theoretically-based and drawn from the literature, the codes presented in Table 5.2 were developed in part on the work of Honig et al. (2010).

In other phases of data analysis, interview responses of district-level and school-level leaders were compared to gain an in-depth understanding of how professional learning was leveraged and fostered. In this way, conclusions were drawn about how and whether district-level leaders used professional learning as a method to successfully prepare school leaders to effectively address achievement gap issues.

## **Results**

The purpose of this section of the qualitative research study is to develop an in-depth understanding of how district leaders of the New Hope School District sought to leverage professional learning for school leaders as an action to further learn about, understand, and address the barriers that may be inhibiting students' opportunity to learn. Analysis of the data and review of documents have resulted in the emergence of a set of findings. These findings indicate that district leaders leveraged professional learning for principals to build capacity, prompt cognitive shifts, and encourage principals' responsibility for school success as an action to improve student performance. They also indicated that while collaboration between district- and school-level leaders occurred within professional learning settings, interactions between principals were limited outside of those settings.

### **Superintendent Initiated Capacity Building**

Interview responses, review of the district's Professional Development Plan, and review of the district's Accelerated Improvement Plan indicated that school leaders engaged in professional learning opportunities arranged by district leaders as a means to learn about, understand, and address gaps in student performance. Interviews revealed that professional learning opportunities were delivered both within and outside of the district. In-district opportunities were developed by administrators and teachers of the New Hope School District and sometimes in partnership with third party affiliates such as the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Out of district professional learning opportunities were offered through third-party vendors (see Table 5.3). Most in-district offerings provided opportunities to examine and discuss the implications of

**Table 5.3***Professional Learning Opportunities Available to District- and School-Level Leaders*

In-District Offerings	Third-Party Offerings
Administrative Council (ADCO) meetings	State training around data use
Full Administrative Council (FADCO) meetings	Research for Better Teaching (RBT)
Traveling Cabinet meetings	National Institute of School Leadership (NISL)
Case-studies (of a school, dept., etc.)	Collaborative Inquiry Training (DSAC)
Professional Learning Communities	Graduate coursework
Coaching (Literacy & Math Coaches)	
Monthly Professional Development Days	
Book studies and online book studies	
Use of collaborative inquiry protocols	
Central Office Liaison to Schools/Principal	

student performance data regularly. The Administrative Council (ADCO)—a combination of central and school-level leaders, Full Administrative Council (FADCO)—which involved the ADCO, all remaining district-leaders and vice principals, as well as traveling cabinet meetings— provided opportunities for central office just a few examples of meetings where leaders could engage in professional learning primarily around the topic of data review and analysis. Professional learning was also supported through job-embedded supports that involved partnerships between central office leaders and school principals. Examples of this included a central office liaison to each school principal as well as instructional coaches in every school.

Third-party offerings were provided by organizations including, yet not limited to, Research for Better Teaching (RBT) and National Institute for School Leadership (NISL). Founded by Dr. Jon Saphier in 1979, RBT offers programs to promote skillful teaching, develop and implement educator evaluation systems, train data coaches and teams, and

develop skillful school leaders. Professional development programs are available outside of school districts and consultants can also be brought in to work directly with staff within districts. According to their online program description, RBT boasts the reputation of having “the longest and most successful track-record of any professional development provider in the United States for developing teacher evaluation systems (1982)” (Research for Better Teaching, 2013). Drawing from effective leadership skills found at military and successful business programs, NISL (2013) is a leadership development program exclusively focused on improving principals’ practice and raising achievement for students. NISL trainings are intended for aspiring leaders, principals, and district leadership teams, and require approximately 30 days to complete, typically over a period of about a year and a half. In addition, they offer an executive development “train-the-trainer” program that is designed to prepare school district leaders to return and deliver NISL leadership training within their own district.

Data analyzed indicated that professional learning opportunities described focused primarily on how to access and analyze student performance data as a means to identify achievement gaps and identify barriers to students’ opportunity to learn. In fact, every district- and school-level leader interviewed described the use and discussion of data as a regular part of their professional discourse.

As will be explained below, some district- and school-level leaders also described how use, discussion, and analysis of data led to the development of actions focused on eliminating gaps in student performance. These actions included a specific focus on improving and increasing literacy instruction across all schools through the use of writing prompts, developing additional Advanced Placement courses and requiring all high

school students to take at least one prior to graduation, monitoring attendance records and targeting support for students to increase attendance rates, as well as other building-based improvements to enhance students' opportunities to learn.

When Sean, the superintendent, was interviewed, he communicated a vision that placed value on becoming familiar with student performance data, as he believed doing so would ultimately improve student outcomes. He did not see the collection and dissemination of data as simply a task of the central office. He believed everyone must take ownership of student learning and that central office must provide the support needed to realize gains: "at one point it was central office need[s] to know the data; then it was really central office and the principals need to know the data; and then there are data people who need to know the data; and now it's every teacher needs to know the data." All district leaders interviewed communicated a belief that principals would be better prepared to devise a course of action to raise student achievement if opportunities to analyze performance data were available.

To carry out his vision, the superintendent, Sean, sought the support of the state Department of Education's District and School Assistance Center (DSAC) to help the New Hope School District "strategically access and use professional development and targeted assistance to improve instruction and raise achievement for all students" (DESE, 2013). With this support, the district developed an Accelerated Improvement Plan (AIP) to address systemic challenges that impact students' opportunity to learn. The use of AIPs is mandated for public school districts with a state accountability status rating of Level 4. However, while New Hope School District had an state accountability status rating of Level 3, the superintendent felt they could benefit from engaging in the AIP process with

the support of its regional DSAC. This is because “the District Accelerated Improvement Process represents a new approach to supporting districts in transforming their work and dramatically increasing student learning outcomes” (DESE, 2013, p. 3).

Consistent with distributed leadership theory (Spillane, 2006; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004; Spillane, Healey & Parise, 2009), goals highlighted in the district’s Accelerated Improvement Plan called for frequent opportunities for administrative staff to share in the work of leadership. Initiative I.2 of the New Hope School District AIP indicated, “the district will establish an organizational structure that promotes collaboration among administrators and assists in identifying positive trends in and impediments to advancing student achievement” (p. 1). As such, the superintendent designed administrative meetings that took place both within and outside of the central office in order to discuss data, share best practices, and develop individual school improvement plans. This resulted in district- and school-level leaders interacting at least every two weeks by way of the ADCO, FADCO and traveling cabinet to talk specifically about disparities in student performance, explore possible barriers to improving achievement, identify positive trends, and devise action plans focused on improving teaching and learning.

Knapp (2003) reported “professional learning could involve changes in one’s capacity for practice (i.e., changes in professionally relevant thinking, knowledge, skills, and habits of mind) and/or changes in practice itself (enacting the new knowledge and skills in one’s daily work)” (pp. 112-113). In essence, the district’s new organizational structure offered regimented professional learning opportunities for district- and school-level leaders in an explicit effort to build the capacity of district and school leaders. These

meetings also heightened visibility of the joint work between central office and school leaders and emphasized the collective responsibility for the work of leadership.

Every leader interviewed described the traveling cabinet meetings. Sean shared, "We used to meet [at the central office] all the time, but now we meet in the school and the school knows we're coming and they're supposed to present their data; where they are, what are they doing with their data teams, what's their biggest weakness, how are they going to address that, and then basically what do you need, what more do you need to do your work."

By offering time to engage in professional learning, central office leaders supported principals' professional growth as instructional leaders dedicated to improving students' opportunity to learn and raising achievement. While there was a heavy emphasis on reviewing data, particularly standardized test scores, this was not simply an exercise to identify existing disparities. It also served as a chance to discuss and develop an understanding of the barriers to student achievement. Equipped with this knowledge and understanding, Sean believed principals were better positioned to devise a school-based AIP which took into account challenges unique to each school community and that specifically addressed obstacles inhibiting students' opportunity to learn.

It was not only the superintendent who spoke of professional learning opportunities, but other leaders as well. Kelsey, a district-level leader, said, "I just know that there seem to be many more meetings in which teachers and principals and coaches gather to look at data and track the data. We're collecting a lot of it, we're communicating a lot of it, we're displaying a lot of it on our walls." Bill, a school-level leader, described his interaction with other leaders via traveling cabinet meetings:

We have been able to look at schools, look at what they're doing, kind of duplicate some of the successes that we've seen out there. And quite frankly, I think that several schools have come here and tried to replicate the systems that we have in place, um, which is always nice too.

Jayden, a school leader, also touched on how central office supported his work with school staff: "This school district has taken full development of professional development time. We have PD days that we use monthly. The other thing that central office has done with administrators is train them to work with teachers." In addition to the ADCO, FADCO and traveling cabinet meetings, the AIP called for developing principals' ability to effectively and consistently observe and provide feedback to teachers. As a result, district leaders offered specific training to principals related to calibrating observations, conducting classroom visits known as walkthroughs, and offering feedback to staff. In this way, the district sought to leverage professional learning to promote high-quality teaching that would result in greater student achievement.

There was evidence, however, that demonstrated problems with the superintendents' efforts to build capacity. Some expressed that more was needed in the area of professional learning to boost the skills of leaders in the district, especially as it related to the use of data. Although data was shared, reviewed and discussed frequently, some wondered whether all leaders truly understood how reviewing data could lead to instructional gains. Kelsey felt more work was needed to translate understanding into action:



I think there's an assumption that people learned tests and measurements in statistics in college, and that the data analysis and interpretation is a skill set that administrators must have in place. So there has been less attention overall to what to do with the data when you have it.

Brian also expressed that the training on the use of data may not be fully sufficient:

I think you have to be trained on how to use data. Again, you know, more data does not necessarily mean good data, and of course you would all know that data can be manipulated as you're trying to skew through all this to get real data from what's happening. And so the district [has not provided] a lot of nuts and bolts.

Some described additional professional learning structures and resources that built upon the knowledge and skills needed to effectively address disparities in student performance. These structures and resources were also intended to strengthen teaching practices so that more students could access the curriculum in a way that was differentiated to meet the needs of all learners. Cote, a district leader, described new staffing hired to build competency among all educators within schools.

Over the past three years we have significantly added to our staffing levels in terms of giving support for coaching and curriculum. We have brought on two curriculum directors who started last year, one in ELA and one in math. We have increased our staffing level, so that in each school we have at least one full-time literacy and one full-time math coach, as well as advanced academic learning coaches in each school.

In schools where improvement was not evident according to standardized testing scores, central office leaders were assigned as liaisons to school principals. This was

intended to further support the professional development and growth of principals. In addition, all school leaders were required to present a plan to accelerate learning to other district- and school-level leaders. Sean, the superintendent, shared, “This year what I did was, the schools that are on an accelerated improvement plan which are the ones that did not go up, they all received a liaison from central office.” Another district leader, Adrienne, spoke of her role as a liaison as well as a resource to others leaders stating, “...we meet with principals to talk about their student improvement plans, I meet with individual principals to talk about special education and their student school improvement plans.”

### **Third-Party Capacity Building**

While some described in-district offerings coordinated by district leaders that aimed to strengthen the principals’ capacity to identify and understand performance gaps using data, there were others that highlighted third-party offerings as effective toward their own professional growth and development (see Table 4.1). One principal, Bill, commented on the value he placed on this type of professional learning opportunity:

Last year we attended...probably half the administrative group attended a collaborative inquiry workshop which was sponsored through DSAC I believe... and Jon Saphier’s...RBT. And that was looking at data, but giving different ways and protocols to look at student data, you know, disaggregated data is one thing but let’s really look at, you know, the smaller pieces to that. How does that impact a particular demographic group? And then, what are the strategies and what are the skills deficits? So, it kind of takes data from the numbers to more of a skills-

based....look at it. And I thought that that was probably some of the best training, and best information that I've had in a number of years.

Another school leader, Jamie, described how he had been encouraged by the superintendent to take advantage of third-party offerings to deepen his professional repertoire:

He promotes doing things like the RBT trainings....I'm in NISL and that's decent. It's a good experience. It's helpful because it gets you thinking. You hear another idea like, "Oh, that's a good thought that they're doing over in [another school district] that I wouldn't have known about if I just stayed in my building all the time and didn't network."

Interviews with district- and school-level leaders revealed that professional learning was leveraged as an action to build capacity so that principals could further learn about what performance gaps currently exist. In addition, specific attention was paid to boosting the skills of principals so they could identify effective teaching practices through classroom observations. As outlined in the New Hope School District AIP, all principals were trained to provide teachers with consistent feedback targeted to improving instruction. However, it was unclear whether this form of professional learning impacted student achievement since it was only recently implemented and future data will need to be reviewed to make this determination. Interview responses further revealed that there were mixed opinions as to whether professional learning truly influenced the way principals understood and therefore addressed barriers that inhibit students' opportunity to learn. While some felt improvements could be made to better support principals as they strive to eliminate gaps in student achievement, all leaders

interviewed agreed that professional learning involving the regular review of data held great potential for improving student performance in the New Hope School District.

### **Prompting Cognitive Shifts**

When asked to describe gaps in academic performance, nearly every administrator interviewed described students from low-income backgrounds, English language learners and students with special needs among those most impacted by gaps in student performance. Review of standardized test scores available through the Department of Education website, and a description of the New Hope Public School District presented earlier in this study, confirmed this to be true. In particular, students with special needs were described as the sub-group in need of most attention. The New Hope School District Improvement Plan reported, “Special education students at every grade level are among our lowest performing students...Due to programmatic/scheduling limitations for these students, they do not access 100% of the mainstream standards-based curriculum” (p. 23). In addition, upon further review of available disaggregated achievement data, it appeared that some of the various sub-groups of students overlapped, meaning that some fell into two or more sub-group designations (e.g., students who were identified as low-income and receiving ELL and special education services).

Cote, a district leader, is one of many interviewed who emphasized the need to address achievement gaps for students with special needs, he said,

[W]e have for a while had underperforming subgroups, and you know primarily the ones that I am aware of and I know that we focused on are SPED, a huge SPED population. I think it’s like 24 percent, and they’re grossly underperforming. Our ELL struggle, and I think our low income and students of

color, there's lots of room for improvement there. So those I know are the subgroups that we have focused quite a bit on and are looking at raising the bar on.

A few research participants described a slowly evolving mindset and practice among staff with regard to the abilities of students receiving special education. Central office leaders and principals noted that, in the past, students with special needs were often educated in separate or substandard classroom settings known as resource rooms. Consequently, all too often some school leaders and teachers viewed these students as belonging to special educators rather than general educators. However, Cote went on to say that central office efforts had been placed on impacting change:

I think there's been a lot of discussion about changing some mind sets in the schools in terms of "my students" and the "SPED students" and trying to incorporate more of they're "our students" and this is what inclusion should look like. And I know we have more; our professional development days have been geared to some of that.

While most professional learning opportunities identified by the majority of research participants focused on data use, some, like Cote, also referenced efforts aimed at addressing deficit thinking that existed among school staff particularly as it related to special education students. These efforts included book studies, case studies, and belief surveys (see Table 5.3). Adrienne, a district leader, shared, "this year we're doing belief surveys, book studies, to get their thinking around, because their thoughts even around inclusion are just, they're archaic and we really need to work with just their belief system..."

Professional learning was fostered through belief surveys and book studies as well as other opportunities (e.g., ADCO, FADCO, and traveling cabinet meetings) to discuss data, identify achievement gaps, and determine a course of action to align the K-12 curriculum. Combined with a clear set of goals and expectations from central office to analyze data in order to best serve all students and eliminate achievement gaps, some school leaders developed an awareness that one of the barriers to students' opportunity to learn was limited access to the general education curriculum for students with special needs. To address this barrier, some schools moved towards greater inclusion of students with special needs in the general education classroom. At one school in particular, superior emphasis had been placed on meeting the needs of all students in an inclusionary classroom setting. In fact, Adrienne highlighted the significant academic gains experienced at this school in the past year as reflected through the state's annual standardized test scores and school accountability rating status. She remarked that this particular school no longer separated students out based on their special education status and believed implementation of the co-teaching model was an action taken to remove a barrier in order to improve student performance, particularly for students with special needs. When speaking about inclusion she stated:

I have sat in one building two years ago where the general ed. teachers actually asked me to come in because they asked to have the special ed. students back in their classroom for instruction. They didn't want them pulled out into the resource room anymore because they felt like they were missing key elements to the common core that they needed to have. So they asked how that can happen and how we can shift that thinking, and that was [our only Level 1 school], and we've

seen the results after two years, that when you shift that professional responsibility, it was a success....so it's really changing the whole scope of how we include kids in the general ed. environment. And you'll see principals...talk about special education students as part of all students, they're not separate...The schools we're still struggling with, you may hear them separate out one population of students from another, but the schools that were a success, like I said with the data, they're all incorporated in; it's all students all the time.

Logan, another district leader, spoke of a different school that promoted equitable learning environments for special education students. He compared two schools and suggested that the more inclusive one enjoyed a higher state accountability rating level because of the changes made to the teaching model versus another that had been slow to implement change:

[T]he high school has shown I think a big improvement in the achievement of the special education population. [A different] school at Level 3 really is, up until maybe this year, they haven't been aligned with what we're trying to do at the district to encourage in terms of inclusion and their approach to their special education subgroup.

Like many other schools in the New Hope School District, at one time the high school separated special education from regular education students. Logan believed through engagement in professional learning activities involving data analysis, the high school principal and staff shifted their mindset about the education of those students identified as special education. Further he felt the principal sought out existing and new staff that shared the same beliefs and values to promote improved opportunities to learn for this

particular subgroup of students. By subscribing to a new way of thinking, deliberate actions were taken to address barriers to students' opportunity to learn. This was made clearer when Logan said:

This is where I think, again, it almost gets really individual. I think it's a function of...each school's leadership and their culture. Again, I'm trying to say this in generic terms but my experience here has been leaders who recognize something has to change will find the people to help them adapt.

Because staff at the high school demonstrated an understanding of the value of inclusion, the principal then worked with them to make changes necessary to enhance students' opportunity to learn. As a result, Logan felt this played a role in improving student performance. He went on to suggest that the lower performing school referenced previously had not yet realized greater achievement for students with special needs because they were not yet fully able to access the curriculum.

Likewise, the superintendent, Sean, expressed his firm belief that inclusion works and that if schools want to improve student performance, staff have to be willing to serve all students, not just some. According to Sean, one elementary school in the New Hope School District proves this theory of action: "So this year, having [a school] move to a Level 1 school and be the school that has the most inclusion of all of our schools shows inclusion works."

One school leader, Jayden, described how professional learning opportunities that focused on data analysis routines prompted conversations about how to address the achievement of low performing student sub-groups. He felt it helped remove the stigma of learning from the leadership and success of others in the district.



We realized that the sharing of best practices...helps us collaborate. And then student sub-groups, we think about...because we're drilling down to all right, what's happening with our low-income children, what's happening with our special ed, and that's driven us to be looking at full inclusion, looking at the way we differentiate instruction.

Though many of the professional learning activities were heavily focused on reviewing and analyzing data, there were other activities designed to shift thinking and practice. Both Veronica and Kaydence, who are district leaders, spoke of book studies and resource sharing that exposed teaching and administrative staff to current literature regarding best practices. Years ago, they had communicated to the previous superintendent that teachers may not be familiar with new information regarding teaching and learning and suggested it may be useful to develop professional learning opportunities for staff. Kaydence shared:

We do a lot of book studies here in New Hope, so Carol Dweck, *Mindset*... We do what we call electronic book studies here, too, so we evaluate the books and a lot of them have to do with something with assessment and data, and then method....

And one of the very first book studies that we did was Nancy Love's *Using Data/Getting Results*.

To prompt shifts in thinking and practice among principals and school staff, district leaders fostered and leveraged professional learning activities. Interview responses suggested professional learning played a role in the way some thought about and in-turn approached their work with particular sub-groups of students (e.g., students with disabilities). In addition, some district- and school-level leaders appeared more

willing to learn from the best practices of schools realizing academic growth. One of the ways in which these educators were able to learn more about successful schools was through professional learning activities (e.g., ADCO, FADCO, traveling cabinet meetings, data, case studies). Therefore, it will be beneficial for district leaders to consider the use of professional learning when seeking to prompt cognitive shifts in order to improve practice and, in turn, student performance.

Interestingly, despite employing an interview protocol that specifically sought information about students categorized by subgroups (i.e., race and ethnicity; ELL, special education and income status), often respondents described students in more general terms. With the exception of speaking about gaps in achievement for students of low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, and English language learners, students' race and/or ethnicity were rarely mentioned in relation to student performance or achievement goals. However, Hispanic/Latino students were amongst those students having the greatest disparities in student performance as measured by state achievement tests, graduation rates and SAT performance reports. Given some of the success evident in the New Hope School District with regard to prompting shifts in thinking about students with disabilities, issues surrounding the correlation between student achievement and race and ethnicity must be addressed head-on. This is even more important given Hispanic/Latino students make up nearly 45% of the total student population. Looking ahead, professional learning opportunities that develop racial awareness among district- and school-level leaders and offer opportunities to engage in courageous conversation about race and ethnicity should be implemented in the New Hope School District.

## Encouraging Responsibility for School Success

It became clear that while teachers were best positioned to directly influence student performance through high-quality teaching, district- and school-level leaders were held responsible for ensuring this happened. Likewise, as evidenced in the New Hope District Improvement Plan (2013), one student learning objective stated: “District and school instructional leaders maintain responsibility for actively monitoring instruction, assessing instructional needs and strengths, and analyzing formative and summative student assessment data” (p. 21). Though encouraged to take responsibility for school success, principals were not left alone to figure out how to accomplish district goals. In fact, as noted previously, by way of the ADCO, FADCO and traveling cabinet meetings, principals participated in activities aimed at strengthening their capacity to use data so they would be better equipped to achieve district goals and lead educational improvements.

New Hope School District had a clear vision and plan for professional learning among teachers *and* administrators. The New Hope School District Professional Development Plan placed emphasis on lifelong learning through the support of a professional, collaborative learning community. This is communicated clearly within the vision statement of the plan where it reads:

Each educator must be committed to being both a leader and a learner: having expertise *while* always learning; providing leadership to new staff *while* engaging in self-reflection; developing independent capabilities *while* collaborating with colleagues to support a strong professional, learning community (p. 3)

The New Hope Professional Development Program was devised to meet the needs of staff and emphasized the importance of being leaders and learners. This 23-page plan was developed by the superintendent of schools and focused on delivering high-quality, effective professional development for all educators. The goal of the plan was to provide significant professional development experiences that led to an “observable impact in the classroom” (p. 5). Because the district relied heavily on state mandated standardized testing data, the researcher was left to believe that an observable impact referred to growth in test scores. In addition, the Professional Development Plan was aligned with the District Improvement Plan and the School Improvement Plans of each of the schools that make up the New Hope School District.

There were many professional development opportunities described in the plan itself that “reflect the New Hope Public Schools’ priorities which encompass state curriculum frameworks/Common core” (p. 2). They ranged from self-directed activities to district sponsored workshops as well as third-party offerings. The plan provided a framework that emphasized particular skills and knowledge that needed to be strengthened across the district through professional development. While most of the plan focused on expanding teacher knowledge specific to content areas, broadening their instructional repertoire, and familiarizing them with the state learning standards and curriculum frameworks, there were some parts that specifically focused on developing the skills of administrators in the district so they can better support teachers to ensure that the needs of all students are met.

In the Professional Development Plan, there were district improvement areas that were aligned to the state’s Educator Evaluation Standards that included categories such as

assessment of data and meeting the needs of diverse learners. With regard to the development of administrators' capacity, the following are a sample of goals highlighted in the Professional Development Plan (2013):

- Increase administrators' and teachers' skills in examining, utilizing and sharing student performance data for instructional change, strategic planning and school program improvement (e.g., collaborative data inquiry process, MCAS teams, CBM, etc) (p. 6)
- Increase administrators' and teachers' skills in using technology and electronic communication to expertly manage the data requirements of the classroom, school, district, state and for planning and parent communication (p. 6)
- Increase administrators' and teachers' understanding, alignment and implementation of the World-class Instructional Development (WIDA) standards and assessments specialized to monitor the progress of English language learners (p. 7).
- Increase administrators' and teachers' knowledge in research-based, academic content areas pertaining to second language acquisition/Rethinking Equity and Teaching for English Language Learners (RETELL) (p. 7).

It is worth noting that within the literature, distinctions are often made between professional development and professional learning. Although often used interchangeably, there are those (Elmore, 2004; Fullan, 2007) who feel the concept of professional development is outdated and characterizes what is "done" to teachers to improve their skills. Fullan (2007) argues that it often involves educators going elsewhere for a workshop or course to learn the skills necessary for instructional improvement. Elmore

(2004) argues that professional learning on the other hand emphasizes ongoing self-reflection, collaboration, and job-related learning within the district that have direct implications for instructional practice leading to improved student achievement. New Hope School District appeared to use these terms interchangeably, and had a combination of both professional development and professional learning opportunities available to teachers and administrators.

As described previously, the state-mandated Accelerated Improvement Plan (AIP) for New Hope School District also emphasized the importance of district- and school-level leaders' roles in improving student performance. The first objective listed in the AIP was aimed at developing the skills of the superintendent and administrators to promote effective teaching and improve student performance. This was to be accomplished through a variety of actions specific to administrator support and professional learning. Two professional development offerings were emphasized. The first was a five-session workshop that enhanced administrators' ability to implement use of the new teacher evaluation system by learning how to “[calibrate] observations and [provide] effective feedback to staff” (p. 1). Logan explained what principals experienced when a third party facilitator conducted these workshops within the ADCO meeting setting:

We shared with all the school principals, each school was anonymous, like A, B, C, D, how they ranked their teachers in the four categories. And we just used percentages, we didn't even use numbers, so you had some schools who ranked their staff 100 percent proficient [based on the evaluation that they had currently done]....And then some schools had a little bit more range, but very few had

people in the lowest category, and very few had teachers in the highest category. So we shared this information, and we had actually had a third party come in to facilitate this, and it actually was kind of the last meeting of basically this program that Sean and this consultant company created in terms in just getting the principals comfortable with the system, calibrating, how to do evaluations and ultimately the data...I think...a major component of that was calibration, so if the three of us are principals and I'm saying everyone is proficient, you're saying there needs improvement. And what I see is we have principals across the spectrum who have now become human resource managers, very active human resource managers, and the reviews that they were accustomed to, that they were historically given are very light, whether it be teachers or their assistant principals or their clerical staff.

The second professional development offering that was emphasized in the AIP involved Learning Walkthrough training that helped principals understand how to both conduct frequent classroom visits and initiate dialogue about instructional improvement. According to the state department's Learning Walkthrough Implementation Guide (2013), Learning Walkthroughs "are NOT intended to serve as a means of evaluating individual teachers" (p. 2). Instead, it is an opportunity to gather information about teaching and learning within the classroom and monitor school-wide progress. It also encouraged collaborative conversations between school staff in an effort to understand what instructional practices are optimal for student learning. DuFour (2002) described how principals foster structural and cultural transformation in their schools when they focus on student learning. He felt "educators are gradually redefining the role of principal from

instructional leader with a focus on teaching to leader of a professional community with a focus on learning” (p. 4). Learning walks are one tool that can be used to promote collaborative learning within a school that results in improved instruction that supports student achievement.

In order to provide principals with time to conduct learning walks, the superintendent created a new position named the Student Program Support Administrator. This role was created to free up principals from mundane tasks (e.g., student discipline) so they may instead spend more time in classrooms and hone their skills as instructional leaders in their effort to support the development of a district committed to continuous improvement for student learning. Sean described this when he said:

Last year my expectation was that every principal and assistant principal be in the classroom two and a half to three hours a day, and they have to submit a log to me on Friday showing me what they’ve done, where they’ve been, how many hours. Well, I couldn’t ask them to do that if they were having to do all the other, so the student program support administrator also takes on some of the discipline so that the principals and assistants can actually be in classrooms. That was the biggest change; that changed the whole culture.

Kaydence, a district leader, described the impact she believed Learning Walk training and time to conduct walkthroughs had on professional practice:

Well, we actually...do walkthroughs, we do a lot of those types of learning walks actually engaging the staff in what are you using for instructional practices. And I think that [teachers] not really closing doors anymore. [Teachers] haven’t flung them all completely wide open, but when [evaluators] would go through as far as



learning walks and say this is what we're looking for, and then we would debrief the staff afterwards as far as what was seen in a school.

In addition to aligning professional development for administrators and staff with district goals, central office provided job-embedded supports to sustain the work of leadership in order to improve student outcomes. Assigning central office liaisons to principals of struggling schools, adding full-time literacy and math coaches, and adding student support program administrators at every school further supported professional learning. Leaders at both the district and school levels described how resources that support professional learning encouraged principals to take responsibility for school success. Jayden, a school leader, described a feeling of empowerment as a result of district-level support and the autonomy he enjoys. Referring to photos of students on the data wall in his school he said,

I think that the professional responsibility, the ownership of the performing to children, I think just in this room the fact that there's pictures on [the wall] put's a name with a face and they're all children that we're responsible for and the outcome is our responsibility. But I also think that one of the things that's been key to the success of the school is because, with our autonomy, we're also now having control of the input. And I think all too often in systems, you're responsible for the output but you have no say in the input.

The superintendent of schools, Sean, echoed the freedom and flexibility described by Jayden. He felt confident that because of their improved capacity to make data-based decisions, principals were better equipped to determine what was needed to accelerate academic improvement in their schools. As such, principals were required to have direct

input on how their school goals would be aligned to district goals by devising either an accelerated or sustained improvement plan for their respective school. Sean noted:

One of the things that I've done, we're on an accelerated improvement plan with the state....and so this year I had every principal write either, if they moved up a level they were to write a sustained improvement plan, and if they didn't they were to write an accelerated improvement plan. So, to try to take a model that they're familiar with and replicate that model at the school level instead of inventing something new, so that's very heavily data driven. And that's what we're hearing from all of our principals that are presenting that have had success— it's been about data-data-data.

Jamie, the leader of a school that continues to seek improvement, also described encouragement he received by way of his central office liaison when sharing, "It's support over compliance. Now, we have to be compliant too, but it's not just about compliance." Jamie understood that he was responsible for understanding the needs of the school community and making use of this awareness to take steps that improve student performance. However, he knew that if help was required at any time he could reach out to district leaders for guidance and additional resources. Jamie said, "The model here is not micromanaging." When describing support from the superintendent, he said,

It's more supportive kind of, 'We're in this together'....if you get in too deep, if you're way down in the tunnel and you need to see the light, Sean will kind of just come out for a second [and say,] 'Look out here. There are some trees.' Because that can happen to you."

Brian, another school leader, also described reaching out to district leaders for guidance. He indicated that when support was needed from central office, resources were recommended to him. “I think they would get me the resources I need, or put me in contact with the person I needed to be in contact with, but it would be my responsibility to follow through.” In fact, Brian described a time when he discussed with the superintendent his desire to work more effectively and represent data better:

One of his recommendations to me was to go to Veronica, [another district leader], and ask her to set me up with some DSAC members on data. I guess there’s a specific DSAC member who does data analysis. So he said, ‘You should really make an outreach to him and have him come in and help you.’

Some district- and school-level leaders also expressed the limitations of putting so much accountability in the hands of principals to realize achievement gains. Jayden, a school leader that appreciated the autonomy he was afforded, said:

It’s being left up to the principals, and I would wonder if the efficacy of some of the lower performing schools is they don’t know really how to – because the district mandates a lot of data collection, a lot of data collection, and I’m not sure they’ve trained us very well and some people might need better training on how to use that data to drive instruction.

Interview responses suggested that district leaders reinforced professional learning by aligning resources with district goals and providing job-embedded supports to principals to encourage responsibility for school success. Though principals expressed varying opinions about the value of such supports, review of documents and interview

transcripts indicated that supports were at minimum made available by district leaders and were in use by school principals.

### **Collaboration**

There were some leaders who felt more could be done to directly support the growth of principals through collaboration in order to realize performance gains.

According to Friend and Cook (1992), there are six conditions necessary for collaboration. They contend that collaboration:

- is based on mutual goals;
- requires parity among participants;
- depends on shared responsibility for participation;
- requires shared responsibility for outcomes;
- requires that participants share their resources; and
- is a voluntary relationship.

While district- and school-level leaders collaboratively reviewed and analyzed data, and learned how to calibrate feedback and learning walks through experiences in ADCO, FADCO and traveling cabinet meetings, it was unclear whether true collaborative partnerships were established. District leaders did not appear to set a clear expectation that participants share resources. Alternatively, they held principals accountable for the progress at their own school. While district-level leaders, particularly Sean, expressed collaboration between school-level leaders occurred regularly, interviews with principals revealed it did not happen so frequently.

Brian felt more collaboration and sharing of best practices was needed to support improvement across schools, and that opportunities were missed where additional

professional learning could occur. After attending a school committee meeting the night before, he described learning about specific initiatives taking place at one of the top performing schools in the district, “what was interesting to hear was what they were doing. And I’m going into my third year and this is the first time I’m hearing these things, and I’m thinking to myself, ‘Wow, I’m hearing that as a briefing to school committee. I should have known that stuff.’” Although some district- and school-level leaders felt different, Brian also shared that he had never been afforded the opportunity to visit other schools nor had he seen it as an expectation by district leaders. However, he did not state whether he had ever asked district leaders to take time to learn from and collaborate with principals outside of ADCO, FADCO and traveling cabinet meetings.

Jayden also spoke about the lack of collaboration between schools and their leaders:

There are no forged partnerships in collaboration. Well, it’s been a very competitive situation I’ve walked into. They’ve pitted schools against each other and things of that nature, and using data to do that and so it’s been a little adversarial.

Joe, a school principal of a school ranked lower than others, felt that it was not even realistic to see other schools as resources. He believed some schools were so different than his that it was not a matter of replicating practices another school has done successfully.

The district is really set up like silos....It’s not like I’m going to ask one of the other....principals, well, how did you do this?....You know, if I said how do you

do this, nine times out of ten it's going to be something that I don't have here anyways.

Through new structures and routines, such as ADCO, FADCO, traveling cabinet and Learning Walks, the superintendent created opportunities for district- and school-level leaders to engage in professional learning. These structures and routines offered settings where leaders met to review data, identify student performance gaps and positive trends, and receive training explicitly tied to goals in the New Hope School District AIP. However, while leaders learned together regularly in a professional setting, these opportunities did not automatically result in the development of trusting, mutual ties between district- and school-level leaders. Evident was a lack of collaboration between principals outside of district-mandated meetings. It is unclear whether this was due to lack of expectation, structure, interest or time. As such, given the districts' efforts focused on strengthening classroom instruction and improving student performance, school principals did not consistently collaborate in order to draw from the knowledge, expertise, and best practices available across the district.

### **Discussion**

This research study offers insight into how professional learning is leveraged by district leaders to learn about, understand and address barriers to students' opportunity to learn in a single, culturally diverse public school district. Prior studies of school districts using professional learning to promote student progress (Elmore & Burney, 1997; Fink & Resnick, 2001; Hightower, 2002; Honig et. al 2010; Stein & D'Amico, 2002) suggest that district leadership can transform students' opportunities to learn by developing the capacity of school-level leaders. Marzano et al. (2004) identified five district-level

leadership responsibilities that had a statistically significant correlation with average student achievement, one of which was the use of resources to support goals related to achievement and instruction. Designation as a Level 3 district according to the state's accountability rating system served as a catalyst for change in the City of New Hope. In their efforts to improve teaching and learning, New Hope School District leaders accessed resources through the state Department of Education's District and School Assistance Center (DSAC) and third-party vendors in order to develop and offer the professional development to district- and school-level leaders. This was not required of Level 3 school districts, however, the superintendent believed DSACs support in the development of a district accelerated improvement plan would improve the skills of all administrators to foster effective teaching in order to improve student achievement. As evidenced by interview responses of district- and school-level leaders, some believed professional learning opportunities and additional resources available through DSAC allowed for the acquisition of requisite skills, knowledge, and competencies needed to achieve goals of the New Hope School District. Research findings further suggest that these efforts played a role in raising student performance as revealed through growth in standardized test scores at schools implementing equitable teaching practices (e.g., full-inclusion and AP course requirement), therefore confirming prior research findings by Marzano et al. (2004).

Marzano et al.'s (2004) research indicated that districts that have successfully advanced student learning have done so by establishing defined autonomy. Sean, New Hope School District superintendent, afforded principals with the freedom to determine how to best address gaps in student performance at their respective schools yet only after

providing clear expectations and supports to assist in their pursuits to accelerate student learning. Additionally, through the regular review of student performance data, assignment of central office liaisons, and implementation of Learning Walks, the superintendent was able to monitor and evaluate progress toward fulfilling professional responsibilities and achieving district goals. By doing so, he encouraged principals to assume responsibility for school success and, as Marzano et al. suggests, fulfilled multiple responsibilities correlated with high levels of achievement. Consistent with prior research, this proved effective in at least some schools over the past year as evidenced by improvements in student outcomes that occurred at those schools implementing new strategies with fidelity.

Similarly, research by Honig et al. (2010) reported that in partnership with principals, district leadership plays a critical role in building capacity that results in teaching and learning advancements across the school system. They identified five dimensions of central office transformation that revamp the role of central office staff to better support the needs and development of school principals. The New Hope School District offered clear examples of how the role of central office had changed in this way. Structures and routines were developed by district leaders to strengthen practices and partnerships between district- and school-level leaders in their effort to improve student performance.

Transforming the role of central office and creating professional learning opportunities focused on student performance through data review provided principals the chance to discover the value of goal-oriented collegial exchange. However, collaboration and mutual exchange did not appear to continue outside of ADCO, FADCO,



and traveling cabinet meetings. Future efforts should involve establishing a requirement that principals share their successes with regard to improvements in teaching and learning resulting in high student performance. In addition, structures and routines should be developed in order to allow principals opportunities to visit each other's schools in order to identify best practices.

Though much of the research on Professional Learning Communities focuses on the collaborative efforts of teachers, if applied to the work of leaders DuFour and Burnette (2002) would argue that superintendents' job is not merely to provide time for groups of district- and school-level leaders to meet, but also "monitor the work of teams by insisting they produce specific documents and artifacts that demonstrate the collective efforts of the team" (p. 3). The New Hope School District superintendent took positive steps to support principals in their efforts to enhance some of the skills needed to assume responsibility for teaching and learning improvements. Moving forward, the superintendent must deepen the dialogue around instructional issues beyond data review and encourage principals to view each other as resources so they can solve problems collectively rather than in isolation.

Consideration should also be given to implementing multicultural and anti-racist professional learning opportunities in order to continue to prompt shifts in teacher beliefs. While anti-racist and multicultural education are closely related in the goal to improve student outcomes, Kailin (1998) believes that multicultural education is a non-threatening way to address the gaps in student performance because it is focused around building teachers' and students' cultural awareness rather than tackling structural aspects of racism. Kailin (1998) further argues that an anti-racist approach to education must focus

on the deliberate dismantling of racism whereas multicultural education strives to broaden teachers' understanding of the diverse histories of students they serve as a means to empower them. It is important to note, however, that ultimately multicultural education and antiracism both seek raise the academic achievement of students of color while nurturing the growth of all students. By implementing multicultural and anti-racist professional learning opportunities, administrators of the New Hope School District will be better equipped to learn about, understand and address the undeniable correlation between students' race and ethnicity and disparities in student performance.

There are prevailing approaches to multicultural and anti-racist professional development and learning that espouse to reduce the achievement gap while transforming teacher beliefs (Ferguson, 2007; Howard, 2007; Singleton & Linton, 2006; Skrla, McKenzie & Scheurich, 2009). Ferguson (2007) is responsible for putting forth a conceptual framework titled the Tripod Project, which aims to close the achievement gap by addressing the three legs of the "tripod": content, pedagogy and relationships. He argues that in order to reduce achievement gaps, content must be accessible and culturally relevant, pedagogy must involve varied approaches to meeting students' needs, and teachers must develop meaningful relationships with students while maintaining high expectations for ALL students.

Skrla et al. (2009) describe the need to use Equity Audits as a means to creating equitable and excellent schools. They contend that by assessing the equity and inequity of programs, as well as teacher quality and achievement, school leaders will be better prepared to develop an action plan that uncompromisingly promotes educational equity. They describe particular skills teachers must develop to improve their practice that

include clearly communicating expectations, stimulating students with high-level tasks, and using an asset-based approach when working with diverse populations.

While experienced, there are high-quality teachers within the New Hope School District that possess many of the skills needed to serve diverse students effectively, Singleton and Linton (2006) argue that in order to reduce the “racial” achievement gap, educators must be willing to engage in courageous conversations about race. Additionally, they and many others (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Gay & Howard, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Lawrence & Tatum, 1997; Nieto, 2000; Tatum, 1997) believe it is critical for teachers to explore their own racial identities and consider how it affects their teaching of students, particularly students of color (i.e., Asian American, Hispanic/Latino, Black/African-American, Multiracial and Native American). The research of Singleton and Linton (2006) indicates when white teachers were able to relate to their diverse students experiences, and as they developed cultural awareness or competence, a narrowing of the achievement gap occurred. Given over 90% of administrators and teachers in the New Hope School District are white while over 60% of students identify as students of color, and in light of the existing racial achievement gap as measured across three performance indicators (i.e., state achievement tests, graduation rates, and SAT performance reports), serious consideration should be given to implementing multicultural and anti-racist professional learning opportunities.

Based on existing evidence, Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom (2004) reported that the impact of district leadership is second only to classroom teaching when it comes to student learning. They also provided evidence that revealed the impact of leadership on student learning is greatest in districts struggling the

most. With a state accountability rating of Level 3, New Hope School District is considered a district capable of significant improvement. District leaders, particularly the superintendent, recognized the impact they could have to improve students' opportunity to learn. As such, district leaders sought to leverage professional learning to support attempts to eliminate the achievement gap, particularly for students with disabilities and also for those from low-income backgrounds as well as ELL and Latino students. While there is still improvement to be made, the superintendent noted that the 2012-13 school year was the first time in his eight-year tenure that any school had improved their state accountability rating level. Therefore, the research findings of this study suggest that leveraging professional learning to build principal capacity generated momentum with regard to raising student achievement in the New Hope School District.

As mentioned previously, only few studies exist (e.g., Knapp, Copland & Talbert, 2004; Honig et. al, 2010; Leithwood et al. 2004) about district-leaders use of professional learning to support the development of school-leaders. In fact, most research focuses almost exclusively on principals' use of professional learning with teachers. This research study adds to the body of literature available. Further, while this study does not contribute new information to the developing body of literature surrounding the use of professional learning with principals as a means to improve students' opportunities to learn, it confirms the existing theoretical knowledge base.

This research study developed an in-depth understanding of how district-level leaders leverage and foster professional learning for school-level leaders as an action to further learn about, understand, and address the barriers that may be inhibiting students' opportunity to learn. New Hope School District offered specific examples of professional

learning structures and routines available to district- and school-level leaders. Findings indicated that district leaders sought to leverage professional learning for principals to build capacity, prompt cognitive shifts, and encourage responsibility for school success. In this way, district- and school-leaders were better equipped to learn about existing disparities and to consider strategies to eliminate achievement gaps. However, findings were inconclusive as to whether professional learning truly influenced the way principals understood and therefore addressed barriers that inhibit students' opportunity to learn.

### **Study Limitations**

This research study was conducted by four individuals attempting to understand how district- and school-level leaders' understanding of the achievement disparities influences the work of leadership focused on addressing disparities in student performance related to race and ethnicity, class and/or disability. In addition, each researcher focused on specific ways leaders went about helping the school community to face the problem of student performance gaps. As with all research studies, limitations exist. This case study involved a single, small, culturally diverse school district. Future research efforts may focus on multiple districts to gain a more comprehensive and generalizable understandings of how district-level leaders leverage professional learning with school-level leaders to learn about, understand and address disparities in student performance.

This portion of the research study focused on understanding how district-level leaders supported the development of school-level leaders through the use of professional learning in order to understand and address barriers to students' opportunity to learn. Thus, only district- and school-level leaders were interviewed. As such, another

limitation of this study was that some school-level leaders did not participate in the interviews conducted by the researchers. Participation was optional and some leaders did not join the study because they were unavailable or failed to respond to requests made to include them. In addition, some members of the school community were not interviewed, including individuals who filled the role of Student Program Support Administrator as well as teachers and students in the district. Because the researcher of this portion of the study sought to understand district leaders' use of professional learning with principals to learn about and address barriers to students' opportunities to learn, limiting interviews to district- and school-level had potential implications for the overall conclusions drawn. Future research efforts involving staff at all levels could help to address this limitation and assist in uncovering the true impact of professional learning for principals on teaching and learning efforts.

## Chapter Six<sup>5</sup>

### Discussion and Recommendations

This research study applied the distributed leadership theoretical framework to explore the following research questions: How do district- and school-level leaders understand disparities in student performance related to race/ethnicity, class and/or disability? How do these understandings then influence the work of leadership that focuses on addressing disparities in race/ethnicity, class, and/or disability? The distributed leadership framework allowed for a focus on interactions and the practice of leadership (Spillane, 2006; Spillane et al., 2004; Spillane et al., 2009; Spillane & Sherer, 2011). Specifically, the practice of leadership focused on the interactions of district- and school-level leaders and aspects of their work such as the tools and routines utilized to address disparities in student performance and broaden students' opportunity to learn (Spillane, 2006; Spillane & Sherer, 2011).

In this study, four researchers (Allwarden 2014; Potenziano, 2014; Talukdar, 2014; Zaleski, 2014) examined specific actions of district- and school level leaders as they engaged in the work of understanding and addressing barriers to students' opportunity to learn. In an attempt to answer the overarching research questions, each researcher examined separate aspects of the central phenomenon, including:

- The specific shifts in thinking that district- and school-level leaders identified as needed before disparities in student performance related to race/ethnicity, class, and/or disability could be effectively addressed, as well as the strategies district- and school-level leaders used in their attempts to prompt these shifts in thinking.

---

<sup>5</sup> Chapter Six was co-authored by Ann F. Allwarden, Phillip J. Potenziano, Sujan S. Talukdar, and Karen J. Zaleski.

- The professional learning leveraged by district-level leaders for school-level leaders as an action to further learn about, understand, and address the barriers that may be inhibiting students' opportunity to learn.
- The data analysis structures and routines that district- and school-level leaders perceived to be essential in understanding and addressing disparities in student performance related to race/ethnicity, class, and/or disability, as well as promoting students' opportunity to learn.
- The influence that interactions between district- and school-level leaders had on their understanding of barriers to students' opportunity to learn, as well as the influence that existing ties between district- and school-level leaders had on their practice aimed at improving students' opportunity to learn.

The following discussion synthesizes insights drawn from the four individual studies. These insights were gained by searching for complementary results based on the “complementarity model of triangulation” (Erzberger & Kelle, 2003, p.469). Applying the complementarity model of triangulation involved reviewing the individual studies for findings that complemented one another. Because the complementary findings were drawn from individual studies that highlighted very different aspects of the central phenomenon, these findings offer a stronger depiction of the topic being analyzed (Erzberger & Kelle, 2003) and further inform current understandings about the work of leadership focused on addressing disparities in student performance and enhancing students' opportunity to learn.

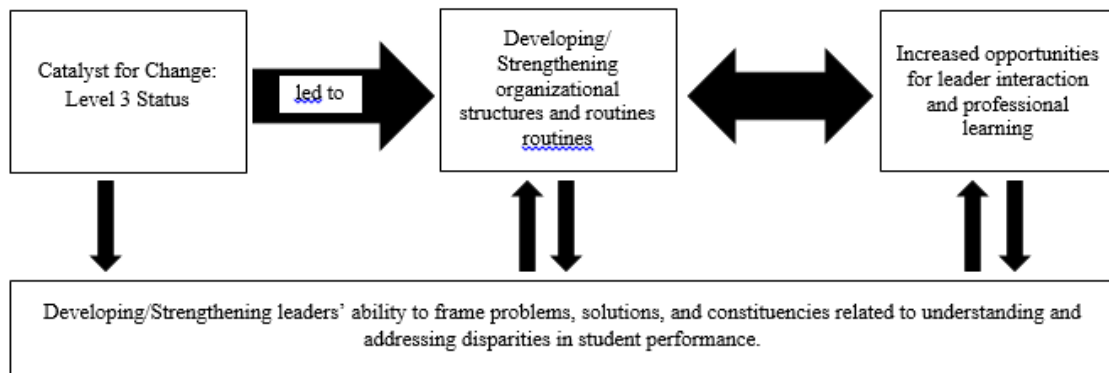


## Complementary Findings

**Level 3 status: Catalyst for change.** Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) emphasized that initiating change often triggers cyclical patterns of acquiring knowledge and taking action. Insights from across the studies revealed that the designation of Level 3 state accountability and assistance\_status served as a catalyst for change in the New Hope School District. The assignment of Level 3 status led to the development of new organizational structures and routines, which, in turn, supported patterns of acquiring knowledge and taking action. Specifically, the development of new organizational structures and routines led to (a) increased opportunities for leaders to interact with one another and (b) enhanced opportunities for leaders to engage in professional learning. Furthermore, since the structures and routines described by district- and school-level leaders occurred regularly (e.g., weekly, monthly, quarterly), leaders were provided with ongoing support as they grappled with understanding—or further developing their understanding—of barriers hindering students’ opportunity to learn. Additionally, the development of new organizational structures and routines provided leaders with a forum for presenting their plans for addressing disparities in student performance, as well as presenting the outcomes that resulted from actions taken. Ultimately, the opportunities that accompanied the establishment of new organizational structures and routines further supported and strengthened the development of shared understandings among district- and school-level leaders regarding why particular student performance gaps exist and how to most effectively address existing performance gaps.

Figure 6.1 depicts the relationship between the catalyst for change, the development of organizational structures and routines, and the increased opportunities for

**Figure 6.1.** The Interrelationship of Elements Studied



leader interaction and professional learning. Figure 6.1 also illustrates the relationship between these three elements and leaders' ability to frame problems, solutions and constituencies related to disparities in student performance. While the individual researchers of this study looked at specific aspects of leadership in isolation, Figure 6.1 offers a broader, more complete picture of how these elements interacted and influenced one another in real life.

As a result of the Level 3 status, district-level leaders sought out and established a partnership with the District and School Assistance Center (DSAC), a state sponsored organization. This partnership led to the establishment of new structures and routines which afforded on-going opportunities to conduct in-depth analyses of (a) disparities in student performance, (b) barriers in the learning environment, and (c) organizational challenges related to students' opportunity to learn. Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) emphasize the importance of analyzing situations in an objective fashion and framing issues from a different perspective when working to address long-standing disparities in student performance. The partnership with DSAC led to the construction of structures and the development of routines that supported this aspect of leadership work.

As leaders came together to analyze disparities in student performance, barriers in the learning environment, and organizational challenges related to students' opportunity to learn, the learning environment within the district was further enhanced. The interactions that took place within this learning environment between district- and school-level leaders were examined as a critical element relating to school improvement (Daly & Finnigan, 2010, 2011, 2012). Sean's statement captures the value of these interactions when he offered, "The DSAC team assisted the district by meeting with school and district leaders monthly, and sometimes more often, and has supported and assisted us with collaborating, analyzing data, and creating the Accelerated Improvement Plan (AIP)." Frequently, interactions between district- and school-level leaders occurred during ADCO, FADCO and traveling cabinet meetings. These meetings offered leaders regular opportunities to engage in professional learning that enhanced their capacity to (a) identify and describe gaps in student performance and (b) consider and explore potential barriers to student learning. In other words, these meetings offered leaders opportunities "to engage in continuous and sustained learning about their practice in the setting where they actually work...confronting similar problems of practice" (Elmore, 2004, p. 127).

Finnigan and Daly (2010) remind us that sharing knowledge and mobilizing resources embedded in individual interactions is critical to influencing practice and enhancing success in "purposive action" (p. 180). The assignment of Level 3 status triggered the mobilizing of resources to develop new structures and routines, which then enhanced leaders' ability to share knowledge and take purposive action. Purposive action taken by district- and school-level leaders included attempts to prompt a common set of shifts in thinking, which focused on distributing across the district a shared understanding

that would support collective action. The actions taken were deliberate (thought about and discussed), developmental (designed to assist with growth and bring about improvement), and progressive (kept moving forward), with the intent of ensuring that students' opportunity to learn was enhanced. These actions supported understanding student performance disparities and informed solutions to address barriers to students' opportunity to learn.

The leaders in the New Hope School District also used organizational routines and structures to help distribute leadership responsibilities (Spillane, 2006). Prior to the Level 3 designation, structures and routines were in place that required district- and school-level leaders to meet. However, leaders were not required to collectively identify and develop a shared understanding of achievement disparities. Following Level 3 designation, enhanced and newly created structures and routines helped promote collaboration and build robust intra-organizational ties (Chrispeels, 2004; Honig, 2004; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). The use of the structures and routines also played a critical role in guiding the New Hope School District in their development of a clearly aligned vision and mission (Harris, Leithwood, Day, Sammons & Hopkins, 2007; Waters & Marzano, 2006).

**Structures and routines led to shared understandings and collective action.**

New Hope School District leaders described specific structures and routines that had been set in place to support collaboration between district- and school-level leaders, as well as to support data use practices. The Administrative Council (ADCO), Full Administrative Council (FADCO), traveling cabinet, DSAC meetings, and the Accelerated Improvement Plan (AIP) were examples of structures and routines put in place to support collaboration

and data use among district- and school-level leaders. In addition, these structures allowed leaders to engage in ongoing professional learning. Spillane (2006) describes this leadership practice as “a product of the joint interactions of school *leaders, followers*, and aspects of their *situation* such as tools and routines” (p. 3).

According to the distributed leadership framework, the structures used within the New Hope School District can be thought of as tools and routines because they involved recurring patterns of “interdependent actions, involving multiple actors” (Feldman & Pentland, 2003, p. 311). For instance, the traveling cabinet structure supported the routine of leaders meeting regularly to engage in ongoing professional learning that involved the frequent review and analysis of student performance data. Established structures and routines also sought to allow district- and school-level leaders to develop an understanding of the opportunity gaps present in the learning environment. The action planning template and the AIP that leaders created in partnership with DSAC facilitated this understanding. As a result, leaders’ ability to recognize barriers was evident in the areas of leadership skills, curriculum alignment and implementation, and instructional practice. More specifically, leaders identified barriers specific to students with disabilities, students from low income households, Latino/a students, and English language learners (ELL).

Additionally, the implementation of enhanced and newly developed structures and routines helped to expose inequitable practices in the New Hope School District. District- and school-level leaders interviewed consistently referred to students receiving special education as the sub-group most impacted by the achievement gap in the New Hope School District. Research findings revealed that one of the barriers to student learning for

students with special needs was inequitable access to the general education curriculum. Greene (1983) explains that equality in education focuses on “inputs” and ensures that the same is provided to all, while equity places emphasis on “outputs” and focuses on achieving the same outcomes for all. Lindsey et al. (2009) contend accommodations that account for differences, such as race and ethnicity, language, and ability, are sometimes needed in order to achieve educational equity.

Students receiving special education services in the New Hope School District were often educated in separate and substandard settings. Research evidence revealed there were some schools that deliberately encouraged equitable learning environments for students receiving special education services. When comparing schools across the district, data indicated that schools utilizing co-teaching and inclusion models earned higher state accountability ratings than those that did not. By differentiating instruction to meet the needs of all students within the general education classroom, school staff moved closer to creating educational equity while improving students’ opportunity to learn.

When examining how district-level leaders sought to leverage professional learning opportunities in the New Hope School District, leaders took advantage of improved structures and routines resulting from the DSAC partnership. Knapp (2003) reported “professional learning could involve changes in one’s capacity for practice (i.e., changes in professionally relevant thinking, knowledge, skills, and habits of mind) and/or changes in practice itself (enacting the new knowledge and skills in one’s daily work)” (pp. 112-113). New structures and routines, such as traveling cabinet meetings, not only resulted in increased interaction between leaders, but also offered occasions for leaders to build their data analysis and decision-making capacity. Further, structures and routines

promoted sustained, job-embedded professional learning (e.g., ADCO, FADCO, and traveling cabinets meetings, learning walks, and 9-day instructional coaching cycle) and allowed for frequent collaboration and discussion of factors influencing teaching and learning. Given the evidence of deficit thinking that existed among school staff, particularly as it related to students with disabilities, district leaders also sought to leverage professional learning to prompt needed shifts in thinking.

As district- and school-level leaders' understanding developed, so did their ability to influence how others understood factors contributing to disparities in student performance related to race/ethnicity, class, and/or disability. Influencing how others understand a situation is a critical aspect of leadership work, and the ability to effectively frame the problems, solutions, and constituencies related to disparities in student performance related to race/ethnicity, class, and/or disability becomes a powerful means for shifting the thinking of others. When effectively done, influencing how others understand a situation can positively impact individuals' perceptions of their work and provide a powerful source of inspiration and motivation (Awamleh & Gardner, 1999; Goldman & Ospina, 2008). The interactions that occurred among district- and school-level leaders as a result of new structures and routines not only led to a shared understanding of student performance gaps and appropriate responses, they also contributed to leaders' attempting to prompt a common set of issue- and constituency-related cognitive shifts, which included:

- Heighten awareness, increase importance, and create a sense of urgency regarding a problem (or need) related to disparities in student performance
- Accept/Embrace a solution for addressing disparities in student performance

- We are responsible for helping all students experience high levels of academic success.
- We can learn from one another.

As leaders attempted to prompt this set of cognitive shifts, the work of leadership (which includes the managing of meaning for others) was further distributed across the district.

The interactions and professional learning that occurred among leaders as a result of the structures and routines that were in place not only led to an understanding of the nature of the gap, it also led to an influence on their work, which focused on addressing disparities in student performance. Specifically, leaders recognized that ongoing data analysis was critical to teaching and learning improvements. The task of analyzing data was distributed among all leaders for the specific purpose of improving the professional capacity to identify gaps in learning with the goal of eliminating barriers. For instance, when looking at data, one building leader recognized that low income and Latino students lacked opportunities pertaining to course placement; it was then brought to the attention of a district leader who subsequently mandated that all students take at least one Advanced Placement course prior to graduation. Similarly, as a result of student performance data analysis, several building-based accelerated improvement plans were strategically created and utilized as tools across the district to enhance the learning environment. The Accelerated Improvement Plan included specific initiatives and objectives that were designed by school and district leaders as tools to guide their work in an effort to eliminate identified barriers and enhance student opportunities to learn. Harris, Leithwood, Day, Sammons, and Hopkins (2007) remind us that school improvement based on a distributed leadership model is not automatic, rather, “much



depends on the way in which leadership is distributed, how it is distributed and for what purpose” (p. 9). The strategic approach utilized to address barriers in the learning environment in the New Hope School District as mentioned above reinforces that they subscribed to a distributed leadership model.

**Student learning is enhanced regardless of tie relations.** District- and school-level leaders revealed that they were engaging in a variety of practices to enhance students’ opportunity to learn at the school and district level. This was evident regardless of whether or not trusting ties were formulated and existent between individuals. For example, to prompt shifts in thinking and practice among principals and school staff, district leaders fostered and leveraged professional learning activities. Interview responses suggested professional learning played a role in the way some thought about and in-turn approached their work with particular sub-groups of students (e.g., students with disabilities). In addition, some district- and school-level leaders appeared more willing to learn from the best practices of schools realizing academic growth. One of the ways in which these educators were able to learn more about successful schools was through professional learning activities (e.g., book studies, belief surveys, case studies, and resource sharing). Another example was that although Jamie shared no outgoing tie connections with building leaders, she acknowledged that she engaged in efforts with Bill and Joe to create a school within her school to address students and subgroups with risk factors such as poor attendance, retention, and high discipline referrals.

Finally, the systems and structures (ADCO, FADCO, Traveling Cabinet) supported leaders with enhancing students’ opportunity to learn across the district. One school in the district did move from a Level 2 to Level 1 status last year; this is the

highest performance rating assigned by the state. District leaders were diligently working with principals to close gaps in performance via the structures in place, and District leader Sean was working with principals on improvement planning at the building level. District leader Alicia also worked with principals on attendance, dropout rates, and graduation rates within a four-year period of time. Although there was a lack of tie relations at the building and district level this did not result in initiatives being stalled. Rather, despite the nature of relations in the New Hope School District, the organizational structures in place resulted in both building and district leaders being actively engaged in practices that were intended to support enhancing students' opportunity to learn. Both group and individual findings informed researchers, resulting in the development of recommendations for practitioners, policy makers and research.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

First and foremost, we recommend that the New Hope School District keep organizational structures intact. ADCO, FADCO, and the traveling cabinet offer building leaders direct oversight and support from central office leaders. Spillane (2013) states that the advantages of organizational structures and routines are that they “allow efficient coordinated action; [provide] a source of stability; and reduce conflict about how to do work”. Furthermore, the use of organizational structures/routines that district- and school-level leaders institute have significant potential to enhance students' opportunity to learn. This was best evidenced in the New Hope School District when district- and school-level leaders analyzed student data with uniformity district wide K-12, resulting in at least one school closing achievement gaps and advancing to Level 1 status.

Any school district that has an opportunity to learn gap should consider developing and implementing the types of structures and routines outlined in the New Hope School District Accelerated Improvement Plan. These types of structures and routines increase the likelihood that interaction among administrators will take place, which will allow knowledge and resource to flow through the network of leaders, ultimately informing the work of practitioners (Daly & Finnigan, 2010). Sustainability is also likely enhanced when these structures and routines are in place. Hargreaves and Fink (2006) emphasize “sustainable leadership matters [as it] preserves, protects, and promotes deep and broad learning for all in relationships of care for others” (p. 23).

Varying tie relations in the New Hope School District may also be a result of competitive pressure at the local level to perform and meet accountability demands. Daly (2009) points out that as a result of high stakes accountability, relations between school and district leaders tend to become less collaborative and more official and organized. One way to remedy this is by fostering the professional growth of leaders and differentiating supports for principals depending on their needs as instructional leaders. Daly and Finnigan (2010) highlight that “leadership development programs both outside and within districts have the unique opportunity to create the space for reflection and dialogue for leaders to explore these tensions and how they may be brought into balance” (p. 520). Therefore, it is essential that the New Hope School District add a component to their existing professional development plans that specifically promotes the building of relationships among leaders across the district in a way that supports collaboration. The National Institute for School Leadership Program (NISL) is one example of a program designed to assist leaders with collaborating and enhancing their skills in the face of

accountability demands (NISL, 2013). Participation in the NISL program also holds the potential to increase the social capital among leaders and assist with policy implementation at the local level (Daly & Finnigan, 2010).

New Hope District-level leaders should also consider creating opportunities for school-level leaders to strengthen relations and formulate new ties. Allowing leaders' time to meet and discuss building based concerns without a central office driven agenda may enhance relations. Daly and Finnigan (2010) point out in a related study that "district[s] will have to avoid the trap of merely providing time and directives to work together as this does not necessarily result in meaningful collaboration between leaders" (p.128). Therefore, New Hope practitioners should heed the advice of DuFour and Burnette (2002) by insisting that principals develop improvement plans demonstrating the collective efforts of the team and not merely the work of individuals. In an effort to enhance relations, increase support from central office leaders to building leaders and enhance success at the building level, it is recommended that the New Hope School District consider creating prescribed structures/routines that require school-level leaders to visit each other's schools to analyze data together and observe successful practices. In doing so, school-level leaders are also less likely to feel unsupported and isolated from one another.

Enhancing connections at the district level in the New Hope School District as well as in other districts with an opportunity to learn gap will assist with building relations across the district, ultimately improving the overall school climate. Curtis and City (2009) agree that collaboration is critical and begins at the central office level stating:

Central office departments create teams to do their work most effectively. The superintendent convenes a senior leadership team to shape and drive the direction of the system's work. Effective collaboration is critical to success at all levels of the organization. Yet the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for collaboration are seldom taught. It is deeply ironic that a skill students need to ensure their future opportunities is one that the adults responsible for their education often do not possess and have not had the opportunity to learn (p.38).

In order for the central office team to be considered high functioning, there must be a "high level of trust, a willingness to be vulnerable, and comfort with conflict" (Curtis & City, 2009, p.56). District leaders in the New Hope School District and those with opportunity to learn gaps are encouraged to implement and facilitate team-building activities to work on strengthening partnerships with each other. Incorporating time on meeting agendas for district- and school-level leaders to engage in activities focused on developing authentic relationships is a suggested activity (Curtis & City, 2009). For instance, Curtis and City (2009) suggest leaders complete the Meyers & Briggs Personality Inventory and share results in an effort to enhance relations and build trust. Hargreaves and Fink (2006) emphasize that "investing resources in training, trust building, and teamwork" (p. 267) is a function of sustainable leadership that has long lasting effects.

New Hope District leaders are also recommended to expand liaison support to all principals, and not limit this resource to struggling schools alone. Honig et al. (2010) point out that central office can engage in efforts to support the teaching and learning environment entirely by "taking the case management and project management

approaches to their work”(p.7). Honig et al. (2010) emphasize that the case management approach enables district leaders to utilize their expertise to fully support “the specific needs, strengths, goals, and character of each individual school in their case load” with the goal of working to provide “high-quality, responsive services appropriate to their individual schools”(p.8). Likewise, the project management approach results in district leaders directly “solving problems that promised to help schools engage in teaching and learning, even if those problems cut across multiple central office units” (p.8).

New Hope District-level leaders should also consider expanding professional learning opportunities intended to eliminate deficit thinking within the district. The New Hope School District superintendent took positive steps to support principals in their efforts to dismantle deficit thinking and enhance some of the skills needed to assume responsibility for teaching and learning improvements. Moving forward, the superintendent must deepen the dialogue around instructional issues beyond data review. In light of the success of schools that ensured students with disabilities had full access to the curriculum, consideration should be given to expand the full-inclusion teaching model across the district.

Consideration should also be given to implementing multicultural and anti-racist professional learning opportunities in order to continue to prompt shifts in teacher beliefs. While anti-racist and multicultural education are closely related in the goal to improve student outcomes, Kailin (1998) believes that multicultural education is a non-threatening way to address the gaps in student performance because it is focused around building teachers’ and students’ cultural awareness rather than tackling structural aspects of racism. Kailin (1998) further argues that an anti-racist approach to education must focus

on the deliberate dismantling of racism whereas multicultural education strives to broaden teachers' understanding of the diverse histories of students they serve as a means to empower them. It is important to note, however, that ultimately multicultural education and anti-racism both seek to raise the academic achievement of students of color while nurturing the growth of all students. By implementing multicultural and anti-racist professional learning opportunities, administrators of the New Hope School District will be better equipped to learn about, understand, and address the undeniable correlation between students' race and ethnicity and disparities in student performance.

There are prevailing approaches to multicultural and anti-racist professional development and learning that espouse to reduce the achievement gap while transforming teacher beliefs (Ferguson, 2007; Howard, 2007; Singleton & Linton, 2006; Skrla, McKenzie & Scheurich, 2009). Ferguson (2007) is responsible for putting forth a conceptual framework titled the Tripod Project, which aims to close the achievement gap by addressing the three legs of the "tripod": content, pedagogy and relationships. He argues that in order to reduce achievement gaps, content must be accessible and culturally relevant, pedagogy must involve varied approaches to meeting students' needs, and teachers must develop meaningful relationships with students while maintaining high expectations for ALL students. Skrla et al. (2009) describe the need to use Equity Audits as a means to creating equitable and excellent schools. They contend that by assessing the equity and inequity of programs, as well as teacher quality and achievement, school leaders will be better prepared to develop an action plan that uncompromisingly promotes educational equity. They describe particular skills teachers must develop to improve their

practice that include clearly communicating expectations, stimulating students with high-level tasks, and using an asset-based approach when working with diverse populations.

While experienced, high-quality teachers within the New Hope School District may already possess many of the skills needed to serve most students effectively, Singleton and Linton (2006) argue that in order to reduce the “racial” achievement gap, educators must be willing to engage in courageous conversations about race. Additionally, they and many others (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Gay & Howard, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Lawrence & Tatum, 1997; Nieto, 2000; Tatum, 1997) believe it is critical for teachers to explore their own racial identities and consider how it affects their teaching of students, particularly students of color (i.e., Asian American, Hispanic/Latino, Black/African-American, Multiracial and Native American). The research of Singleton and Linton (2006) indicates when white teachers were able to relate to their diverse students experiences, and as they developed cultural awareness or competence, a narrowing of the achievement gap occurred. Given over 90% of administrators and teachers in the New Hope School District are white while over 60% of students identify as students of color, and in light of the existing racial achievement gap as measured across three performance indicators (i.e., state achievement tests, graduation rates, and SAT performance reports), serious consideration should be given to implementing multicultural and anti-racist professional learning opportunities.

### **Recommendations for Policy Makers**

Cohesive relations between school and district leaders are often hindered by accountability policy demands (Daly 2009). This often complicates the job of leaders trying to effect change in schools. Daly and Finnigan (2010) point out that “effectively



responding to state and federal accountability policies at the local level may require a more collaborative relationship among and between central office and school administrators to allow for the diffusion of innovation and knowledge”(p.131). In an effort to strike this balance, district leaders in the New Hope School district and those in districts with an opportunity to learn gap need to develop systems and structures to enhance collaboration within school districts. New Hope School District leaders implemented structures to support collaboration in an effort to enhance students’ opportunity to learn. Their efforts yielded evidence that some schools were making progress. This supports the research claim that school culture, namely interactions, is a valuable consideration when enhancing student opportunities to learn. Policy makers are recommended to be mindful of this consideration and recognize that accountability demands alone do not promote equitable opportunities to learn (Harris & Herrington, 2006).

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

While this study contributed to theoretical knowledge and provided a practical contribution to the field of education, future research areas must be noted. First, conducting an exploration of interactions among leaders using an external social capital lens (Leana & Pil, 2006) may prove beneficial. The external partnership with DSAC in this study was instrumental in assisting leaders with responding to accountability demands beyond standardized testing through the development of the Accelerated Improvement Plan. A deeper exploration of external partnerships may yield findings in relation to the importance of these relations when attempting to enhance students’ opportunity to learn. Second, given the potential that leader relations may be

“bureaucratic” due to accountability pressures (Daly & Finnigan, 2010, p.131), it may be worthwhile to conduct a similar study with a focus on examining the impact of roles and hierarchy on relations in a district that is attempting to enhance student opportunities to learn. Third, future research should include multiple districts with similar demographics in an effort to enhance generalizability.

Finally, because the research team members sought to understand how district- and school-level leaders learned about, understood, and addressed barriers to students’ opportunities to learn, interviews were limited to district- and school-level leaders. This had potential implications for the overall conclusions drawn. Future research efforts involving staff at all levels could help to address this limitation and assist in uncovering the true impact of efforts aimed at eliminating barriers to students’ opportunity to learn.

### **Overarching Study Limitations**

A few limitations are noted in this study. The New Hope School District is a small district comprised of eight district leaders and eight school level leaders. As aforementioned, researchers were unable to interview two building level leaders. This hindered the overall analysis and conclusion of findings for the overarching study. Additionally, researchers relied on the strategy of snowball sampling as outlined by Creswell (2012) and Merriam (2009) to interview participants. Because the researchers relied on the superintendent and assistant superintendent to recommend individuals whom they felt could best describe efforts aimed at impacting students’ opportunity to learn and performance gaps, key individuals were not recommended and were therefore not interviewed. Mentors, coaches, DSAC members, teachers, and students may have been able to provided information, which might have enhanced the overall findings.

## **Conclusion**

The literature portrays a multifaceted depiction of how many factors have the potential to impact district- and school-level leaders understanding of the nature of the gap and how these understandings then influence the work leadership focused on addressing disparities in student performance. It was the intent of the research team to enhance insight in this area for practitioners. It is evident that leaders' interactions and framing of events coupled with how they practice has the potential to enhance the school climate and increase students' opportunity to learn. Additionally, the purposeful distribution of leadership work provides the opportunity to enhance collaboration and collective action. Conversely, without proper district-level leadership and leader distribution, effectively addressing disparities in student performance may be hindered.

## References

- Aaron, D. I., & Gewertz, C. (2009) Enthusiasm builds for data systems. *Education Week*, 18-19.
- Achieve, Inc. (2013). *About PARCC*. Retrieved from <http://www.parcconline.org/about-parcc>
- Achinstein, B., & Barrett, A. (2004). (Re) Framing classroom contexts: How new teachers and mentors view diverse learners and challenges of practice. *Teachers College Record*, 106(4), 716-746.
- Adler, P. S., & Kwon, S.W. (2002). Social capital: Prospects for a new concept. *Academy of Management Journal*, 27(1), 17–40.
- Allwarden, A.F. (2014). *Opportunity to learn: The role of prompting cognitive shifts in understanding and addressing educational inequities* (Doctoral dissertation). Boston College, Boston, MA.
- Alsbury, T. L., & Whitaker, K. S. (2007). Superintendent perspectives and practice of accountability, democratic voice and social justice. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 45(2), 154.
- American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009, Pub. L. No. 111-5, 123 Stat. 115, 516 (Feb. 19, 2009).
- Anderson, S., Leithwood, K., & Strauss, T. (2010). Leading data use in schools: Organizational conditions and practices at school and district levels. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 9, 292-327. doi: 10.1080/15700761003731492

- Awamleh, R., & Gardner, W. L. (1999). Perceptions of leader charisma and effectiveness: The effects of vision, content, delivery, and organizational performance. *Leadership Quarterly*, 10(3), 345-373.
- Barnard, C. (1968). *Functions of the executive*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Basadur, M. (2004). Leading others to think innovatively together: Leading creatively. *Leadership Quarterly*, 15(1), 103-115.
- Becker, H. S. (1986). *Writing for social scientists: How to start and finish your thesis, book, or article*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Benford, R. D., & Snow, D. A. (2000). Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26, 611-639.
- Bennett, W., Finn, C., & Cribb, J. (1999). *The educated child: A parent's guide from preschool through eighth grade*. New York: The Free Press.
- Berman, P., & Chambliss, D. (2000). *Readiness of low-performing school for Comprehensive reform*. Emeryville, CA: RPP International.
- Berman, P., Chambliss, D., & Geiser, K. D. (1999). *Making the case for a focus on equity in school reform*. Emeryville, CA: RPP International.
- Bernhardt, V. L. (2003). *Using data to improve student learning in elementary schools*. Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education.
- Bjork, L. G. (1993). Effective schools, effective superintendents: The emerging instructional leadership role. *Journal of School Leadership*, 3(3), 246-259.
- Bogdan, R., & Biklen, S. (2003). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

- Bogdan, R.C., & Biklen, S.K. (1998). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Borgatti, S. P., & Halgin, D. (2011). On network theory. *Organization Science*, 22(5), 1168-1181.
- Borgatti, S. P., Jones, C., & Everett, M. G. (1998). Network measures of social capital. *Connections*, 21(2), 1–36.
- Borgatti, S. P., Mehra, A. J., Brass D. J., & Labianca, G. (2009). Network analysis in the social sciences. *Science*, 323(5916), 892–895.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of social capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241-258). New York: Greenwood.
- Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The logic of practice*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Bowen, G. A., (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2) 27-40. doi:10.3316/QRJ0902027
- Boykin, A. W., & Noguera, P. (2011). *Creating the opportunity to learn: Moving from research to practice to close the achievement gap*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Braun, H. I. (2005). *Using student progress to evaluate teachers: A primer on value-Added models*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Services.
- Brazer, S. D., & Keller, L. R. (2006). A conceptual framework for multiple stakeholder educational decision making. *International Journal of Educational Policy and Leadership*, 1(3), 1-14.

- Bredeson, P. V., & Kose, B. W. (2007). Responding to the education reform agenda: A study of school superintendents. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 15*(5), 1-24.
- Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).
- Brunner, C., Fasca, C., Heinze, J., Honey, M., Light, D., Mandinach, E. B., & Wexler, D. (2005). Linking data and learning: The grow network study. *Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk, 10*(3), 241-267.
- Bryk, A. S., & Schneider, B. (2002). *Trust in schools: A core resource for school improvement*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Camburn, E., Rowan, B., & Taylor, J. E. (2003). Distributed leadership in schools: The case of elementary schools adopting comprehensive school reform models. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 25*(4), 347-373.
- Carmin, J., & Balsler, D. B. (2005). *Mobilization routines in professional environmental movement organizations: Matching solutions to problems*. Paper presented at the Annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Philadelphia, PA.
- Cawelti, G., & Protheroe, N. (2001). *High student achievement: How six school districts changed into high-performance systems*. Arlington, VA: Educational Research Service.
- Choo, C. W. (1996). The knowing organization: How organizations use information to construct meaning, create knowledge and make decisions. *International Journal of Information Management, 16*(5), 329-340.
- Chrispeels, J. H. (Ed.) (2004). *Learning to lead together: The challenge and promise of sharing leadership*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- City-Data (2011). New Hope profile: population, maps... Retrieved from <http://www.city-data.com/crime/crime-NewHope-Massachusetts.html#ixzz2gJqVoiwB>
- City of New Hope (2013). City of New Hope, city information. Retrieved from <http://www.ci.newhope.ma.us/>
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2011). Organizational routines are stored as procedural memory: Evidence from a laboratory study. *Research methods in education (7th ed.)*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Cohen, M. D., & Bacdayan, P. (1996). Organizational routines are stored as procedural memory: Evidence from a laboratory study. In M. Cohen & L. S. Sproull (Eds.), *Organizational learning* (pp. 403-429). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology, 94*(1), 95-120.
- Coleman, P., & LaRocque, L. (1988). Reaching out: Instructional leadership in school districts: The local school district superintendency, under reform. *Peabody Journal of Education, 65*(4), 60-89.
- Collins Educational Associates. (2013). *Five types of writing*. Retrieved from <http://www.collinsed.com/5types.htm>
- Conger, J. A., & Kanungo, R. N. (1987). Toward a behavioral theory of charismatic leadership in organizational settings. *Academy of Management Review, 12*(4), 637-647.
- Copland, M. A. (2003). Leadership of inquiry: Building and sustaining capacity for school improvement. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 25*(4), 375–



395.

- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A (2008). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Corcoran, T., Fuhrman, S.H., & Belcher, C. L. (2001). The district role in instructional improvement. *Phil Delta Kappan* 83(1), 78-84.
- Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five designs*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2007). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Curtis, R., & City, E. (2009). *Strategy in Action*. Cambridge, Ma: Harvard Education Press.
- Daly, A. J. (2009). Threat rigid response in an age of accountability. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 45(2), 168-216.
- Daly, A. J., & Finnigan, K. S. (2010). A bridge between worlds: Understanding network structure to understand change strategy. *Journal of Educational Change*, 11(2), 111-138.
- Daly, A. J., & Finnigan, K. S. (2011). The ebb and flow of social network ties between district leaders under high-stakes accountability. *American Educational Research Journal*, 48(1), 39-80.
- Daly, A. J., & Finnigan, K. S. (2012). Exploring the space between: Social networks, trust, and urban school district leaders. *Journal of School Leadership*, 22(3), 493-

530.

Darling-Hammond, L. (1994). Standards of practice for learning-centered schools. In R. Berne & L. Picus (Eds.), *Outcome equity in education* (pp. 191-223). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Darling-Hammond, L. (2004). From “separate but equal” to “No Child Left Behind”: The collision of new standards and old inequalities. In D. Meier & G. Wood (Eds.), *Many children left behind* (pp. 3-32). Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Darling-Hammond, L. (2007). Third Annual Brown Lecture in Education Research: The flat earth and education: How America's commitment to equity will determine our future. *Educational Researcher*, 36(6), 318-334.

Darling-Hammond, L. U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Education and Labor. (2007). *ESEA reauthorization: Options for improving NCLB's measures of progress* (110-11). Retrieved from United States Government Printing Office website:  
<http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-110hhr34015/pdf/CHRG-110hhr34015.pdf>

Darling-Hammond, L., & McLaughlin, M.W. *Policies that support professional development in an era of reform*. Retrieved from  
<http://www.questia.com/googleScholar.qst?docId=5000286584>

Davis, S., Darling-Hammond, L., LaPointe, M., & Meyerson, D. (2005). *School leadership study developing successful principals*. Standard Educational Leadership Institute, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, United States.

- Delpit, L. (1995). *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom*. New York: The New Press.
- DeMarrais, K. (2004). Qualitative interview studies: Learning through experience. In K. deMarrais & S. Lapan (Eds.), *Foundations for research* (pp. 51-68). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Denzin, N. K. (1978). *The research act: A theoretical introduction to sociological methods* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Drath, W. H., & Palus, C. J. (1994). *Making common sense: Leadership as meaning making within a community of practice*. Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership.
- DuFour, R. (2002). The learning centered principal. *Educational Leadership*, 59(8), 12-15.
- DuFour, R., & Burnette, B. (2002). Pull out negativity by its roots. *Journal of Staff Development*, 23(3), 27-30.
- DuFour, R., Eaker, R., & Karhanek, G. (2004). *Whatever it takes: How professional learning communities respond when kids don't learn*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.
- Education Trust. (2010). *Reports reveal colleges with the biggest, smallest gaps in minority graduation rates in the U.S.* Retrieved May 16, 2012, from [www.edtrust.org](http://www.edtrust.org)
- Eisenhardt, K. M. (1989). Building theories from case study research. *Academy of Management Review*, 14(4), 532-550.
- Eisner, E. W. (1991). *The enlightened eye: Qualitative inquiry and the enhancement of*

- educational practice*. New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Company.
- Elmore, R. (1993). The role of local districts in instructional improvement. In S. Fuhrman (Ed.), *Designing coherent education policy: Improving the system* (pp. 96-124). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Elmore, R. F. (2007). *School reform from the inside out: Policy, practice, and performance*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Elmore, R.F., & Burney, D. (1997). *Investing in teacher learning: Staff development and instructional improvement in Community School District #2, New York City*. National Commission on Teaching & America's Future.
- Elmore, R. F. (2000). *Building a new structure for school leadership* (pp. 1-46). Washington, DC: Albert Shanker Institute.
- Elmore, R. F. (2004). *School reform from the inside out: Policy, practice, and performance*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51-58.
- Erzberger, C., & Kelle, U. (2003). Making inferences in mixed methods: The rules of integration. In A. Tashakkori & C. Teddye (Eds.), *Handbook of mixed methods in social and behavioral research* (pp. 457-488). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Evans, R. (2005). Reframing the achievement gap. *The Phi Delta Kappan*, 86(8), 582-589.
- Fairhurst, G. T., & Sarr, R. A. (1996). *The art of framing: Managing the language of leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

- Farley-Ripple, E. N. (2012). Research use in school district central office decision making: A case study. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 40(6), 786-806. doi: 10.1177/1741143212456912
- Feldman, M. S. (2000). Organizational routines as a source of continuous change. *Organization Science*, 11(6), 611-629.
- Feldman, M. S., & Rafaeli, A. (2002). Organizational routines as sources of connections and understandings. *Journal of Management Studies*, 39(3), 309-332.
- Feldman, M. S., & Pentland, B. T. (2003). Reconceptualizing organizational routines as a source of flexibility and change. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 48(1), 94-118. doi:10.2307/3556620
- Ferguson, R. (2007). *Toward excellence with equity: An emerging vision for closing the achievement gap*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education.
- Fink, E. & Resnick, L.B. (2001). Developing principals as instructional leaders. *The Phi Delta Kappan*. 82(8), 598-606.
- Finnigan, K. S., & Daly, A. J. (2010). Learning at the system level: Ties between principals of low-performing schools and central office leaders. In A. Daly (Ed), *Social network theory and educational change* (pp. 179-196). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Firestone, W. A., & Martinez, M. C. (2007). Districts, teacher leaders, and distributed leadership: Changing instructional practice. *Leadership & Policy in Schools*, 6(1), 3-35.
- Fixsen, D. L., Blase, K. A., Horner, R., & Sugai, G. (2009). Readiness for change. Scaling Up Brief #3. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, Frank Porter

- Graham Child Development Institute, State Implementation and Scaling Up of Evidence Based Practices (SISEP). Retrieved from <http://sisep.fpg.unc.edu/>
- Flick, U. (1998). *An introduction to qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Foldy, E. G., Goldman, L. S., & Ospina, S. M. (2008). Sensegiving and the role of cognitive shifts in the work of leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *19*(5), 514-529.
- Foldy, E. G., Goldman, L. S., & Ospina, S. M. (2009). *The leadership task of prompting cognitive shifts: Shaping perceptions of issues and constituencies to achieve public service goals*. Retrieved from New York University's Research Center for Leadership in Action website <http://wagner.nyu.edu/leadership/reports/files/CognitiveShiftsLeadership0309.pdf>
- Foorman, B. R., & Nixon, S. M. (2006). The influence of public policy on reading research and practice. *Topics in language disorders*, *26*(2), 157-171.
- Friend, M., & Cook, L. (1992). *Interactions: Collaboration skills for school professionals*. White Plains, NY: Longman Publishing Group.
- Fuhrman, S. H., Goertz, M. E., & Weinbaum, E. H. (2007). Educational governance in the United States: Where are we? How did we get here? Why should we care? In D. Cohen, S. Fuhrman, & F. Mosher (Eds.), *The state of education policy research* (pp. 41–61). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Fullan, M. (2007). Change the terms for teacher learning. *Journal of Staff Development*, *28*(3), 35-36.
- Fullan, M., & Stiegelbauer, S. (1991). *The meaning of educational change*. (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

- Gall, M. D., Borg, W. R., & Gall, J. P. (1996). *Educational research: An introduction* (6th ed.). White Plains, NY: Longman.
- Garcia, S. B., & Guerra, P. L. (2004). Deconstructing deficit thinking: Working with educators to create more equitable learning environments. *Education and Urban Society*, 36(2), 150-160.
- Gardner, D. (2007). Confronting the achievement gap. *Kaleidoscope: Contemporary and Classic Readings in Education*, 154-159.
- Gauthier, A. (2006). *Developing collective leadership: Partnering in multi-stakeholder contexts*. Retrieved from <http://www.alaingauthier.org/GauthierChapter.pdf>
- Gay, G. (2004). Beyond Brown: Promoting equality through multicultural education. *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision*, 19(3), 193-216.
- Gay, G., & Howard, T. C. (2000). Multicultural teacher education for the 21st century. *The Teacher Educator*, 36(1), 1-16.
- Gee, J. P. (2008). A sociocultural perspective on opportunity to learn. In P. Moss, D. Pullin, J. Gee, E. Haertel, & L. Young (Eds.), *Assessment, equity, and opportunity to learn* (pp. 17-41). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of society*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Gioia, D. A., & Chittipeddi, K. (1991). Sensemaking and sensegiving in strategic change initiation. *Strategic Management Journal*, 12(6), 433-448.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. New York, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.

- Glaser, B. G. (1978). *Theoretical sensitivity: Advances in the methodology of grounded theory*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.
- Glasman, N. (1984). Student achievement and the school principal. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 6(3), 283-296.
- Glass, T., Bjork, L., & Brunner, C. (2000). *The 2000 study of the American school superintendency: A look at the superintendent of education in the new millennium*. Arlington, VA: American Association of School Administrators.
- Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Goldring, E., & Berends, M. (2009). *Leading with data: Pathways to improve your school*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Granovetter, M. (1973). The strength of weak ties. *American Journal of Sociology*, 78(1), 1360-1380.
- Greene, J. P., & Forster, G. (2003). *Public high school graduation and college readiness rates in the United States*. New York, NY: The Manhattan Institute.
- Green, T. F. (1983). Excellence, equity, and equality. In L. Shulman & G. Sykes (Eds.), *Handbook of teaching and policy* (pp. 318-341). New York, NY: Longman Inc.
- Grogan, M., & Shakeshaft, C. (2011). *Women and educational leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Gronn, P. C. (1983). Talk as the work: The accomplishment of school administration. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 28, 1-21.
- Gronn, P. (2000). Distributed properties: A new architecture for leadership. *Educational Management Administration Leadership*, 28(3), 317-338.
- Gronn, P. (2003). Leadership: Who needs it? *School Leadership and Management*, 23(3),



- 267-290.
- Grubb, W. N., & Flessa, J. J. (2006). "A job too big for one": Multiple principals and other nontraditional approaches to school leadership. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 42(4), 518-550. doi:10.1177/0013161X06290641
- Guiton, G., & Oakes, J. (1995). Opportunity to learn and conceptions of educational equality. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 17(3), 323-336.
- Hallinger, P., & Heck, R. H. (2002). What do you call people with visions? The role of vision, mission, and goals in school leadership and improvement. In K. Leithwood & P. Hallinger (Eds.), *Second international handbook of educational leadership and administration* (pp. 9-40). Dordrecht, NL: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Hallinger, P., & Heck, R. H. (2009). Distributed leadership in schools: Does system policy make a difference? In A. Harris (Ed.), *Distributed leadership* (pp. 101–117). New York, NY: Springer.
- Hallinger, P., & Heck, R. H. (2010). Collaborative leadership and school improvement: Understanding the impact on school capacity and student learning. *School Leadership & Management*, 30(2), 95-110.
- Halverson, R., Kelley, C., & Kimball, S. (2004). Implementing teacher evaluation systems: How principals make sense of complex artifacts to shape local instructional practice. In W. Hoy & C. Miskel (Eds.), *Educational administration, policy, and reform: Research and theory* (Vol. 3). Greenwich, CT: Information Age Press.

- Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (2007) *Ethnography: Principals in practice* (3rd ed.). London: Routledge.
- Hamilton, L. S. (2003). Assessment as a policy tool. *Review of Research in Education*, 27, 25-68.
- Hamilton, L. S., & Koretz, D. M. (2002). Tests and their use in test-based accountability systems. In L. Hamilton, B. Stecher, & S. Klein (Eds.), *Making sense of test-based accountability in education* (pp. 13-49). Santa Monica, CA: RAND.
- Hanneman, R., & Riddle, M. (2005). *Introduction to social network methods*. Riverside, CA: University of California, Riverside. Retrieved from <http://faculty.ucr.edu/~hanneman/>
- Hargreaves, A., & Fink, D. (2004). The seven principles of sustainable leadership. *Educational Leadership*, (61)7, 8-13.
- Hargreaves, A., & Fink, D. (2006). *Sustainable Leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Harris, A. (2002). Effective leadership in schools facing challenging contexts. *School Leadership & Management*, 22(1), 15-26.
- Harris, A. (2004). Distributed leadership for school improvement: Leading or misleading. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, 32(1), 11–24.
- Harris, A. (2005). Distributed leadership. In B. Davies (Ed.), *The essentials of school leadership* (pp. 160-172). London, UK: Paul Chapman Publishing.
- Harris, A. (2008). *Distributed school leadership developing tomorrow's leaders*. New York, NY Routledge.

- Harris, A. (2013). Distributed Leadership: Friend or foe? *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 41(5), 545-554. doi:10.1177/1741143213497635
- Harris, A., Leithwood, K., Day, C., Sammons, P., & Hopkins, D. (2007). Distributed leadership and organizational change: Reviewing the evidence. *Journal of Educational Change*, 8(4), 337-347. doi:10.1007/s10833-007-9048-4
- Harris, D. N., & Herrington, C. D. (2006). Accountability, standards, and the growing achievement gap: Lessons from the past half-century. *American Journal of Education*, 112(2), 209-238.
- Hawley, W., & Sykes, G. (2007). Continuous school improvement. In W. Hawley (Ed.), *The keys to effective schools: Educational reform as continuous improvement* (pp. 153–172). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Heifetz, R. A. (1996). *Leadership without easy answers*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Hightower, A. (2002). San Diego's big boom: Instructional change in the central office and schools. In A. Hightower, M. Knapp, J. Marsh & M. McLaughlin (Eds.), *School districts and instructional renewal* (pp. 76-93). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Hitchcock, G., & Huges, D. (1995). *Research and the teacher: A qualitative introduction to school-based research* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.
- Honig, M. I. (2004). District central office-community partnerships: From contracts to collaboration to control. In W. Hoy & C. Miskel (Eds.), *Theory and research in educational administration* (pp. 59-99). Greenwich, CT: Information Age.

- Honig, M. I. (2012). District central office leadership as teaching how central office administrators support principals' development as instructional leaders. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 48(4), 733-774.
- Honig, M. I., & Coburn, C. (2007). Evidence-based decision making in school district central offices: Toward a policy and research agenda. *Educational Policy*, 22(4), 578–608. doi:10.1177/0895904807307067
- Honig, M. I., Copland, M. A., Rainey, L., Lorton, J. A., & Newton, M. (2010). Central office transformation for district-wide teaching and learning improvement. *Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, University of Washington*.
- Honig, M. I., & Venkateswaran, N. (2012). School-central office relationships in evidence use: Understanding evidence use as a systems problem. *American Journal of Education*, 118(2), 199-222.
- Howard, G.R. (2007). As diversity grows, so must we. *Educational Leadership*, 64(6), 16-22.
- Huzzard, T. (2004). Communities of domination: Reconceptualizing organizational learning and power. *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 16(6), 350-361.
- Ingram, D., Louis, K., & Schroeder, K. G. (2004). Accountability policies and teacher decision-making: Barriers to the use of data to improve practice. *Teachers College Record*, 106(6), 1258-1287.
- James, E. A., Milenkiewicz, M. T., & Bucknam, A. (2008). *Participatory action research for educational leadership: Using data-driven decision making to improve schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Kailin, J. (1998). Preparing urban teachers for schools and communities: An anti-racist perspective. *The High School Journal*, 82(2), 80-87.
- Kennedy, E. (2003). *Raising test scores for all students: An administrator's guide to improving standardized test performance*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Kirkpatrick, S. A., & Locke, E. A. (1996). Direct and indirect effects of three core charismatic leadership components on performance and attitudes. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 81(1), 36-51.
- Knapp, M. S. (2003). Professional development as a policy pathway. *Review of Research in Education*, 27(1), 109-157.
- Knapp, M. S., Copland, M. A., & Talbert, J. (2003). *Leading for Learning: Reflective tools for school and district leaders*. Seattle, WA: Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, University of Washington.
- Knapp, M. S., Swinnerton, J. A., Copland, M. A., & Monpas-Huber, J. (2006). *Data-informed leadership in education*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington, Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy.
- Lachat, M. A., & Smith, S. (2005). Practices that support data use in urban high schools. *Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk*, 10(3), 333-349.  
doi:101207/s15327671espr1003\_7
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2006). From the achievement gap to the education debt: Understanding achievement in U.S. schools. *Educational Researcher*, 35(7), 3-12.
- Lashway, L. (2003). *Distributed leadership*. Retrieved from ERIC database. (ED 477356).

- Lawrence, S. M., & Tatum, B. D. (1997). *White educators as allies: Moving from awareness to action*. Retrieved from <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/>
- Leana, C., & Pil, F. (2006). Social capital and organizational performance: Evidence from urban public schools. *Organization Science, 17*(3), 353-366.
- Leithwood, K., Begley, P., & Cousins, B. (1990). The nature, causes and consequences of principals' practices: An agenda for future research. *Journal of Educational Administration, 28*(4), 5-31.
- Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2008). Seven strong claims about successful school leadership. *School Leadership and Management, 28*(1), 27–42.
- Leithwood, K., & Jantzi, D. (2008). Linking leadership to student learning: The contributions of leader efficacy. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 44*, 496-528. doi:10.1177/0013161X08321501
- Leithwood, K., Louis, K., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *How leadership influences student learning*. Retrieved from <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/WF/KnowledgeCenter/KnowledgeTopics/EducationLeadership/HowLeadershipInfluencesStudentLearning.htm>.
- Leithwood, K. A., & Riehl, C. (2005). What we know about successful school leadership. In W. Firestone & C. Riehl (Eds.), *A new agenda: directions for research on educational leadership* (pp. 22-47). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Levin, B. (2006). Schools in challenging circumstances: A reflection on what we know and what we need to know. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement, 17*(4), 399–407.
- Lin, N. (1999). Building a network theory of social capital. *Connections, 22*(1), 28-51.

- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Thousand Oaks: CA: Sage.
- Linn, R. L. (1988). Perspective: State-by-state comparisons of achievement: Suggestions for enhancing validity. *Educational Researcher*, 17(3) 6-9. doi: 10.3102/0013189x017003006
- Lindsey, R. B., Nuri Robins, K. T., & Terrell, R. D. (2009). *Cultural proficiency: A manual for school leaders*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Louis, K. S., Leithwood, K., Wahlstrom, K. L., Anderson, S. E., Michlin, M., Mascall, B., & Moore, S. (2010). *Learning from leadership: Investigating the links to improved student learning: Final report of research to the Wallace Foundation*. New York, NY: The Wallace Foundation.
- Love, N. (Ed.). (2009). *Using data to improve learning for all: A collaborative approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Mann, H. (1865). *Life and works of Horace Mann*. Boston, MA: Walker, Fuller and Co.
- Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2012). *Glossary of 2012 accountability reporting terms*. Retrieved from <http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/ayp/2012/GlossaryTerms.docx>
- Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2013b). *Accountability, Partnerships, & Assistance*. Retrieved from <http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/sss/dsac/teams/>
- Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2013). *District and School Assistance Center*. Retrieved from <http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/sss/dsac/>
- Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2013). *Focused Planning for Accelerated Student Learning: District Guide for the Development*

- and Implementation of Accelerated Improvement Plans*. Retrieved from <http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/sss/dsac/FocusedPlanning.pdf>
- Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary. (2013). *Learning Walkthrough Implementation Guide*. Retrieved from <http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/dart/walk/ImplementationGuide.pdf>
- Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2013a). *MCAS Results by Subgroup by Grade and Subject*. Retrieved from <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/mcas/subgroups2.aspx?linkid=25&orgcode=00970000&fycode=2013&orgtypecode=5&>
- Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2013c). *Methodology for identifying Level 3 and Level 4 schools*. Retrieved from [www.doe.mass.edu/apa/ayp/2013/MethodologyL3-4.docx](http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/ayp/2013/MethodologyL3-4.docx)
- Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2013, December). *School Choice*. Retrieved from <http://www.doe.mass.edu/finance/schoolchoice/>
- Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2013a). *School leaders guide to the 2013 accountability determination*. Retrieved from <http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/accountability/default.html>
- Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2013b). *State releases 2013 MCAS school and district results: Majority of schools statewide improve or hold steady since last year*. Retrieved from <http://www.doe.mass.edu/news/news.aspx?id=7703>
- Massell, D., & Goertz, M. E. (2002). *District strategies for building instructional capacity*. In A. M. Hightower, M. S. Knapp, J. A. Marsh, & M. McLaughlin, (Eds.), *School*



- districts and instructional renewal* (pp. 43-60). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- March, J. G., & Simon, H.A. (1958). *Organizations*. New York, NY: Wiley.
- Marsh, J. A., McCombs, J. S., & Martorell, F. (2010). How instructional coaches support data-driven decision making: Policy implementation and effects in Florida middle schools. *Educational Policy*, 24(6), 872-907. doi: 10.1177/0895904809341467
- Marzano, R.J. (2003). *What works in schools: Translating research into action*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Marzano, R. J., & Waters, T. (2009). *District leadership that works: Striking the right balance*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.
- Marzano, R. J., Waters, T., & McNulty, B. (2005). *School leadership that works: From research to results*. Aurora, CO: ASCD and McREL.
- Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2011). *Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career, 2011*. Retrieved from <http://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/parcc/>
- Maxwell, J. (2008). Designing a qualitative study. In L. Bickman & D. Rog (Eds.), *The handbook of applied social research methods* (pp. 214-253). Thousand Oaks CA: Sage.
- McGrath, C., & Krackhardt, D. (2003). Network conditions for organizational change. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 39(3), 324–336.

- McMillian, J. H. (2004). *Educational research: Fundamentals for the consumer*. New York, NY: Pearson Education.
- Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Miles, B., & Huberman, M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Miles, B., Huberman, M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Miller, K. (2004). *Creating conditions for leadership effectiveness: The district's role*. Aurora, CO: Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning.
- Mintrop, H., & Trujillo, T. (2007). The practical relevance of accountability systems for school improvement: A descriptive analysis of California schools. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 29*(4), 319–352.
- Mohrman, S., Tenkasi, R., & Mohrman, A. (2003). The role of networks in fundamental organizational change. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 39*(3), 301–323.
- Monroe, C.R. (2005). Understanding the discipline gap through a cultural lens: Implications for the education of African American students. *Intercultural Education, 16*(4), 317-330.
- Murphy, J., & Hallinger, P. (1988). Characteristics of instructionally effective districts. *Journal of Educational Research, 81*(3), 175-181.
- Nahapiet, J., & Ghoshal, S. (1998). Social capital, intellectual capital, and the

- organizational advantage. *Academy of Management Review*, 23(2), 242–266.
- National Assessment for Educational Progress. (2012). *Understanding gaps*. Retrieved from [http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/studies/gaps/understand\\_gaps.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/studies/gaps/understand_gaps.asp)
- National Center for Educational Statistics. (2010). *Trends in high school dropout and completion rates in the United States: 1972–2008*. Retrieved from [nces.ed.gov/pubs2011/2011012.pdf](http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2011/2011012.pdf)
- National Center for Educational Statistics. (2011a). *The nation's report card: Mathematics 2011*. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/main2011/2012457.pdf>
- National Center for Educational Statistics. (2011b). *The nation's report card: Reading 2011*. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/main2011/2012457.pdf>
- National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). *A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- National Institute for School Leadership. (2013). *Frequently Asked Questions*. Retrieved from <http://www.nisl.net/faq/>
- National Institute for School Leadership (2013). *The NISL difference for Principals and School Leaders*. Retrieved from <http://www.nisl.net/our-difference/you-are-a-principal-or-school-leader/>
- Nelson, R., & Winter, S. G. (1982). *An Evolutionary Theory of Economic Change*.

- Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- New Hope Public School District. (2014). *District Improvement Plan*. Retrieved from <http://www.newhope.k12.ma.us/about-us/district-improvement-plan>
- New Hope Public School District. (2014). *Professional development plan*. Retrieved from <http://www.newhope.k12.ma.us/about-us/professional-developmental-plan>
- Nieto, S. (2000). *Affirming diversity: The sociopolitical context of multicultural education* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). New York: Longman.
- No Child Left Behind Act, 20 U.S.C. 6302 § 1001 (2001).
- Noguera, P., & Akom, A. (2000). Disparities demystified. *The Nation*, 270(22), 29-31.
- O'Day, J. (2004). Complexity, accountability, and school improvement. In S. Fuhrman & R. Elmore (Eds.), *Redesigning accountability systems* (pp. 15–43). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Paccione, A. (2001). Developing a commitment to multicultural education. *Teachers College Record*, 102(6), 980-1005.
- Park, V., Daly, A. J., & Guerra, A. W. (2013). Strategic framing: How leaders craft the meaning of data use for equity and learning. *Educational Policy*, 27(4), 645-675.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pentland, B. T., & Feldman, M. S. (2005). Organizational routines as a unit of analysis. *Industrial and Corporate Change*, 14(5), 739-815. doi:10.1093/icc/dth070
- Plessy v. Ferguson. 163 U.S. 537 (1896).
- Pondy, L. R. (1989). Leadership is a language game. In H. Leavitt, L. Pondy, & D. Bonje

- (Eds.), *Readings in managerial psychology* (pp. 224-233). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. (Original work published in 1978)
- Porter, A. C. (1991). Creating a system of school process indicators. *Educational Research and Policy Analysis, 13*(1), 13-29.
- Porter, A. C. (1994). National standards and school improvement in the 1990s: Issues and promise. *American Journal of Education, 102*(4), 421-449.
- Porter, A. C. (1995). The uses and misuses of opportunity-to-learn standards. *Educational Researcher, 24*(1), 21-27.
- Porter, A. C., Smithson, J., Blank, R., & Zeidner, T. (2007). Alignment as a teacher variable. *Applied Measurement in Education, 20*(1), pp. 27-51.
- Portin, B., Schneider, P., DeArmond, M., & Gundlach, L. (2003). *Making sense of Leading schools: A study of the school principalship*. Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, Washington University.
- Potenziano, P.J. (2014). *Opportunity to learn: The role of structures and routines in understanding and addressing educational inequities* (Doctoral dissertation). Boston College, Boston, MA.
- Prepared, A. N. (1986). Teachers for the 21st Century. *The Report of the Task Force on Teaching as a Profession*.
- Ravitch, D. (1995). *National standards in American education: A citizen's guide*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution.
- Research for Better Teaching. (2013). *About RBT*. Retrieved from <http://www.rbteach.com/rbteach2/about.html>
- Richardson, J. (2011). The ultimate practitioner. *The Phi Delta Kappan, 93*(1), 27-32.

- Robinson, V., Hohepa, M., & Lloyd, C. (2009). *School leadership and student outcomes: Identifying what works and why*. New Zealand Ministry of Education, University of Auckland, Wellington, New Zealand.
- Roehrig, A. D., Bohn, C. M., Turner, J. E., & Pressley, M. (2008). Mentoring beginning primary teachers for exemplary teaching practices. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 24*, 684-702.
- Romm, T., & Mahler, S. (1986). A three-dimensional model for using case studies in the academic classroom. *Higher Education, 15*(6), 677-696.
- Rorrer, A. K., & Skrla, L. (2005). Leaders as policy mediators: The reconceptualization of accountability. *Theory into Practice, 44* (1), 53-62.
- Saldaña, J. (2013). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Salkind, N. J. (2006) *Exploring research* (6th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Schall E., Ospina, S., Godsoe, B., & Dodge, J. (2004). *Appreciative narratives as leadership research: Matching method to lens*. Retrieved from <http://wagner.nyu.edu/files/leadership/matchingmethodtolens.pdf>
- Schmoker, M. (2003). First things first: Demystifying data analysis. *Educational Leadership, 60* (5), 22-25.
- Schon, D. A., & Rein, M. (1994). *Frame reflection: Toward the resolution of intractable policy controversies*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Schott Foundation for Public Education. (2012). *The urgency of now: The Schott 50 state*

- report on public education and black males*. Retrieved from  
[www.blackboysreport.org](http://www.blackboysreport.org)
- Schwahn, C. J., & Spady, W. G. (2002). *Total leaders applying the best future-focused change strategies to education*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Education.
- Scribner, R., Sawyer, K., Watson, S., & Myers, V. (2007). Teacher teams and distributed leadership: A study of group discourse and collaboration. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 43(1), 67-100.
- Seidman, I. (2006). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Senge, P. M. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. New York, NY: Doubleday.
- Shaul, M. S., & Ganson, H. C. (2005). The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001: The Federal government's role in strengthening accountability for student performance. In L. Parker (Ed.), *Review of research in education* (pp. 151-163). Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.
- Sheppard, B., Brown, J., & Dibbon, D. (2009). *School district leadership matters*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Sherer, J. Z. (2006). *School leadership practice: Putting school subjects into leadership equation*. (Order No. 3212789, Northwestern University). *Proquest Dissertations and Theses*, 198-198 p. Retrieved from  
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/305305437>.

- Sherer, J. Z. & Spillane, J. P. (2011). Constancy and change in school work practice: Exploring the role of organizational routines. *Teachers College Record*, 113(3), 611-657.
- Silins, H., Mulford, B., & Zarins, S. (2002). Organizational learning and school change. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 38, 613-642.
- Singleton, G., & Linton, C. (2006). *Courageous conversations about race: A field guide for achieving equity in schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Skrla, L., McKenzie, K. B., & Scheurich, J. J. (2009). *Using equity audits to create equitable and excellent schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Skrla, L., & Scheurich, J. J. (2001). Displacing deficit thinking in school district leadership. *Education and Urban Society* 33(3), 235-259.
- Skrla, L., Scheurich, J. J., & Johnson, J. F. (2000). Equity-driven achievement-focused school districts: A report on systemic school success in four Texas school districts serving diverse student populations. The Charles A. Dana Center. Austin, TX: University of Texas. Retrieved from <http://www.utdanacenter.org/downloads/products/equitydistricts.pdf>
- Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium. (2012). *About Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium*. Retrieved from <http://www.smarterbalanced.org/about/>
- Snow, D. A., Rochford, E. B., Worden, S. K., & Benford, R. D. (1986). Frame alignment processes, micromobilization, and movement participation. *American Sociological Review*, 51(4), 464-481.
- Spillane, J. P. (2013). *Diagnosis and design for instructional improvement: Formal structure and school work practice* [Powerpoint slides]. Retrieved from



[http://www.distributedleadership.org/DLS/Presentations\\_files/SingaporeTalk\\_final.pdf](http://www.distributedleadership.org/DLS/Presentations_files/SingaporeTalk_final.pdf)

- Spillane, J. P. (2006). *Distributed leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Spillane, J. P. (2012). Data in practice: Conceptualizing the data-based decision-making phenomena. *American Journal of Education*, 118(2), 113-141.
- Spillane, J. P., & Diamond, J. B. (2007). *Distributed leadership in practice*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Spillane, J. P., Diamond, J. B., & Jita, L. (2003). Leading instruction: the distribution of leadership for instruction. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 35(5), 533-543.  
doi:10.1080/00220270210000041972
- Spillane, J. P., Halverson, R., & Diamond, J. B. (2001). Investigating school leadership practice: A distributed perspective. *Educational Researcher* 30(3), 23-28.
- Spillane, J. P., Halverson, R., & Diamond, J. B. (2004). Towards a theory of leadership practice: A distributed perspective. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 36(1), 3-34.  
doi: 10.1080/0022027032000106726
- Spillane, J. P., Healey, K., & Mesler, L. M. (2009). School leaders' opportunities to learn: A descriptive analysis from a distributed perspective. *Educational Review*, 61(4), 407-432. doi: 10.1080/00131910903403998
- Spillane, J. P., & Kenney, A. W. (2012). School administration in a changing education sector: The US experience. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 50(5), 541-561. doi:10.1108/09578231211249817

- Spillane, J. P., Parise, L. M., & Sherer, J. Z. (2011). Organizational routines as coupling mechanisms: Policy, school administration, and the technical core. *American Educational Research Journal*, 48(3), 586-620.
- Stake, R. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Starratt, R. J. (2003). Opportunity to learn and the accountability agenda. *The Phi Delta Kappan*, 85(4), 298-303.
- Stecher, B. (2005). Public hearing on educational governance: Statement of Brian Stecher to State of California, Little Hoover Commission. Retrieved from [http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/2005/RAND\\_CT245.pdf](http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/2005/RAND_CT245.pdf)
- Stein, M.K., & D'Amico, L. (2002). The district as a professional learning laboratory. In A. Hightower, M. Knapp, J. Marsh & M. McLaughlin (Eds.), *School districts and instructional renewal* (pp. 61-75). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Stillwell, R., Sable, J., & Plotts, C. (2011). *Public school graduates and dropouts from the common core of data: School year 2008–09* (NCES 2011-312). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch>
- Strategic Education Research Partnership. (2011). *Word generation*. Retrieved from <http://wg.serpmedia.org/>
- Stripling, B. (1992). *Libraries for the national education goals*. Syracuse, NY: Information Resources Publications, Syracuse University.
- Sugai, G., & Horner, R. H. (2009). Defining and describing school-wide positive behavior support. In W. Sailor, G. Dunlap, G. Sugai, & R. Horner (Eds.), *Handbook of positive behavior supports* (pp. 307–326). New York, NY: Springer.

- Tatum, B.D. (1997). *“Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?” and other conversations about race*. New York: BasicBooks.
- Taylor, J. R., & Van Every, E. J. (2000). *The emergent organization: Communication as its site and surface*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- The Education Trust. (2004). A dream deferred: 50 years after Brown vs. Board of Education, the struggle continues...A 50 state look at achievement, attainment, and opportunity gaps. Retrieved from [http://www.edtrust.org/dc/press-room/press-release/a-dream-deferred-50-years-after-brown-v-board-of-education-the-struggle-](http://www.edtrust.org/dc/press-room/press-release/a-dream-deferred-50-years-after-brown-v-board-of-education-the-struggle)
- Theoharis, G. (2007). Social justice educational leaders and resistance: Toward a theory of social justice leadership. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 43(2), 221.
- Timperley, H.S. (2005). Distributed leadership: Developing theory from practice. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 37(4), 395-420.
- Togneri, W., & Anderson, S. E. (2003). How high poverty districts improve. *Leadership*, 33(1), 12-16.
- Traiman, S. L. (1993). *The debate on opportunity-to-learn standards*. Washington, DC: National Governors' Association.
- Tucker, B. (2010). Putting data into practice: Lessons from New York City. Washington, DC: Education Sector.
- United States Census Bureau (2010). Retrieved from <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/25/2523875.html>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2006). *No Child Left Behind improving data quality for Title I standards, assessments and accountability reporting: Guidelines for states*,

- LEAs, and schools* [Non-Regulatory Guidance]. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/standardassessment/nclbdataguidance.doc>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2013). *Race to the Top assessment program*. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop-assessment/index.html>
- Valencia, R.R. (1997). *The evolution of deficit thinking: Educational thought and practice*. London: Falmer.
- Valencia, R., & Solórzano, D. (1997). Contemporary deficit thinking. In R. Valencia (Ed.), *The evolution of deficit thinking in educational thought and practice* (pp. 160-210). Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Valenzuela, A. (1999). *Subtractive schooling: U.S.-Mexican youth and the politics of caring*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Vardaman, J. M., Amis, J. M., Dyson, B. P., Wright, P. M., & Van de, G. R. (2012). Interpreting change as controllable: The role of network centrality and self-efficacy. *Human Relations*, 65(7), 835-859. doi:10.1177/0018726712441642
- Walker, R. (1987). Bennet: Test gains at a “dead stall.” *Education Week*, 7(23), 5.
- Waters, J. T., & Marzano, R. J. (2006). *School district leadership that works: The effect of superintendent leadership on student achievement*. Denver, CO: Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning.
- Ware, F. (2006). Warm demander pedagogy: Culturally responsive teaching that supports A culture of achievement for African American students. *Urban Education*, 41(4), 427-456.
- Wayman, J. C., Cho, V., & Shaw, S. (2009). *First-year results from an efficacy study of the Acuity data system*. Austin, TX: The University of Texas at Austin.

- Wayman, J. C., Cho, V., & Johnston, M. T. (2007). *The Data-informed district: A district wide evaluation for data use in the Natrona County School District*. Austin, TX: University of Texas.
- Wayman, J. C., Jimerson, J., & Cho, V. (2012). Organizational considerations in establishing the data-informed district. *School Effectiveness & School Improvement, 23*(2), 159-178. doi:101080/09243453.2011.652124
- Wayman, J. C., & Stringfield, S. (2006). Data use for school improvement: School practices and research perspectives. *American Journal of Education, 112*(4), 463-468.
- Weick, K. E., Sutcliff, K. M., & Obstfeld, D. (2005). Organizing and the process of sensemaking. *Organization Science, 16*(4), 409-421.
- Whitaker, K. (1996). Exploring causes of principal burnout. *Journal of Educational Administration, 34*(1), 60-71.
- Wohlstetter, P., Datnow, A., & Park, V. (2008). Creating a system for data-driven decision-making: Applying the principal-agent framework. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement, 19*(3), 239-259.
- Yin, R. K. (1994). *Case study research: Design and methods (revised 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.)*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Yin, R. K. (2003). *Case study research: Designs and methods (3rd ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Yin, R. K. (2008). *Case study research: Designs and methods (4th ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ysseldyke, J., Thurlow, M., & Shin H. (1995). *Opportunity-to-learn standards (Policy*

Directions No. 4). Retrieved from University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes website:

<http://www.cehd.umn.edu/NCEO/onlinepubs/archive/Policy/Policy4.html>

Zaleski, K.J. (2014). *Opportunity to learn: The role of interactions in understanding and addressing educational inequities* (Doctoral dissertation). Boston College, Boston, MA.

Zaleznik, A. (2004). Managers and leaders: Are they different? *Harvard Business Review*, 82(1), 74-81. (Original work published in 1977)

### **End Note**

<sup>1</sup>Due to differences in student populations, as well as variation found among the states' policies and practices for identifying and including SD and ELL students in NAEP testing, comparisons of performance results for SD and ELL populations may not accurately reflect increases and decreases over time (NCES, 2011). This likely explains why less attention has been focused on reporting discrepancies between students with and without disabilities (Foorman & Nixon, 2006), as well as between native English speaking students and English language learners. In an effort "to ensure that NAEP results accurately reflect the educational performance of all students in the target population and can continue to serve as a meaningful measure of U.S. students' academic achievement over time" (NCES, 2011, p.100), the National Assessment Governing Board recently adopted a new policy that focuses on testing and reporting on SD and ELL students.

## Appendix A

### District-level Leader Interview Questions

1. To begin, please briefly describe your educational background, as well as your current role and your history in the school district.
2. Please describe any gaps in student performance that your district is focused on eliminating.
3. How has central office trained school leaders to use student data?
  - a. Are there any other supports offered?
  - b. What else helps people to learn how to use data in this district?
4. What changes have you seen in schools as a result of this training?
5. Have you seen any changes in the central office as a result of this training?
6. Do you believe people have changed the way they think about:
  - a. their professional responsibilities?
  - b. collaborating with others?
  - c. student subgroups?
  - d. Probes: How do you know? What have you seen? Can you provide an example?
7. What should schools be doing regularly when it comes to analyzing student data?  
How is central office supporting this?
8. Who do you go to for advice regarding work (if anyone)? Why?
  - a. What do you talk about? Give me an example of a recent conversation you have had?
  - b. Have you talked about gaps in student performance?



- c. Have any actions been taken as a result of these discussions?
  - i. Which student subgroup(s) have been/will be impacted by these actions?
- 9. Are there others you should be able to go to, but do not? Explain.
- 10. Imagine you had a magic wand. What else needs to happen in your district to improve student performance?
- 11. Are there any specific documents related to what we have just discussed that you would recommend for us to review?

### **School-level Leader Interview Questions**

- 1. To begin, please briefly describe your educational background, as well as your current role and your history in the school district.
- 2. Please describe any gaps in student performance that your district is focused on eliminating.
- 3. How has central office trained school leaders to use student data?
  - a. Are there any other supports offered?
  - b. What else helps people to learn how to use data in this district?
- 4. What changes have you seen in your school as a result of this training?
- 5. Have you seen any changes in the central office as a result of this training?
- 6. Do you believe people have changed the way they think about:
  - a. their professional responsibilities?
  - b. collaborating with others?
  - c. student subgroups?

- d. Probes: How do you know? What have you seen? Can you provide an example?
7. What should schools be doing regularly when it comes to analyzing student data?
    - a. How are you supporting this?
    - b. How is central office supporting this?
  8. Who do you go to for advice regarding work (if anyone)? Why?
    - a. What do you talk about? Give me an example of a recent conversation you have had?
    - b. Have you talked about gaps in student performance?
    - c. Have any actions been taken as a result of these discussions?
      - i. Which student subgroup(s) have been/will be impacted by these actions?
  9. Are there others you should be able to go to, but do not? Explain.
  10. Imagine you had a magic wand. What else needs to happen in your school to improve student performance?
  11. Are there any specific documents related to what we have just discussed that you would recommend for us to review?