

EVIDENCE-USE AND ROLE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT IN LEADING FOR  
LEARNING: A CASE STUDY OF A SMALL ILLINOIS RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

BY

JEAN M. NEAL

DISSERTATION

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Doctoral Committee:

Professor Donald G. Hackmann, Chair  
Clinical Assistant Professor Mary Herrmann  
Professor Peter Kuchinke  
Assistant Professor Anjalé Welton

## Abstract

Extensive research has been conducted on the role of school principals in promoting student learning, but there has been relatively little focus on the role of the central office administration, specifically the superintendent, as leaders for learning. The school district superintendent's office is often seen as a separate entity that is removed from everyday work in classrooms. Hough (2014) states that superintendents are often seen as too detached from the classroom to have any quantifiable impact on student academic performance; perhaps this assumption is due to the fact that the majority of the empirical evidence centers on the school level as the unit of study. Smith and O'Day (1991) explained that teachers and building leaders are the "initiators, designers, and directors of change efforts" (p. 235). However, the school superintendent, as the chief administrative officer of the school system, also has an important duty to facilitate, direct, and support classroom teaching and learning practices.

This qualitative case study examined the practices of one exemplary Illinois rural school district that is engaged in a formalized evidence-use process as a lever for school reform. The school district superintendent's leadership behaviors and practices were examined as he compiled, desegregated, and analyzed district data in collaboration with district and building personnel. The supposition of this study was the superintendent is uniquely positioned as the formally appointed head of the organization to lead and guide procedures and practices related to student learning. Gaining an understanding of the unique role of the rural superintendent while leading for learning included an examination of how evidence-use processes are structured and what systems and sub-units matter to evidence-use. Specifically, a focus of the study was the examination of the superintendent's leadership choices and experiences while leading a district-wide reform process that centered on student learning, to gain an understanding of successful

implementation strategies and potential obstacles in leading change, and to explore one promising lever—evidence-use—to increase student learning.

The theoretical construct that informed this study is rooted in the Leadership for Learning Framework (Knapp et al., 2010) and is an appropriate lens for examining district improvement and leadership processes. The findings revealed the superintendent demonstrated behaviors and practices that facilitated and supported evidence-use process and subsequently the district engaged in practices that promoted professional, student, and systems learning. The findings revealed four themes that included the superintendent focused on learning, established high expectations for learning, modeled evidence as a medium for leading improvements, and “generated will” with stakeholders through the development of good relationships. Next, four key themes emerged from the data regarding what matters in effective evidence-use processes that included the district focusing on collaboration, building staff members’ capacity as educators through meaningful professional development and leadership opportunities, establishing a mutually reliant information exchange relationship, and engaging in professional reflection. Finally, the findings revealed three key themes related to evidence-use barriers and constraints that inhibit effective evidence-use process that included: (a) optimal assessment conditions, (b) striking the right balance in testing, and (c) communicating findings in a productive manner.

Implications from this study focused upon the superintendent facilitating Leadership for Learning action steps, distributing leadership, collaborating, and building capacity through the evidence-use processes to promote professional, student, and system learning. Recommendations for practice, policy and future research are presented to advance rural district leaders of learning

utilization of one strategic lever of school reform—evidence-use processes focused upon improving student performance.

### **Dedication**

To my GOD who has walked beside me my entire life.

I dedicate my life, this work, and my service to you.

For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, " plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.- Jeremiah 29:11

Your promises sustain me.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Extensive research has been conducted on the role of school principals in promoting student learning, but there has been relatively little focus on the role of the central office administration, specifically the superintendent, as leaders for learning. The school district superintendent's office is often seen as a separate entity that is removed from everyday work in classrooms. Hough (2014) states that superintendents are often seen as too detached from the classroom to have any quantifiable impact on student academic performance; perhaps this assumption is due to the fact that the majority of the empirical evidence centers on the school level as the unit of study. Smith and O'Day (1991) explained that teachers and building leaders are the "initiators, designers, and directors of change efforts" (p. 235). However, the school superintendent, as the chief administrative officer of the school system, also has an important duty to facilitate, direct, and support classroom teaching and learning practices.

Context matters in the school superintendency. For example, rural superintendents conduct an all-encompassing range of responsibilities and duties when compared to urban superintendents. One significant factor is that rural school superintendents have fewer district administrators to handle the myriad of responsibilities inherent in running their school systems (Lamkin, 2006; Leithwood, 1995); in contrast, large suburban and urban districts employ layers of middle management personnel to perform business and instructional leadership duties. Yet, Lamkin (2006) found that rural superintendents encountered comparable obstacles as other superintendents in various contexts, contrary only in their "scale and intensity rather than substance" (p. 19). All public school districts are required to equally adhere to federal and state mandates, submit the same amount of reports, and acquiesce to the state and federal



accountability measures (Canales, Tejeda-Delgado, & Slate, 2008). The rural superintendent, with little or no additional central office administrative support, can become overwhelmed managing the district business responsibilities and increasing instructional leadership expectations initiated by national and state reform movements.

Contemporary educational reform efforts over the past three decades have guided and contributed to current practices in schools and have shaped, over time, superintendents' duties. These major school reform movements were prompted by the 1983 *Nation at Risk Report* published by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE). The task force, maintaining that public schools were failing to educate students to compete in a global marketplace, issued the following call for school reform:

It is their America, and the America of all of us, that is at risk; it is to each of us that this imperative is addressed. It is by our willingness to take up the challenge, and our resolve to see it through, that America's place in the world will be either secured or forfeited. Americans have succeeded before and so we shall again. (NCEE, 1983, p. 4)

The first reform movement from 1983 to 1986 strived to improve schools by making changes to the structural components of public schools. The school day was extended to allow more instructional time, teacher qualifications were strengthened, and high school graduation requirements were increased (Smith & O'Day, 1991). The second reform movement was implemented in the latter part of the 1980s and was characterized by site-based management, a push for the educators to define their practice in their individual schools. The third reform movement was characterized by standardization intended to affect a far greater number of students and educational communities across the country. Rorrer et al. (2008) explained that the third wave, emphasizing national standards and performance tests, grew in prominence throughout the 1990s, and considerable elements are present in today's mandates.

Conspicuously, 30 years of reforms have neglected the school district superintendent, who is the primary individual accountable for educational progress at the local level.

Marzano and Waters (2009) conducted a meta-analysis that synthesized empirical evidence on school district leadership to determine its relationship with student achievement. The study sample included all research on district leadership and student achievement from 1974-2005. Their primary research aim was to determine the strength of relationship between district-level administrative actions and student achievement. The authors reviewed 27 reports, 14 of which included data from 1,210 school districts. Their meta-analysis revealed a correlation between district leadership and student achievement of .24 which is statistically significant at the .05 level. Interpreting the meta-analysis results, Marzano and Waters maintained, “These findings suggest that when district leaders are carrying out their leadership responsibilities effectively, student achievement across the district is positively affected” (p. 5). The natural follow-up research question Marzano and Waters posed was: What are the specific district leadership behaviors that are associated with student achievement? Subsequently, they found five district-level leadership responsibilities with a statistical significance at the .05 level with average student academic achievement: (a) ensuring collaborative goal setting, (b) establishing nonnegotiable goals for achievement and instruction, (c) creating board alignment with and support of district goals, (d) monitoring achievement and instruction goals, and (e) allocating resources to support the goals for achievement and instruction.

The superintendent, as the leader of the public education system, is held to a higher standard. Superintendents are expected and are challenged with leading effective reform that positively influences student achievement while managing the complex responsibilities of running a school district. It is not only a challenge for urban superintendents, who have resources

to draw upon with additional central office administrators available to structure the educational process to close achievement gaps, but it is also challenging for superintendents working in small, rural districts who lack resources and additional administrative support at the district office. The empirical research is sparse on school districts and superintendents as leaders of learning, specifically rural superintendents, as the unit of analysis in leading reform. Additional research is needed on the district office, specifically the superintendent, as the primary unit of study to gain an understanding on how effective superintendents' facilitate, manage, and sustain system-wide change efforts.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The past and current accountability movement in public education has maintained a focused attention on the perceived failure of public schools in the United States to adequately educate all students. We have experienced 30 years of national reform movements focused on the structure of schools, the effect of building-level personnel on student achievement, an increase in accountability measures for schools and, more recently, the transition to national common core learning standards. However, little attention has been placed upon superintendents as leaders of learning, and even less on the rural superintendents who strive to lead effectively despite the lack of administrative personnel support at the district level.

Superintendents complain that their plates are too full with managing school business and instructional leadership responsibilities and fulfilling the numerous mandates and policies (Glass, Bjork, & Bruner, 2000). Student performance, as well as teacher and administrator effectiveness in raising test scores is increasingly scrutinized, and state and federal educational reform legislation has increased the workload for superintendents and educators in their school systems. For example, in the past 3 years, Illinois school reform efforts have transitioned to the New

Illinois Learning Standards aligned to Common Core national standards and to the redesign of the state testing system that aligns with the new standards. Further, the state of Illinois has reduced General State Aid to school districts to 89% and is not fully funding state categorical payments, and the majority of which are not being submitted to districts in a timely and predictable manner (Illinois State Board of Education, n.d.). The inadequate funding of schools is not unique to Illinois. Abshier, Harris, and Hopson (2011) conducted a study with seven Texas small-school superintendents to determine their perceptions of improving district financial efficiencies and financial rating. Findings suggest that small-school superintendents are seeking new revenue streams (e.g., charging out-of-district student tuition), striving to understand and navigate state funding mechanisms, and exploring improved efficiencies in staffing and purchasing energy.

The reduction in funding inhibits the ability of school districts to maintain staff and programs and finance the reform initiatives. For example, Illinois instituted a new principal and teacher evaluation system in 2010, the Performance Evaluation Reform Act (PERA), which requires 40 hours of certification training and significantly extends the time required to evaluate administrators and teachers. Moreover, the implementation of the new state student performance assessment system, Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), replaced the former Illinois Standard Achievement Test (ISAT). Administrators' time commitment and district resources are stretched to fulfill the requirements of these initiatives.

All of the reforms are intended to have a positive effect on student learning. However, the aforementioned Illinois education initiatives have increased the duties and workload of personnel in suburban, urban, and rural school districts. Yet, an important difference is that large urban and suburban districts typically have more financial and human resources to implement reform

efforts, whereas small rural districts have far fewer human and financial resources to marshal when addressing the school reform requirements. One study (Levin, Manship, Chambers, Johnson, & Blankenship, 2011) examined the difference in resource allocations among rural, suburban, and urban districts, finding that rural districts in the Western part of the United States spent more per pupil, employed more staff per 100 students, and had higher overhead cost ratios of district to building level resources than districts located in more populated areas. Furthermore, the rural regional factor more strongly connected to resource allocation than all other cost characteristics studied. Lamkin (2006) maintains that rural superintendents are ill prepared to handle many of the challenges associated with the geographic and isolated location, decreased funding, and the lack of specialized staff to perform the required duties.

The University of Montana Rural Institute (2005) reports that rural areas comprise 3,444,930 miles, cover 97% of the land mass of the United States, and are populated by 60 million residents. School districts are defined as rural when they are geographically isolated, serve a small student population, and have fewer infrastructures (NCES, 2006). According to the National Center of Education Statistics (2006), rural public schools educate 8.8 million students. States commonly use a categorization system to identify rural, suburban, and urban school districts. The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) employs the urban centric locale codes which originated from a categorization system developed by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) to describe a school district location ranging from “large city” to “rural.” The codes are based on the physical location represented by an address that corresponds with a topographical databank maintained by the United States Census Bureau (ISBE, n.d.).

Table 1

*Illinois Urban Centric Locale Codes and School District Distribution*

Illinois urban-centric locale codes	Illinois school districts' distribution
<b>31–Town, Fringe:</b> Territory inside an urban cluster that is less than or equal to 10 miles from an urbanized area	36
<b>32–Town, Distant:</b> Territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 10 miles and less than or equal to 35 miles from an urbanized area	78
<b>33–Town, Remote:</b> Territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 35 miles from an urbanized area	74
<b>41–Rural, Fringe:</b> Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 25 miles from an urban cluster	65
<b>42–Rural, Distant:</b> Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 25 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster	208
<b>43–Rural, Remote:</b> Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster	57

*Note.* Adapted from ISBE (n.d.).

Illinois has a total of 857 public school districts, 518 of which are located within five miles from an urbanized area (ISBE, n.d.). Rural educators are important, educating a large percentage of American public school students. The problem is the superintendents in small rural school districts have little to no central office support, and like their colleagues in suburban districts and large urban districts, they are overwhelmed with the implementation of unfunded mandates coupled with a responsibility to perform all district-level administrative duties. A related issue is the sparse research on rural superintendents' effective leadership practices; therefore, there is relatively little understanding of how successful rural school district superintendents address educational reform mandates while working within the constraints of limited fiscal and personnel resources.

## **Purpose of the Study**

Despite the complex and often competing responsibilities of small rural district superintendents, there are those who are successfully leading for learning and, as a result, student achievement gains are being evidenced in their districts. In this study, I attempt to understand how rural superintendents effectively lead and support evidence-use processes that positively influence student achievement despite the overwhelming administrative tasks they perform. Federal and state level reform initiatives have focused on increasing the use of data analysis (i.e., evidence-use processes) to support instructional decision making. The use of data to inform instruction, curriculum, and assessment decision making is often described as *evidence-based decision making* and is most commonly implemented at the school level (Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012). However, there is a gap in the literature due to relatively little empirical evidence related to superintendents' implementation of evidence-use processes to increase student learning. Two reform initiatives in Illinois heavily utilize evidence-use in their district reform models. First, the federal Race to the Top (RttT) is a competitive grant program aimed at creating conditions in schools for rapid improvements, closing achievement gaps, and facilitating educational innovation. In 2011 Illinois was awarded \$42.8 million in RttT funding that was distributed between 32 district awardees across the state (ISBE, n.d.). The school improvement strategies outlined in the RttT requirements include recruiting, evaluating, and retaining highly effective teachers and principals; building data systems that measure student success; and constructing state capacity and support (ISBE, n.d.). Second, the new Illinois school improvement technological platform, Rising Star, has expanded the school improvement focus to include the district office and superintendent in the improvement process, an attempt to create coherence in a school system. The Rising Star system is a web-based platform for continuous

district and school improvement planning processes. Rising Star, facilitated by ISBE, is supported by the National Center on Innovation and Improvement and is federally funded through the Department of Education to focus on four categories for improvement:

(a) continuous improvement, (b) learning environment, (c) educator quality, and (d) teaching and learning (Pathways Resource Center, n.d.). The Rising Star web-based platform is linked to the Illinois Interactive Report Card (IIRC) and integrates school and district student performance and goal setting data. A superintendent who is utilizing a structured evidence-use process in instructional, curricular, and assessment decision making, such as, RttT, the Rising Star platform, or a similar structured evidence-use process was sought for this study.

The purpose of this case study was to examine one exemplary Illinois rural school district and the practices of one rural school district superintendent who is participating in a formalized evidence-use process, such as, the state of Illinois Rising Star District Improvement Planning and/or the federally supported “Race to the Top” initiative in implementing school reform efforts. There are varying definitions of rural, but for the purpose of this study, a small rural district was defined as utilizing the above urban locale definition for town and rural districts as one situated at least five miles away from an urban setting and the total student population should not exceed 2,000. The small district may draw from a large geographic area and from neighboring towns with the central office administrative staff should not exceed two. Specifically, this study explored the superintendent’s leadership of evidence-use processes and structures and the subsequent impact district-wide.

### **Personal Interest**

I was interested in conducting this study because I am a superintendent of a small rural Illinois school district. I am a White female who attended primary and secondary parochial



schools, who was college educated as an adult, and currently live in a university town in the Midwest. I have worked as a school social worker and student services coordinator in an urban setting and have served in the role of principal and now superintendent in a rural setting. The rural setting has been my most challenging professional experience. Currently in Illinois, funding for schools is reduced, and unfunded mandates are increasing my work load and diverting my time and attention away from leading for learning. I would like to extend my learning by conducting a case study of an effective rural superintendent leader of learning who is experiencing success leading school reform despite the overwhelming demands. The results of the study will inform my practice and possibly the practice of other rural superintendents who also are struggling to lead for learning.

I am familiar with school improvement processes as an administrator at the building and district levels. As a principal of a large rural elementary school, I led a school improvement planning process that integrated data decision making and focused on building teacher capacity in the classroom and as building leaders. As a superintendent, I have facilitated a district-wide Illinois Rising Star process that was heavily dependent upon analyzing and making decisions with data. As a district leader of learning in a rural area, I experience the challenges in resource allocation, time-management, keeping a focus on teaching and learning, and identifying where to intervene to make the most significant impact on raising student achievement. In my school principal experience, I have seen the positive impact on student achievement when evidence is used to make instructional decisions. I wanted to extend my learning in this study from the building level to how to effectively manage change district-wide and perhaps add to the literature related to superintendency as leaders of learning. I was most interested in how successful superintendents structure and facilitate a rural district's evidence-use process and what behaviors

and practices they demonstrate to support change despite the numerous challenges they face leading. I was cognizant to not make judgments but to remain open to how the case unfolded. Making initial judgments was my biggest challenge.

### **Research Questions**

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What district leadership strategies and practices matter to evidence use?
2. How does the rural district structure the process of evidence-use that is focused on student, professional, and system learning?
3. What barriers and constraints are encountered and what supports are lacking that inhibit effective district evidence-use processes that promote continual systems learning?

### **Research Methodology**

This qualitative research study used case study methods to examine one rural exemplary district where the superintendent was leading a structured continuous improvement process utilizing data to drive instructional, curriculum, and assessment decision making. A single case study design was used to explore the uniqueness of a rural district superintendent leading a formalized evidence-use district improvement process. Stake (1995) maintained that “case study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances” (p. xi). One rural district and superintendent were purposely selected according to predetermined criteria.

The data collection consisted of individual interviews, focus group interviews, observations, and review of district artifacts. Interviews were conducted with the superintendent, school board president, curriculum coordinator, and principals, and focus group interviews were conducted with the school improvement teams and district improvement team. Observations were conducted at school and district improvement team meetings. An observation protocol was utilized to gather case setting details, as well as informational details. Finally, school district

artifacts were reviewed to aid in triangulation of data. The data were analyzed through a coding process to elicit themes and uniqueness of the case.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The Leadership for Learning framework was utilized to examine superintendent leadership practices and strategies related to leading a process of evidence-use focusing on student achievement. This framework is built upon a set of foundational concepts about leadership, learning, and their potential connections (Knapp, Copland, Ford, & Markholt, 2003). Leadership for Learning identifies three continual learning agendas that are embedded in specific contexts: larger policy and professional contexts, family and community contexts, and organizational contexts. The Leadership for Learning framework provides a structure of continuous district improvement. Knapp et al. (2003) describes five areas of action that district leaders can employ to advance powerful and equitable student learning that includes establishing a focus on learning, building professional learning communities, engaging external environments that support the educational process, acting strategically and collaboratively, and creating coherence within the educational system. The learning agendas (i.e., student, professional, and systems learning) coupled with the five areas of action embedded in a unique environmental context are integral components to leading and guiding a district reform process. The Leadership for Learning framework's focus on learning agendas and five action areas provides leaders with a model to guide leadership practices. Even though, evidence-use is not fully addressed in the Leadership for Learning framework, the current study has the potential to strengthen the Leadership for Learning framework. Superintendents who employ the Leading for Learning framework and focus on facilitating district-wide evidence-use processes may employ an effective lever to positively influence student achievement.

## **Limitations**

This study is a single case study of one exemplary rural Illinois School district and the superintendent leading school reform initiatives utilizing evidence-use processes. The study is limited in four ways: (a) generalizability, (b) researcher potential bias, (c) self-reporting by study participants, and (d) sampling procedures. First, this case study is a unique example that cannot be generalized to other contexts; although, the case may be instructive to other rural superintendents who are challenged with managing their districts and leading for learning. A second limitation of this study is the researcher who is currently a small rural district superintendent with experience in leading school reform efforts. Personal bias may be possible. Third, this study relied on semi-structured interviews with a rural superintendent, administrators, school board president, and with focus groups. It is understood that the information obtained through the interviews may not be complete as it is individuals' perceptions and understanding of an event or experience. The triangulation of information may help to minimize self-reporting limitations. The final limitation of this study is the sampling procedures. The Illinois Regional Office of Education (ROE) superintendents and other education professionals (e.g., school improvement providers, university professors) were asked to endorse an effective small rural school district superintendent leader of learning who has a reputation as a collaborative superintendent and who is utilizing evidence-use as a lever of improving student performance. The ROE superintendents and educational professionals may have unintentionally omitted recommending effective rural superintendent candidates because they were not familiar with all of the rural superintendents' leadership practices in their regions. This scenario is possible because Illinois is currently transitioning from the former Illinois State Assessment Test (ISAT) to the new Partnership for Assessment and College and Career Readiness (PARCC) measure.

ISAT and PARCC assessment trend data cannot be compared. Currently, there is no state-wide reporting mechanism that the ROE superintendents can access that highlights those districts whose student performance is trending upward.

### **Delimitations**

It is important to outline limitations as well as delimitations of this study. The case study is delimited in three ways: (a) district site classification, location, and size; (b) length of superintendent tenure in district; and (c) district performance. The research site should be a small Illinois public school unit district that is situated in a rural area with a student population that does not exceed 2,000. The superintendent must be in at least the third year of tenure in the district and served in the role of leader of learning. Because this study focused on the strategies and practices of an effective rural superintendent leading for learning through the utilization of evidence-use processes, it was important the district was using a formalized evidence-use process and could demonstrate progress toward increasing student performance.

### **Significance of the Study**

Studying exemplary districts and effective rural superintendents is significant for a variety of reasons, but the most noteworthy reason is there is very little research on the small school district rural superintendents' influence on student achievement, and specifically, on the behavior and practices rural superintendents demonstrate while leading successful reform. Definitions of rural are varied, but for the purpose of this study, small rural districts are defined as located at least five miles away from an urban area and the district may encompass a large geographic area. The total student population should not exceed 2,000. Engaging in this study may add to the scant body of research in this area. Second, the superintendent and central office leaders have historically been removed from what happens in the classroom. However, current

research demonstrates that superintendents can make a difference in teaching and learning. Wright and Harris (2010) maintain that superintendents who understand the importance of cultural proficiency and purposely lead school reform efforts focused on increasing staffs' cultural proficiencies lead their districts in closing achievement gaps.

Cultural proficiency is critical for the rural superintendent, but also the ability to negotiate encroaching political and capitalist demands and shifting student population demographics. Howley, Howley, Rhodes, and Yahn (2014) suggested that current dilemmas rural superintendents negotiate that many suburban and urban superintendents may not face include the following: (a) school district consolidation; (b) influx of students of color into predominantly White communities; and (c) hydraulic fracturing (fracking), which is a process that initiates the release of natural gas and petroleum from bedrock. The change in the structure of a rural district, the student population served, and the environmental landscape are challenges experienced by superintendents working in the rural context. This study may be helpful in revealing leadership practices and behaviors that help inform rural superintendent as they strive to be responsive to the unique needs of the population and community they serve.

Because of the importance of the topic, it is essential to explore what behaviors and practices superintendents demonstrate that facilitate continuous improvement and to examine levers, such as evidence-use processes that result in improvement in student achievement. Third, the use of data to drive instructional, curricular and assessment decisions has been studied extensively at the school level, but little research on evidence-use at the district level has been conducted to determine if using data to drive instructional, curriculum, and assessment decision making impacts learning. This one lever of evidence-use between the district and the school-level relationship may have positive effects on teaching and student learning. As a sole leader of

a rural district, superintendents are faced with unique context realities of the rural environment. One study of rural superintendents' effects on student achievement looked at context and collaborative leadership practices. Forner, Bierlein-Palmer, and Reeves (2012) conducted a multi-site case study investigating leadership practices of seven effective rural superintendents. The researchers utilized the six correlates of effective leadership practices identified by Marzano and Waters (2007) and found that the goal-setting process was driven by the rural superintendent, and there was little collaborative "bottoms-up" goal setting form of consensus building (Forner et al., 2012). The authors suggested that it was more efficient for the superintendent to use a directive approach to goal setting due to the limited time rural superintendents have to focus on instructional leadership. This study highlights the need for more research on effective rural superintendents' leadership collaborative practices. Finally, the study of one rural superintendent facilitating reform may reveal leadership practices, strategies, and structures that have the potential to inform the leadership practice of fellow rural superintendents who are struggling to serve as district business manager and leader of learning.

### **Key Terms**

**Evidence-use processes.** Evidence-use in education is often described as "evidence-based decision making" (Honig & Benkateswaran, 2012). A decade of research on evidence-use in schools reveals that school staff and administrators commonly examine standardized assessment data (Ikemoto & Marsh, 2007; Lachat & Smith, 2005); researched based programming data results (Cousins, Swee, & Clark, 2006) and at risk indicators, such as, discipline, attendance, and dropout rates (Choppin, 2002; Halverson, Grigg, Pritchett, & Thomas, 2007) to make instructional, assessment, and curriculum decisions. Honig and Venkateswaran (2012) explained that the empirical literature on evidence-use in education has yet to define or

make distinctions of evidence-use in schools; the authors view those activities where educators intentionally analyze student data to inform their practice as a group of studies on the process of evidence-based decision making.

**Leadership for learning framework.** The Leadership for Learning framework is a leadership framework that is built upon a set of foundational concepts about leadership, learning, and their potential connections. Leadership for Learning identifies three continual learning agendas that are embedded in specific contexts: larger policy and professional contexts, family and community contexts, and organizational contexts (Knapp, Copland, Ford, & Markholt, 2003).

**Rural school district.** A school districts is defined as rural when it is geographically isolated, serves a small student population, and has fewer infrastructures (NCES, 2006). In Illinois, there are three types of school districts: (a) elementary, (b) high school, and (c) unit (ISBE, n.d.). ISBE delineates rural school districts with Illinois urban centric locale codes that include (a) Rural, Fringe: Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 25 miles from an urban cluster; (b) Rural, Distant: Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 25 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster; (c) Rural, Remote: Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster; (d) Town, Fringe: Territory inside an urban cluster that is less than or equal to 10 miles from an urbanized area; (e) Town, Distant: Territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 10 miles and less than or equal to 35 miles from an urbanized area; and (f) Town, Remote: Territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 35 miles from an urbanized area (ISBE, n.d.).



**Unit school district.** In the state of Illinois, a unit district is a public school district encompassing grades prekindergarten through 12 (ISBE, n.d.).

## **Conclusion**

Chapter 1 provided a synopsis of the single case study. Chapter 2 will begin with an overview of school reform movements. Next, a review of the literature will be conducted of district level leadership and superintendents' practices literature. Because the unit of analysis in this case study is an exemplary rural school district, with a focus upon the rural superintendent leadership practices related to evidence-use that centered upon improving student achievement, an examination of rural and urban superintendents' roles and similarity and differences was explored. The rural superintendent is challenged with managing business and instructional demands of the district; therefore, it is critical they choose effective leadership strategies and practices that will promote student growth. At the end of Chapter 2, the Leadership for Learning framework will be discussed as the lens for this single case study. In Chapter 3, a description of the research methodology will be presented in detail that includes the research questions that guided this study, the research method approach, and a brief synopsis of the Leadership for Learning conceptual framework lens. Chapter 4 provides a description of the case study community and school site, and Chapter 5 outlines the research findings. Finally, the discussion, implications, and case study recommendations are presented in Chapter 6.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

This chapter focuses on the rural superintendent and the necessity to construct a concrete leadership for learning structure sustained by effective interpersonal and collaborative superintendent practices. The single case study examined the rural superintendent's leadership work centered on one improvement lever—evidence-use—as the mechanism for school reform. This review explores six areas relevant to rural superintendents' leading school reform. First, the review will begin with an overview of school reform movements in the United States. Over three decades of reform movements have shaped the role of the superintendent. Second, a review of the limited empirical evidence related to the degree district-level leadership can positively affect student achievement, followed by a critique and discussion of challenges associated with leading in the accountability era. Third, a review of the literature related to superintendents' leadership behaviors that affect student achievement, and an analysis of the benefits of a structured leadership process is presented. Fourth, considering the rural superintendent is the unit of analysis, it is important to review the role and evolution of the superintendent position and how the role varies between contexts. Fifth, the focus of this study is the rural school district and the superintendent leading evidence-use processes as a lever to improve student performance; therefore, a review of the evidence-use literature will follow. Finally, the Leadership for Learning framework will be reviewed as a promising model for managing the demands of the rural superintendency, providing an effective structure to guide educators' work, and engaging collaboratively with stakeholders.

## History of School District Reform

A 1983 nation-wide call for school reform was declared by the National Commission of Excellence in Education in their *A Nation at Risk* report. The commission stated,

We report to the American people that while we can take justifiable pride in what our schools and colleges have historically accomplished and contributed to the United States and the well-being of its people, the educational foundation of our society is presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future of our Nation and a people. (p. 112)

*A Nation at Risk* was the catalyst for over 30 years of continual national and state school reform initiatives and legislation. Three waves of reform have shaped current practice in public schools. Smith and O'Day (1991) outlined the first two waves of school reform. They identified the years of 1983 through 1986 as the first reform movement. The first wave endeavored to improve schools by making changes to the structural components of public schools. The school day was extended to afford more instructional time, teacher qualifications were strengthened, and high school graduation requirements were increased (Smith & O'Day). During this initial wave of school reform, researchers struggled with determining effective school characteristics, and experienced even more difficulty identifying features of an effective district (Purkey & Smith, 1985). School district superintendents focused on the management of the district and tasks associated with adjusting the structure of education to improve student achievement.

The second reform movement, implemented in the latter part of the 1980s, was characterized by site-based management and a push for the educators to define and improve their practice in their individual schools (Smith & O'Day, 1991). This approach was in direct opposition of the first wave of the earlier top-down reform efforts. In the 1990s, researchers were beginning to identify characteristics of effective schools, and they began to determine how central office administrators impeded reform efforts (Berends, Bodilly, & Kirby, 2002). During this period the focus was on the individual school, building the capacity of teachers' skills, and

site-based management. The initiatives were articulated from the bottom up, originating at the school site. The superintendent continued to be far removed from direct instructional leadership responsibilities.

In the late 1990s and into early 2000, political platforms were built upon reforming American public education. For example, President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) federal legislation was the most comprehensive national school reform effort to date. This period marks the third reform movement that was characterized by unprecedented standardization and the implementation of formalized educator accountability measures that were intended to impact a far greater number of students across the country. Rorrer, Skrla, and Scheurich (2008) explained that the third wave emphasized national standards and standardized testing, and many elements of the reform movement are present in today's mandates. Noticeably, 30 years of reform have neglected the school superintendent, who is the "director" of education at the local level. Instead, school reform efforts have been focused on the school, the teacher, standardizing practice, and increasing accountability measures that were driven by special interest groups (Rorrer et al.). However, one result of the reform movements of standards and assessment is that the superintendent began to reconnect and engage in issues related to teaching and learning (Petersen & Young, 2004).

Contemporary reform initiatives such as the federal No Child Left Behind Act (2001) and school improvement grant opportunities such as Race to the Top (2010) increased accountability measures, focused on student achievement, and broadened federal involvement in public education. NCLB (2001) legislation integrated accountability measures and achievement targets for schools that warranted sanctions if they did not attain these goals. The Race to the Top (RttT, 2010) grant is voluntary but includes specific grant management and school reform guidelines

that are designed to realize rapid improvements in student performance. For example, the state of Illinois was awarded in 2011 the RttT grant in the amount of \$42.8 million. Thirty-five Illinois school districts agreed to participate in the RttT initiative and to implement all reform strategies outlined in the grant proposal. The goal of RttT is to assist the state to adopt rigorous standards and assessment systems to improve education in Illinois. The school improvement strategies outlined in the RttT requirements include recruiting, evaluating, and retaining highly effective teachers and principals; building data systems that measure student success; and constructing state capacity and support (ISBE, n.d.). Despite the fact that applying for the RttT grant was completely voluntary for states and districts, the states were required to establish legislation that integrated accountability measures for schools and districts as a precondition for submitting RttT applications. In order to receive RttT funds, states were required to include student growth measures within their teacher and principal evaluation systems. As a result, Illinois passed the Performance Evaluation Reform Act (PERA) to implement these provisions. Therefore, although only 35 districts are receiving the funds, school districts throughout the state are required to meet the student growth expectations in teacher and principal evaluations. The federal government's act of linking funding and expectations to federal monies is a policy lever to increase accountability and implement more control over state education systems.

The role of the federal government in public education has increased throughout the school reform movements due to federal legislation and mandates associated with states and districts. Scholars and educators debate the value of the government and special interest involvement in public education. Soo Hoo (2004) posed the following important questions:

Why is it that the general public seems complacent with the government's conservative choke-hold on education in this country? Why aren't more communities renouncing the narrowing of textbook selections, the profusion of scripted teaching, the obsession with standardized testing, the erosion of student, teacher and community participation in

decision-making processes, and other such exclusionary, discriminatory, and thus undemocratic trends? Where is the resistance? (p. 200)

Soo Hoo's questions are relevant and timely considering the landmark NCLB (2001) legislation has been reauthorized, as well as requirements contained within the recent RttT initiative. The pattern of response of educators to public criticism has historically been to strive to meet these enhanced expectations. Educators have dutifully worked to meet the various requirements outlined in the grant and legislation, even when, intuitively, they may question the validity of the process. Despite the various encroaching systems, there are key personnel in school systems that can lead and guide improvement efforts. The superintendent of schools as leader of learning is uniquely positioned to enact change in public education.

### **Professed Advantages and Critiques of the School Reform Movements**

The first professed advantage of the various national school reform movements is the process of analyzing the fidelity of public education in the United States. The critical analysis of the nation's public school system provides an overview of public schools as a whole as opposed to examining just one part of the system. On August 26, 1981, Secretary of Education T. H. Bell created the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE) to scrutinize the quality of education in the United States. They were charged with presenting findings within an 18-month period. The landmark *A Nation at Risk* report, published in 1983, was a catalyst for three decades of reform movements (NCEE, 1983). The NCEE identified key deficiencies in America's education system in regard to instructional use of time, expectations, curriculum content, and then outlined recommendations for improvement. *A Nation at Risk* uncovered three areas of concern: (a) compared to other nations, American children spend much less time on schoolwork; (b) time spent in the classroom and on homework is often used ineffectively; and (c) schools are not doing enough to help students develop either the study skills required to use time well or the

willingness to spend more time on school work. It was also found that in many schools, the time spent learning to cook and drive counts as much toward a high school diploma as the time spent studying mathematics (pp. 64–65).

Moreover, the NCEE (1983) recommended an increase in curricular expectations and graduation requirements identifying “Five New Basics” that established a standard of course work completion required to graduate. The mandatory course work recommendation included that every high school student complete 4 years of English, 3 years of mathematics, 3 years of science, 3 years of social studies, and one-half year of computer science. For those students aspiring to go to college, further course work recommended includes 2 years of foreign language. *A Nation at Risk* spurred decades of reform initiatives.

The second professed advantage to reform movements is the awareness of how public education serves, or in some cases does not serve, all students. NCLB (2001) created a paradigm shift in public school education philosophy and practices with the establishment of the expectation that no child would be left behind academically with her/his peers. One result of NCLB is there has been an unprecedented emphasis in public education on increasing student performance overall. NCLB prompted an unparalleled strategic focus on improving student achievement, especially for student populations who had not historically performed well on standardized tests.

The final professed advantage of the reform movements is the focus on cohesive leadership. Petersen and Young (2004) maintained that another benefit of the accountability movement is the school superintendent is positioned into a central role of leading for learning due to the national demand for student performance improvements, the focus on evidence-use in decision making, and the extensive evaluation of teachers and assessment of students. The last 15

years of reform successfully “readjusted the lens of accountability and focused it directly on school district leaders” (Petersen & Young, p. 344). The superintendent is now challenged to facilitate and lead reform by engaging the entire learning organization in goal setting and aligning resources. The superintendent as the leader of learning may be well positioned to promote a congruent and aligned education system.

The implementation of federal and state policy mandates, coupled with the management aspect of running a district, is an overwhelming challenge for superintendents. School superintendents’ priorities have shifted due to political influences. Johnstone, Dickers, and Luedeke (2009) maintained that because of the intense focus on the standardized tests, superintendents are caught between the unintended consequences of reform policy that restricts curriculum and the desire to maintain a rigorous and balanced educational system. The issue at hand is how to meld the traditional superintendent managerial role with the current expectation to serve as leader of learning, and what behaviors and practices the superintendent must demonstrate to promote successful integration. To understand how to shape superintendent behavior and practices, it is important to learn about the current workload of the typical superintendent.

Bredeson and Kose (2007) conducted a statewide survey in a Midwestern state to assess superintendents’ perceptions of federal and state school reform agendas and subsequent mandates, concluding that superintendents value curriculum and instruction, but their daily responsibilities thwart their effort to focus on teaching and learning. The survey demonstrated that the role of the superintendent has expanded, and federal and state mandates have added additional responsibilities to the leaders’ work. The overwhelming daily responsibilities hinder superintendents from focusing more attention on teaching and learning despite the desire to lead



for learning (Bredeson & Kose). Of course, the majority of superintendents strive to improve schools, but there are challenges associated with each district's unique context. For example, urban and suburban superintendents of larger school districts may have layers of district office administrative support to assist with managing and implementing reform, but the rural superintendent is often the sole district office administrator. More research is needed on effective strategies and practices (e.g., superintendents leading evidence-use processes) district leaders can implement that positively affects student achievement. Research on promising levers that promote student achievement would be beneficial information for superintendents who struggle with balancing management issues and leading for learning demands, which is the reality of many rural superintendents.

### **District-Level Leadership Effect on Student Achievement**

Extensive research has been conducted on effective schools, but relatively little attention has been devoted to district-level leadership. Central office personnel are often seen as separate entities that are removed from the everyday work in the classroom, and the majority of the empirical evidence centers on schools as the unit of study, focusing on classroom instructional practices and school principals' leadership behaviors. Smith and O'Day (1991) explained that teachers and building leaders are the "initiators, designers, and directors of change efforts" (p. 235). Historically, the school has been viewed as central to education; all other entities are peripheral.

It is not surprising then that the research on school districts has been limited. The majority of the research in the past two decades has focused more on teachers' and building principals' effects on student achievement. However, during this time period a few scholars recognized the gap in the literature and have begun to explore the roles, responsibilities, and

utility of superintendents leading large-scale school reform efforts (Berman, 1986; Bridges, 1982; Bryk, 1999; Elmore, 1993; Masell, 2000; Marsh, 2000; Oakes, 1987). Many scholars agree that school reform efforts have not been successful due in part to district leaders' ineffectiveness in managing these initiatives (Bryk, Sebring, Kerbow, Rollow, & Easton, 1998; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Malen, Ogawa, & Kranz, 1990; Ravitch & Viteritti, 1997). This research has laid the foundation for more contemporary studies on school factors, the roles of effective district leadership, and the subsequent effect on student achievement.

Recent research on school-level effects has disclosed that high quality teachers and building-level administrators have an impact on student achievement. Teachers have a direct effect on student achievement as they are the implementers of the instruction, whereas the building principal has an indirect but positive effect. Building-level leaders are uniquely positioned to influence the formal process of learning. Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, and Lewis (2011) found that leadership efforts are "small but significant" (p. 8). A meta-analysis conducted by Marzano Waters, and McNulty (2005) revealed an average correlation of .25 between principals' leadership actions and student academic achievement. However, this review identifies other key players that have a significant influence on facilitating, directing, and supporting what is occurring in classrooms—specifically, the school district leadership.

Preliminary research on district leadership effects on student achievement and district leadership is positive. Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) determined the standardized total effects of district leadership on student achievement were .13. Further, Waters and Marzano (2006) proclaimed that district leadership does matter, calculating a .24 correlation between student achievement and district leadership. Effective district leadership includes structuring the work of

school reform and performing fundamental roles that orient the organization to perform at high levels.

The findings of Waters and Marzano support the Rorrer et al. (2008) narrative synthesis on district leadership. Rorrer et al. proposed a framework of “districts as institutional actors” in the creation of equitable conditions and raising student achievement by operationalizing “district” as an organization that encompasses the Board of Education, superintendent, and the administration. The authors employed a narrative synthesis approach of the district leadership literature to understand the intricacies involved in leading effective school reform that allows for the interpretation and integration of the evidence. To guide the narrative synthesis method, the authors utilized the iterative stages identified by Mays, Pope, and Popay (2005) that include conducting a broad focus, establishing research question(s), selecting studies, extricating and critiquing data, and synthesizing and reporting the results. Four fundamental roles of districts in leading reform were identified from the study: (a) imparting instructional leadership, (b) reorienting the organization, (c) instituting policy coherence, and (d) preserving a focus on equity (Rorrer et al.).

Edmonds (1979) developed the concept of “instructional leadership” and identified that effective schools were managed by leaders who focused on teaching and learning. There has been some disagreement in the literature defining instructional leadership at the district level, because it requires complex and targeted attention that is focused on leading instruction and learning (Rorrer et al., 2008). However, researchers agree on two aspects of effective instructional leadership: generating will (Berman, 1986; Daresh, 1991; Elmore & Burney, 1997; Firestone, 1989; Jacobson, 1986; McLaughlin, 1987) and building capacity (Firestone, 1989; Honig, 2003; Jacobson, 1986; Massell, 2000; McLaughlin, 1987, Sclafani, 2001; Spillane &

Thompson, 1997). Leaders must link generating will with capacity building because capacity building reveals the district's ability and competency to enact its will (Rorrer et al., 2008).

Blanco (2009) identified strategic planning, building capacity, sharing of a common vision, and a focus on data-driven results as mechanisms that lead to improved student performance.

The second important feature of effective reform is the process of reorienting the organization to focus on learning. Rorrer and colleagues (2008) maintained the process of reorienting the organization involves refining and aligning organizational structures and processes (Cawelti, 2001; Corcoran, Fuhrman, & Belcher, 2001; Desimone, Porter, Birman, Garet, & Yoon, 2002; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003) and changing the district culture (Elmore & Barney, 1997; McLaughlin, 1992). McLaughlin (1992) asserted that "the relationships between teacher and districts that are powerful influences on teachers and teaching have little to do with hierarchical structure and controls and everything to do with the norms, expectations, and values that shape the district professional community" (p. 35). Establishing a professional culture is critical to supporting reform.

The third strategy to improve student achievement is to ensure there is coherence between policy and practice. Rorrer and colleagues' (2008) synthesis of school reform literature outlines two attributes of policy coherence that includes mediating federal, state, and local policy and aligning resources. Superintendents are responsible for articulating the various mandates and policy changes and structuring reform implementation in a district. Policy coherence is a process of negotiation whereby district- and building-level leaders construct the fit between encroaching policy with current policy, practices, and goals and utilize those external policies as a lever to purposely inform the implementation of newly established practices and goals (Honig & Hatch, 2003). The federal, state, and local policies are outlined expectations for districts. Policy

coherence is necessary to define, organize, and implement practices that improve student achievement and promote equitable experiences for all students.

The fourth feature of effective schooling is to establish a focus on equity. Historically, inequities in public education have been evident in public schools, such as the segregation of Black and White students as memorialized in *Brown vs. the Board of Education* (1954), as well as the enactment of the federal Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1974 to address inequities in Special Education and No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) to address, in part, the achievement gap between students of color and White students. Rorrer and colleagues (2008) maintained, “even though districts can, and have historically, institutionalized inequity, recent research has shown that districts are also capable of disrupting and even displacing institutionalized structures and practices that perpetuate inequity in student achievement” (p. 328). Two attributes of districts that maintain an equity focus have emerged from the literature. The first attribute is districts owning past inequity (Skrla & Scheurich, 2001; Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2000; Togneri & Anderson, 2000) and highlighting equity and maintaining data transparency within systems (Cawelti, 2001; Hernandez, 2003; Koschoreck, 2003; Rorrer, 2001, 2006). Keeping equity as a focus and in the forefront of communications and decision making may assist in expanding equitable opportunities for all students.

Rorrer and colleagues (2008) clearly outlined the fundamental roles district leadership should employ in leading reform. The structure of reform matters, but maintaining a clear focus on district and building leaders’ capacity to successfully lead reform also is important. Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, and Newton (2010), with the support of the Wallace Foundation, conducted a study of three urban districts’ central office transformation as leaders of learning. A comparative case study was conducted in Atlanta, Georgia, the Empowerment Schools

Organization in New York City's Department of Education, and the Oakland, California Unified School District. Honig and colleagues explained, "high-performance depends not only on formal structures but also fundamentally on the practice of people—how central office administrators' understand and go about their work day-to-day in leading for teaching and learning improvement" (p. 2). Researchers explored questions related to who was involved in the central office transformation, how the central office leaders supporting the process of reform, and what barriers are encountered. They found that when central office transforms the ways they support teaching and learning district-wide, central office leaders engage in five leadership "lines of work" that include (a) building the capacity of principals as instructional leaders, (b) committing to the central office—building administrator partnership, (c) reorganizing and intentionally shifting central office philosophy of building level leadership support, (d) accepting stewardship over the central office transformational paradigm shift, and (e) practicing evidence-use throughout the central office to reinforce and ensure continuous improvement of these lines of work (Honig et al., 2010). The fundamental roles in leading reform, which was outlined by Rorrer et al. (2008), are critical to maintaining a structure where districts can continue to improve; also equally important is supporting the building administrators who are leading the efforts at the school levels. The following discussion expands on ways districts can structure student, system, and professional learning.

Rorrer and colleagues (2008) recommended future research should focus upon how district school improvement work can be tightly and loosely coupled, and under what conditions. Weick (1976) introduced the concept of tight and loose coupling in organizations where tightly coupled work is structured and accountability measures are built within the system and loosely coupled work is less structured to allow members' leadership, innovation, and capacity building

opportunities. In this case study, the Leadership for Learning framework, which is both a tightly and loosely coupled system, is an ideal lens to study one superintendent's strategies and practices in leading evidence-use processes. The Leadership for Learning framework is tightly coupled in the embedded student, professional, and system learning agendas, as well as, in the specific areas of action of the leader in establishing a focus on learning and establishing coherence in beliefs and practices from the school board to the classroom. The Leadership for Learning framework is loosely coupled in the leader's collaborative approach of shared decision-making framework structure. A second recommendation for further research included examining how districts negotiate external and internal influences (Rorrer et al., 2008). This study examined internal processes of joint decision making and negotiation as the superintendent leads evidence-use processes with personnel. Also, this dissertation offers a glimpse into one superintendent's experiences of negotiating external (e.g., funding, political issues) and internal (e.g., interpersonal) influences while leading for learning. Organizational change and reform can occur as district educators' continuously collect, analyze, interpret, and make decisions around learned information (Daft & Weick, 1984). Further, due to their competing responsibilities, rural superintendents have finite time and resources to allocate to instructional leadership. Evidence-use processes that are implemented with fidelity are a potential lever of continuous improvement that rural superintendents could choose to employ.

### **Effect of Superintendents' Leadership Behaviors on Student Achievement**

School reform studies conducted in the last two decades have focused on school, teacher, and principal effects on student performance. However, there has been some attention on the superintendents' role in school reform efforts. Superintendents can also influence student learning. Even though they are not immersed in the act of teaching or leading at the building

level, they do contribute through facilitating and organizing reform efforts in collaboration with district personnel. Effective superintendents demonstrate various behaviors and practices that include leading reform efforts, supporting change through generating will and capacity building, and purposely focusing on the development of equitable systems. Leaders of learning have a comprehensive understanding of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. They understand the importance of ensuring all systems are aligned, and they work to establish a culture of joint leadership and accountability. This content knowledge is the foundation for structuring effective reform efforts. The following review is an overview of superintendents' administrative actions and leadership behaviors associated with student achievement. Next, a discussion of the benefit of a district established and structured collaborative processes and the contribution of superintendent efficacy leading student learning is presented. Finally, a review of the importance of superintendent support of building level administrators as they lead for learning and the establishment of accountability measures to assist the superintendent and Board of Education in instructional oversight is outlined.

Leadership is connected to successful school reform and effective districts (Fullan, 2001). Marzano and Waters (2009) conducted a meta-analysis that synthesized empirical evidence on school district leadership to determine the relationship between school district leadership and student achievement, examining all research that had been conducted on district leadership and student achievement from 1974-2005. Their primary research focus was to determine the strength of relationship between district-level administrative actions and student achievement. The authors reviewed 27 reports, and 14 of these reports included data from 1,210 school districts. Their meta-analysis revealed a correlation between district leadership and student achievement of .24, which is statistically significant at the .05 level. Interpreting the meta-



analysis results, Marzano and Waters maintained, “These findings suggest that when district leaders are carrying out their leadership responsibilities effectively, student achievement across the district is positively affected” (p. 5).

Subsequently, Marzano and Waters (2009) investigated specific district leadership behaviors that are associated with student achievement, noting that those effective superintendents set student performance goals, monitored progress toward meeting the goals, and supported the goal progress by aligning district resources. They identified the following five leadership practices of district administrators that were statistically correlated with improved student achievement: (a) ensuring collaborative goal setting, (b) establishing nonnegotiable goals for achievement and instruction, (c) creating board alignment with support of district goals, (d) monitoring achievement and instructional goals, and (e) allocating resources to support the goals for achievement and instruction (p. 6). Other researchers have concluded that superintendents who developed collaborative structures also enhance student learning (Honig, 2006, Honig & Copland, 2008).

Superintendents in high performing districts develop goals in collaboration with staff, assess the effectiveness of instructional strategies, and monitor goal attainment (Petersen & Barnett, 2005). High performing districts are similar to effective businesses in that collaborative structures have been found to be successful in promoting system learning. Wilhelmson (2006) conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 management professionals in both public and private sectors on transformative learning in joint leadership processes. The findings revealed that joint leadership processes can provide both the leader and participants with professional development growth opportunities. Wilhelmson explained that the collaborative joint leadership venture is most effective in a context of mutual understanding of mission and work procedures

and should include supportive inter-personal interactions. Wilhelmson concluded, “The results indicate that joint leadership offers the possibility of a deepened learning process in daily work in a communicative relationship where profound values and ways of acting are openly shared and critically-reflected upon” (p. 495). This study highlights how structured collaborative processes are valuable to leading change and can promote deep organizational learning for all participants.

Structured collaborative processes are effective not only in the business world but also in school districts. Schechter (2011) conducted a study of superintendents’ insights about the determinant of “collective learning from success” within collaborative learning opportunities. The study was exploratory and utilized a topic-oriented methodology in which 61 Israeli superintendents were interviewed. Schechter reported, “Determinants of collective learning from success at the superintendency level, school building level, and national level. Although these levels are distinct, they are closely interrelated in the context of the educational system” (p. 490). The study focused on examining collective learning from success rather than learning from problems. Overall, superintendents’ noted learning from successes was a useful and advantageous instructional leadership strategy. However, in this study superintendents’ expressed concern that currently in the field of education there is a lack of a “learning culture” (Schechter). This study highlights the need for leaders to establish a structure of continuous improvement that embeds learning from past experiences and collaborative opportunities where members’ collective intellect can be harnessed to improve teaching and learning.

The majority of the empirical literature on the effect of the superintendent on student performance is situated in an urban setting. One study did exam rural superintendents’ challenges. Forner (2010) conducted a multi-case study to examine leadership practices of

effective rural superintendents. The purpose of the study was to investigate Waters and Marzano correlates to effective district leadership practices. Seven rural superintendents participated in the study. Forner found that three predominant themes emerged and three common superintendent priorities were revealed. The first common theme that emerged between the superintendents was related to district-level financial challenges associated with reduced enrollment and the reduction in state financial assistance. The second theme that emerged between the superintendents was each participant emerged from a non-traditional physical education and business background. The third theme that emerged from this study was the rural public school context is challenged to thrive when it is struggling to survive. Forner stated, “The superintendents in this study view aggressive differentiation as the best means for small school survival in an increasingly competitive public school marketplace” (p. 115). This study reveals the various challenges rural superintendents face managing and leading for learning.

As a sole leader of a rural district, superintendents are faced with unique context realities of the rural environment. A later study of rural superintendents’ effects on student achievement looked at the context and collaborative leadership practices. Forner, Bierlein-Palmer, and Reeves (2012) conducted a multi-site case study investigating leadership practices of seven effective rural superintendents. The researchers utilized Marzano and Waters’s (2007) six correlates of effective leadership practices and found that the goal setting process was driven by the rural superintendent, and there was little collaborative “bottoms-up” goal setting form of consensus building (Forner et al., 2012). The authors postulated that given the close proximity of the rural superintendent to the schools, it was more efficient to employ a more direct approach to setting goals district-wide. Other possible explanations are that rural superintendents are unable to dedicate significant portions of their time to conduct leading for learning and that business and

fiscal responsibilities can inhibit the facilitation of a collaborative goal setting process. This study highlights the need for more research on effective rural superintendents' leadership collaborative practices.

Collective learning and collaboration are promising leadership practices, but also of interest is the capacity of school administrators to lead for learning. Leadership efficacy and its positive contribution in improving student learning is a construct researchers are examining more closely. Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) investigated the contribution of leader efficacy on student learning in their study of 96 principals and 2,764 teacher survey respondents. Leithwood and Jantzi found:

School leaders' collective efficacy was an important link between district conditions and both the conditions found in schools and their effects on student achievement. School leaders' sense of collective efficacy also had a strong, positive, relationship with leadership practices found to be effective in earlier studies. These results suggest that district leaders are most likely to build the confidence and sense of collective efficacy among principals by emphasizing the priority they attach to achievement and instruction, providing targeted and phased focus for school improvement efforts and by building cooperative working relationships with schools. (p. 496)

Superintendents' focusing on building leaders' collective efficacy is a lever for improving student achievement and promoting organizational learning. Clarke and Wildy (2011) stated, "District-level leaders are able to evince a strong belief in the capacity of school personnel to achieve high standards of learning for all students, and high standards of teaching and leadership" (p. 25). Leithwood (2010) maintained that districts strive to develop a mutual sense of purpose to raise student achievement through the "generate the will" to continually improve (p. 252). The literature suggests that superintendents' who focus on building collective efficacy in the organization are employing an effective strategy in guiding and leading reform, but this strategy may be an especially critical task for the rural superintendent. Because the rural superintendents' plates are overflowing with responsibilities, it is imperative the leader chooses

school reform strategies and practices that move the organization toward a higher level of functioning.

Building-level leaders are often assumed to be competent in leading for learning. However, this assumption may be false as many school administrators are far removed from the classroom experience in terms of teaching expertise and length of administrative tenure and need additional guidance and training on research-based instructional practice. Investing and supporting the instructional leadership development of building level leaders may be another effective strategy the rural superintendent could employ to realize improved student performance. Clarke and Wildy (2011) conducted a case study of one district in Australia. The purpose of the study was to highlight the influence of a small rural superintendent efforts to build the capacity of school administrators to lead for learning. Clark and Wildy (2011) found that is especially germane to embed mentoring of principals and teacher leaders into their day-to-day practice and developing an administrative professional learning plan that is instructionally focused. Utilizing student performance evidence in district and building decision making is another promising strategy. They explained, “Pedagogies in small and remote schools are effective when teaching is informed by data—especially in low socioeconomic status environments” (p. 32).

The research reveals that leaders of learning develop collaborative relationships, design collective learning opportunities, and build leadership efficacy to improve student outcomes, but it also is important for the superintendent to create internal accountability mechanisms to facilitate continuous reform. Hough (2011) defines internal accountability as the means to organize the work of educational units around the mission of the organization. The alignment of district goals, practices, and policies narrows the focus of educator work and allows for the

monitoring of progress. Hough conducted a study on internal accountability and district achievement and how superintendents affect student learning. Fifty-five school district superintendents and central office administrators were surveyed concerning superintendents' accountability leadership behaviors. Hough reported that there is a relationship between internal accountability and district achievement, finding that superintendents and district leaders who agreed on the factor of accountability led districts with substantially higher scores in mathematics and reading than did superintendents who underrated their performance in the area of accountability. The empirical evidence on district research revealed effective superintendent practices and strategies include facilitating collaborative processes and enacting accountability structures that encourages a focus on continuous improvement.

This review outlined promising strategies and practices superintendents can utilize to guide and direct school reform. These practices and strategies can be separated into two categories: structural frameworks and behavioral practices. For example, structural framework would include reorienting the organization by the superintendent facilitating district and school improvement planning, distributing leadership across the system, developing policy to support continuous improvement, aligning resources to meet district goals, and establishing expectations of collaboration. Effective behavioral practices would include the focus on generating will and leader efficacy, building instructional capacity of administrators and staff, and facilitating activities that lead to student, system, and professional learning. The superintendent is uniquely positioned to lead this type of transformational change. In addition, the Leadership for Learning integrates many of these structural and superintendent practices within the framework.

The literature outlines strategies and practices the superintendent can implement to focus the educational community toward student and organizational improvements. However, the

literature does not clearly delineate how a leader would successfully develop those specific structures. For example, the literature states that effective leaders develop collaborative relationships but does not describe how these collaborative relationships develop. Is there a district collaborative structure, such as a district leadership team that determines goals and non-negotiable practices? The concept of collaboration is nebulous and should be deconstructed, as it is a commonly touted expectation of school leaders. Future research could focus upon defining more clearly effective practices and processes around collaboration, accountability, and leadership practices that support facilitating, managing, and sustaining school reform.

### **Superintendent's Role Evolution and Contextual Factors**

Through the various school reform movements, the school superintendent's role has evolved. The historical role of the superintendent of schools was one of managerial role, including planning and administrative work (Cuban, 1976; Johnson, 1996). The superintendent oversees personnel, finance, and building and grounds facilities (Jones & Howley, 2009). This review will outline the evolution of the superintendent role, the influence of social learning on superintendents' role understanding, and will conclude with a discussion on the similarities and differences associated with context.

Cuban (1976) was the first to outline three roles the superintendent serves: teacher scholar, chief administrator, and negotiator statesman. Later, he expanded the role of the superintendent by adding the terms instructional, managerial, and political leadership to the conceptualization of the role (Cuban, 1998). Johnson (1996) defined the superintendency as including roles in educational, political, and managerial leadership. Johnson flushed out these terms after conducting research on the work of 12 novice superintendents. Examining the

framework of superintendents' roles, role transition, and accountability will glean understanding of the work of superintendents.

Bredeson (1996) maintained that superintendents conceptualize their roles as leaders of learning through a social learning process of role making (self-understanding of role) and role taking around their superintendency, the result of influences and expectation of others (e.g., school board members, educators, stakeholders, and legislatures). Transition leadership allows for the examination of the role shifts in superintendents' work (Goldring, Crowson, Laird, & Berk, 2003). Anchored in role transition theory, superintendents' responses to demands for greater accountability for student learning outcomes provide insight into the influence of educational reform policy on their work (Bredeson & Kose, 2007). The accountability movement has intensified in recent years with nationwide movements focusing on national standards and assessment requirements, with intense focus on closing the achievement gaps. Educators are adapting over time and making necessary practice and structural adjustments to meet the accountability expectations. Richard Elmore explained how the educational accountability is impacting superintendents' practices (quoted in Choy, 2003):

The biggest change has occurred with the introduction of performance based accountability-the direct measurement of student performance, disaggregated by school and by type of student, and the use of that data to make judgments about how well schools perform. There are many problems with such accountability systems, the biggest may be the profound change in the work of leading and managing school systems. Many superintendents haven't realized this change, some have acknowledged the change and grapple with how to accept it, and a few have embraced the knowledge necessary to operate in this new environment. (p. 1)

Accountability measures are institutionalized in public education through practice, policy, and law. The challenge for the school superintendent is how to balance the demands while keeping a focus on teaching and learning and improving student outcomes.

Superintendents often express dissatisfaction with the many mandates and federal and state



initiatives that continually filter down to the districts and the incessant crowding of their already full plate (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000). Superintendents have many challenges associated with encroaching systems; however, the uniqueness of a community and location of the district also have an impact on superintendent practices. In particular, rural superintendents serve in a similar role and have many of the same responsibilities as urban and suburban superintendents who lead large school systems, but they also have unique challenges associated with the rural setting. In an effort to restructure the manner that rural superintendents respond to school reform efforts, this review explores empirical research that examines how a superintendent as a leader for learning can demonstrate a proactive response, rather than a reactive response, to political and public accountability demands.

Superintendent role, role transition, and accountability measures are difficult to manage, especially for rural superintendents. Lamkin (2006) found that rural superintendents experience many of the same challenges as suburban superintendents, varying on the “scale and intensity rather than substance” (p. 19). Small rural districts are typically staffed with far fewer central office personnel. Therefore, the rural superintendent is responsible for all aspects of the district (e.g., financial, curriculum and instruction, facilities, contracted services, grants, mandated reports). In a larger district, central office personnel are clustered in manageable roles (e.g., business or human resource director). Canales, Delgado, and Slate (2008) maintained that superintendents in small districts “wear many hats” (p. 7) and juggle the immense task of performing the numerous roles and responsibilities of district manager and instructional leader. Lamkin (2006) found rural superintendents lack the training for all the specialized roles they fulfill, made more difficult by the fact that rural superintendent positions often are perceived as entry-level positions and are filled by less experienced administrators. Rural superintendents

identify more with managerial rather than instructional leader tasks, and those superintendents in districts with low enrollment are more likely to spend time managing their district (Jones & Hawley, 2009). In the state of Illinois, as is true in most states, rural district superintendents are held to the same accountability expectations and are required to submit the same state reports as their colleagues who lead larger districts. The difference in the rural district is there are fewer individuals available to complete the required work. Interestingly, Munther (1997) found that small district superintendents may deal more with instructional leadership compared to large-district superintendents. The large and small district superintendents work focus is different depending upon contextual needs, as Jones and Hawley (2009) noted: “the fact remains that as districts become larger the character of the superintendents’ work changes” (p. 16).

To gain an understanding of superintendent leadership, researchers have examined superintendent practices and the influence of context (Bredeson, Klar, & Johansson, 2011; Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Louis, 2010). Scholars agree that context matters in educational leaders’ behaviors and practices. Leithwood and colleagues (2004) explained, “There is a rich body of evidence about the relevance to leaders of such features of organizational context and geographic location (urban, suburban, rural), level of schooling (elementary, secondary), and both school and district size” (p. 10). In a later study, Louis and colleagues (2010) confirmed that poverty, district size, grade level, and location influence leaders’ practices and decision making. Numerous studies on superintendent leadership, as well as research on accountability systems confirm that leadership is integral to school reform (Fuhrman, 2003; Goetz & Massell, 2005). Other studies have examined how superintendents prioritize work and address their numerous challenges (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005; Bredeson & Kose, 2007; Bredeson, Kose, & Johansson, 2004; Glass et al., 2000; Johnson, 1996; Petersen & Barnett, 2005).

Jones and Howley (2009) examined how context and the actual and professed stringency of accountability measures affect how superintendents prioritize their work. They noted:

Superintendents' perceptions of the stringency of state accountability measures were related to location in high or low stringency states, contextual factors and especially enrollment and the location of a district in a rural region had the most pronounced effects on their attention to managerial tasks. Allocation of time varied by state; however, across states very few superintendents' devoted the majority of their time to educational leadership. (p. 1)

In addition, researchers are beginning to study how superintendents' leadership practices may look differently depending on the context. Bredeson and colleagues (2011) found the superintendents' work is similar in work priorities and challenges associated with contextual factors that influenced practice, yet differences were noted in district size, culture of the district, community factors, and location of the district. One key finding was that all superintendents in the study "responded to and shaped the context of their work" (p. 2). For the rural superintendent, the responsibilities associated with the rural context matters as they have limited time and resources to devote to instructional leadership activities. Therefore, it is critical the rural superintendents choose wisely what strategies or processes they will implement to stimulate a positive trend in student achievement. Marzano and Waters (2009) maintained, "High instructional quality within and between schools, or increased reliability is possible when school districts "strike the right balance" between direction and school support" (p. 116).

### **Evidence-Use as a Lever for Continuous Improvement**

Over the past 10 years, federal and state level reform initiatives have focused on increasing the use of data analysis to support instructional, curriculum, and assessment decision making. This use of data to drive decisions often is referenced as "evidence-based decision making" and is most commonly implemented at the school level (Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012). This focus on evidence-use to make instructional or program decisions has prompted numerous research

studies. Honig and Venkateswaran (2012) conducted a review of evidence-use in schools and central offices, choosing to focus on the relationship of the district office and school leaders. They found that most studies focus primarily on evidence-use in schools and centered on standardized test data (Ikemoto & Marsh, 2007; Lachat & Smith, 2005; Supovitz & Klein, 2003). Other common data examined at the school level include attendance and graduation rate and discipline data, or “nonperformance” statistics (Choppin, 2002; Cousins et al., 2006). The authors recognized that these forms of evidence are varied and may reveal different findings. Due to the current empirical evidence available, they chose to include those studies in which educators were intentionally using some form of data to drive decision making. In addition, the majority of this research has been focused at the level of the school or individual (e.g., teacher or principal) and has not included the superintendent or district office as the unit of analysis.

Knapp, Copland, Honig, Plecki, and Portin (2010), conducted a large-scale mixed-methods study, supported by the Wallace Foundation, investigating leadership in urban schools and districts. The authors sought to answer the following question: “What does it take for leaders to promote and support powerful, equitable learning in a school and in the district and state system that serves the school?” (p. i). Knapp et al. (2010) found the practice of learning-focused leadership includes (a) focusing on learning, (b) investing in instructional leadership, (c) reinventing leadership practice, (d) establishing new working relationships, and (e) using evidence as a medium for leadership. Evidence-use is one important component in the practice of learning-focused leadership. Knapp and colleagues explained, “learning-focused leaders use evidence of many kinds as a main medium of leadership work and a constant reference point in their interaction with teachers, each other, and stakeholders” (p. 15). Despite the above mentioned large-scale study of urban districts, there are few empirical studies on the

superintendents' use of evidence as a lever for school improvement, and even less on the small rural superintendent use of data to facilitate reform efforts.

The gap in the literature related to superintendent-school use of evidence is problematic in three ways. First, the various federal and state mandates require that entire systems utilize data to make decisions to improve educational practices (Honig & Coburn, 2008). Second, the focus of schools in evidence-use studies minimizes the complexity of uncovering irregularities and inequities system-wide, neglecting to recognize that the challenges associated with promoting change require the involvement of district leaders to sustain the initiative (Honig, 2003). These studies highlight how superintendent involvement with schools does matter. Third, federal and state mandates require that district leaders analyze school level data (e.g., student performance, graduation rates, socio-economic variables, and race data), but the studies mainly focus on how educators use this data to make decisions and overlook the essential ways educators participate in producing fundamental evidence for district and schools (Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012). The above concerns highlight the need to expand the literature related to evidence-use to include the district office and the relationship of evidence-use between district office and schools.

Honig and Venkateswaran's (2012) review of empirical research found that the majority of the research on evidence-use in education did not include the school-superintendent component. However, the research did suggest that the district office and school relationships do matter to school evidence use. The superintendent's contributions to schools' evidence use was outlined in four ways: (a) participates in information channeling to the schools, (b) provides staff with the necessary time to review, analyze, and develop goals for improvement, (c) establishes educator expectations on evidence-use to drive instructional decision making, and (d) provides staff with the necessary training to use data to improve instruction and promote higher levels of

learning (Honig & Venkateswaran). This process suggests that there may be a reciprocal and mutually reliant relationship between central office and schools in evidence-use.

The superintendent may very well be able to play a critical role in structuring and supporting the work of educators. Honig and Venkateswaran's (2012) analysis reveals not only a gap in the literature related to district leadership role in evidence-use, but also suggests that central office involvement in structuring and leading school reform may be more integral than previously noted. The superintendent role could be just a peripheral system that is far removed from what goes on in the classroom, but they also could be a powerful lever for transformational reform. Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, and Newton's (2010) national study of how leaders in urban school districts transformed schools found that districts do not realize extensive improvements in teaching and learning without the intensive support and involvement of the district leaders. The study focused on "central office transformation" that included five dimensions:

*Dimension 1:* Learning-focused partnerships with school principals to deepen principals' instructional leadership practice;

*Dimension 2:* Assistance to the superintendent-principal partnerships;

*Dimension 3:* Reorganizing and re-culturing of each district office unit, to support the central office-principal partnerships and teaching and learning improvement;

*Dimension 4:* Stewardship of the overall district office transformation process; and

*Dimension 5:* Use of evidence throughout the district office to support continual improvement of work practices and relationships with schools. (p. v)

Imbedded within the five dimensions is district-level leadership professional practice support of building-level leaders and the expansion of the use of data from the traditional use of student performance data to experiential support data of leaders for learning.

Honig and colleagues (2010) found that the evidence was utilized throughout each dimension in their pursuit to facilitate district office transformation and to fundamentally support teaching and learning activities. The collection and review of evidence on teaching and learning and quality of support elicited interesting results. Specifically, Honig et al. (2008) found that the use of evidence helped to identify student performance areas needing improvement, assisted in supporting and guiding the partnership between central office and principals, and informed and strengthened the professional supports of instructional leaders. Therefore, evidence was not collected on just student characteristics, but also on the quality of support offered to all leaders in the district. Evidence was used to monitor the entire district to ensure that quality teaching and learning was implemented with fidelity, and equity continued to be a focus. The expanded use of data assists in creating a holistic focus on Leadership for Learning from the superintendent to the building level, and it highlights the reciprocal relationship involved in the exchange of information and support. To build a highly responsive, culturally relevant, equitable and excellent learning environment requires a complex framework for leadership and practice that is sensitive to encroaching mandates and individual needs of all members of the learning community.

### **Leadership for Learning Framework**

The Leadership for Learning framework is built upon a set of foundational concepts about leadership, learning, and their potential connections (Knapp, Copland, Ford, & Markholt, 2003). In schools, the traditional goal or common task is to educate students to be productive citizens and to prepare them to compete in a global marketplace. Currently, school leaders, especially rural superintendents with limited resources, struggle with developing learning

opportunities and structures that can meet the educational needs of students. However, student growth and learning is a primary focus and will continue to be a goal educators aspire to achieve.

In order to achieve this goal, a focus on what is happening in individual classrooms and the leadership that guides instruction is just part of the picture. Knapp and colleagues (2003) explained, “That notion of instructional leadership misses a more inclusive picture of leadership that embraces work carried out simultaneously by individuals at different levels of the system, and with different purviews over and proximity to instruction” (p. 14). Promoting and sustaining equitable student learning requires a model or framework that supports continual improvements and reflection and is designed to create growth at all levels of the organization. One such framework, Leadership for Learning, outlines the impact of micro-environmental and macro-environmental influences on a district and the socio-political contexts within the system. Leadership for Learning identifies three continual learning agendas that are embedded in specific contexts: larger policy and professional contexts, family and community contexts, and organizational contexts. Knapp et al. outline four leading for learning tasks:

Leaders for learning will (1) conduct essential tasks that include making learning central to their work; (2) consistently communicate the centrality of student learning; (3) articulate core values that support a focus on powerful; and (4) equitable learning and paying public attention to efforts to support learning. (p. 21)

The Leadership for Learning framework provides a structure of continuous district improvement. Knapp et al. (2003) describe five areas of action to advance powerful and equitable student learning that district leaders can employ:

1. Establishing a focus on learning—by persistently and publicly focusing their own attention and that of others on learning and teaching;
2. Building professional communities that value learning—by nurturing work cultures that value and support their members’ learning;
3. Engaging external environments that matter for learning—by building relationships and securing resources from outside groups that can foster students’ or teachers’ learning;



4. Acting strategically and sharing leadership—by mobilizing effort along multiple “pathways” that lead to student, professional, or system learning, and by distributing leadership across levels and among individuals in different positions; and
5. Creating coherence—by connecting student, professional, and system learning with one another and with learning goals. (p. 18)

The learning agendas (i.e., student, professional, and systems learning) coupled with the five areas of action embedded in a unique environmental context are integral components to leading and guiding a district reform process.

The Leadership for Learning framework demonstrates how the learning agendas and action steps are connected and how they reinforce and support the cycle of continuous systems learning (Knapp et al., 2003). Learning leaders who remain cognizant of the various contexts and who take the action steps with fidelity will create a system that outlines equitable policy, procedures, and practices that positively impact student outcomes. Leadership for Learning is the structure of reform and embeds human relation and culture development strategies and practices that can be a catalyst for transformational change.

Fullan (2003) referred to this condition of education law and policy as “what standards were to the 1990s, leadership is to the future” (p. 1). Positioning the superintendent as an integral part of the change process is essential to school reform. Houston (2001) maintained, “Leadership in the future will be about the creation and maintenance of relationships: the relationship of children to learning, children to children, children to adults, adults to adults, and school to community” (p. 428). A relationship with all stakeholders is important. Waters and Marzano (2006) noted that recent findings suggest relationships with the superintendent flow through the organization, and strong relationships with principals are essential to a superintendent’s success. Superintendents who focus on developing professional, responsive, and trusting relationships with constituents may be better able to manage and guide district reform.

## **Leadership for Learning Framework's Theoretical Underpinnings**

The strength of Leadership for Learning framework is the bottom-up philosophy of garnering stakeholders' participation. Coch and French (1948) noted individuals are more likely to support change when they are active participants in the construction of a vision or process. The approach utilizes extensive collaboration in which the educators collectively design the system. A stakeholder-driven initiative will result in an increase in employee investment. Systems of checks and balances are integrated throughout the model of district improvement to ensure practices, processes, and policies are aligned to the shared vision, mission, and goals of the school district. The overarching goal of the model is to construct an evolving, dynamic, and responsive educational system in which data is utilized to drive decision making. The system is defined by the community and is a self-correcting, primarily because it begins and ends with the analysis of community data.

Theory Y is one theory that informs the Leadership for Learning framework. Theory Y is built upon key assumptions that include promoting an environment of collaboration, problem solving, risk taking, and personal and professional growth. MacGregor (1960) explained that employees view the act of work as a natural part of life and will demonstrate initiative, vision, and diligence if given the opportunity. MacGregor maintained the typical worker can flourish in these types of work conditions and will strive for added responsibility and the opportunity to be a creative and effective employee.

The process of school reform is often difficult but can be more palatable when it is done in a structured and supportive environment of shared decision making, responsibility, and ownership. Leadership for Learning in evidence-use processes is a promising structure for a continuous improvement cycle where stakeholders are engaged and organizational learning is

realized. Similar to Lewin's (1951) understanding of the three phases of change, this model facilitates change, supports the employees during the change process, and then reorients them in demonstrating best-practice. The system is monitored and adjusted through continual and strategic review of student performance data. Lewin explained the first step in change is "unfreezing" the organization to accept change, the second step is to implement and facilitate change within the organization, and the third step is to "re-freeze" the organization once it has reached an optimal level of functioning. The Leadership for Learning continuous process of improvement promotes student, professional, and organizational learning and may promote institutional change that increases student performance.

### Conceptual Model of Leadership for Learning in Evidence-Use Process

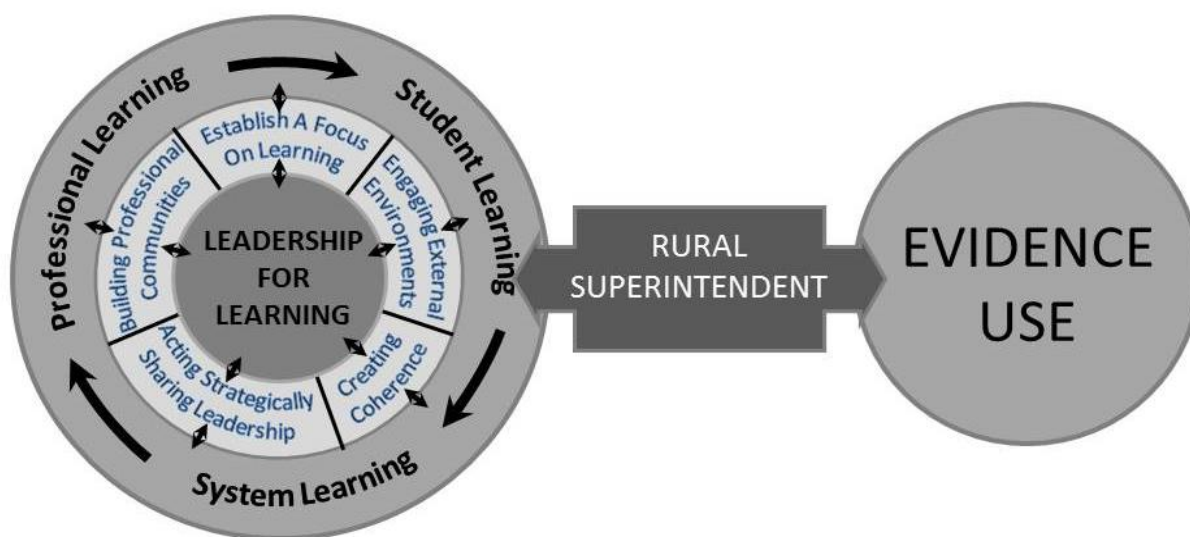


Figure 1. Conceptual Model Leadership for Learning in Evidence-Use Processes

The primary objective of the conceptual model of rural district improvement is for the rural superintendent to facilitate and sustain a focus on teaching and learning despite competing professional demands. The Leadership for Learning framework and evidence-use processes is the means to maintaining a focus on school and district improvement. In this district improvement

model, there is one central ring. The inner ring represents the predominant lens—Leadership for Learning. In this model of district improvement, the Leadership for Learning structure is fundamental to organizing and leading reform. In a rural district with few administrators, it is virtually impossible to manage, facilitate, and lead effectively all aspects of the district. A rural superintendent must generate will and build capacity with stakeholders to move the district forward and realize gains in student performance. Arguably, true district reform is not realized by one person but instead is a joint venture of committed educators that relies upon the collective intelligence and subsequent decision making to effectively solve the complex issues. Rural superintendents who structure district work around Leadership for Learning principles and demonstrate effective leadership characteristics may help facilitate the process of uniting the district toward one central goal of teaching and learning. The lens of the Leadership for Learning framework facilitated by the rural superintendent as he or she leads evidence-use processes is depicted by the off-set circle and represents one lever to improve student achievement.

In this model, the rural superintendent structures district improvement processes around the lever of district improvement: evidence-use. The development of evidence-use processes are built upon the Leadership for Learning areas of action that include establishing a focus on learning, engaging external environments, creating coherence, acting strategically and sharing leadership, and building professional communities. Teacher leadership, collaboration, and a focus on generating will and building capacity should support the establishment of each action area. For example, establishing a focus on learning may mean that together the leaders, teachers, students, and parents establish a district vision and mission. It also may include structuring how and how often students are assessed, and how student performance is monitored. Establishing a focus on learning is determined by the community, with the guidance and support of the rural

superintendent. In each action area, the rural superintendent develops a structure that guides continuous improvement and demonstrates supportive behaviors and practices that facilitates continual progress toward improvement.

The rural superintendent, represented by a two-sided arrow, facilitates the evidence-use process and acts as a channel to allow the flow of information between the buildings and central office. Evidence flows from the central office to the school and from the school to the central office, depicting the mutually dependent relationship in evidence-use processes. The rural superintendent depends on the data from the building levels, and the schools depend on the central office evidence to ensure the entire system is accurately represented and pertinent data is analyzed. The arrow flowing from the right of the rural superintendent arrow signifies the structure and process of evidence-use. The arrow flowing to the left of the rural superintendent signifies the impact of evidence-use processes on continual student, system, and professional learning. The Leadership for Learning framework coupled with the rural superintendent facilitating the lever of evidence-use processes may promote data driven decision making and institutionalize continuous organizational learning and improvement.

## **Conclusion**

The conceptual model of rural district improvement integrates best practices within an organized continuous district improvement cycle, utilizing one promising lever—evidence-use. The conceptual model is collaborative and gives teachers a voice and the opportunity to share their expertise and may help to build their capacity as professional educators. The collaborative culture among the Board of Education, superintendent, district and building leadership team and the teachers may “generate will” and organizational learning as they put their collective intellect together to design a responsive education program.

Rural superintendents who structure and lead effectively can impact student learning in the classroom. Waters and Marzano (2009) found a .24 correlation between student achievement and district leadership. Further, Waters and Marzano (2009) identified five district-level practices that improved student achievement that include: conducting goal setting process, establishing instructional and achievement non-negotiable goals, aligning and supporting district goals, monitoring instructional and achievement goals, and aligning resources to support the successful implementation of goals. As Waters and Marzano's research revealed, leadership for learning is a complex process that requires administrative oversight and guidance.

Urban superintendents' struggle with the demands of the superintendency, and the rural superintendent who has finite human and financial resources and is charged with all administrative tasks are further challenged. The rural superintendent's time is limited to conduct administrative tasks, so they must choose carefully the leadership strategies and practices they employ. This research study provides an opportunity to examine one effective district that utilizes evidence-use processes and the role of the superintendent as he or she leads an evidence-use process that is built upon a collaborative and structured process of district reform. Evidence-use is not fully addressed in the Leadership for Learning framework. This study may strengthen the Leadership for Learning framework. Superintendents who employ the Leading for Learning framework and focus on facilitating district-wide evidence-use processes may find an effective lever to positively impact student achievement. This study is an opportunity to integrate more fully evidence-use within the Leadership for Learning framework.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

This qualitative study examined the practices of one exemplary Illinois rural school district that is engaged in a formalized evidence-use process as a lever for school reform. The school district superintendent's leadership behaviors and practices were examined as he compiled, desegregated, and analyzed district data in collaboration with district and building personnel. The supposition of this study was the superintendent is uniquely positioned as the formally appointed head of the organization to lead and guide procedures and practices related to student learning. Gaining an understanding of the unique role of the rural superintendent while leading for learning included an examination of how evidence-use processes are structured and what systems and sub-units matter to evidence-use. Specifically, a focus of the study was the examination of the superintendent's leadership choices and experiences while leading a district-wide reform process that centered on student learning, to gain an understanding of successful implementation strategies and potential obstacles in leading change, and to explore one promising lever—evidence-use—to increase student learning.

This chapter outlines the research questions for this study, the research method approach, a brief synopsis of the conceptual framework lens, followed by a review of the gap in the literature related to superintendent leading school reform utilizing evidence-use processes. Next, the study's methodology related to sampling strategies, data collection, and analysis procedures will be presented.

#### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What district leadership strategies and practices matter to evidence use?

2. How does the rural district structure the process of evidence-use that is focused on student, professional, and system learning?
3. What barriers and constraints are encountered and what supports are lacking that inhibit effective district evidence-use processes that promote continual systems learning?

### **Research Design**

In planning a research study, the investigator must choose whether a qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods design will best capture and reveal the nuances of the phenomena being studied. Qualitative research is a means of exploring and seeking to understand meaning ascribed, while quantitative research examines relationship among variables, and the mixed methods approach combines elements of both qualitative and quantitative methods (Creswell, 2009). This research involved a case study utilizing qualitative research methods to analytically examine one school district and the rural superintendent's leadership behaviors in facilitating evidence-use processes that focuses on promoting higher student achievement. Case study was an advantageous way to explore and gain understanding of leadership behaviors because it provided a means for characterizing contextual evidence that is situated in a specific situation or site (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The naturalistic setting was optimal because it provided me an opportunity to critically examine the "case" in situ.

Embedded in a research design is an intersection between assumption or worldview, the detailed strategies of inquiry, and the specific methods researchers will employ to uncover the uniqueness of the phenomena being studied (Creswell, 2009). A research design is built upon philosophical assumptions (Creswell, 2009). Worldview is "a basic set of beliefs that guide action" (Guba, 1990, p 17). Although philosophical assumptions or worldview concepts remain hidden in research, they still influence the process of empirical examination and should be explored (Slife & Williams, 1995). The individual researcher may be drawn to a specific worldview prompted by his or her basic set of beliefs. Creswell (2009) discussed four



worldviews common in the literature that includes postpositivism, constructivism, advocacy/participatory, and pragmatism. The lens of this study was grounded in a social constructivism. The social constructivist assumption is that people strive to make meaning of the world through interaction in the lives and their work (Creswell, 2009).

A qualitative case study strategy of inquiry, paired with a social constructivism lens, provided a solid structure to examine rural superintendent behaviors and practices as he or she facilitated evidence-use processes in leading for learning. The rural school district was the unit of analysis in this case study. Stake (1995) explained that case study is a method of inquiry that is bound by time and activity and best facilitates the examination of a phenomenon, process, event, or a uniqueness of an individual or group. I chose this case study research method because of the uniqueness of the setting and the case. Despite the all-encompassing responsibilities associated with being the sole district instructional leader and business manager for a rural district, an effective rural superintendent who is adept at leading evidence-use processes and whose district has demonstrated success in positively influencing student achievement is a “case” worth examining.

The nature of qualitative research naturally immerses the researcher into very intimate situations within the context of the case. Because of this embedded nature, it is imperative that the researcher maintains strong ethics and exposes her own personal biases, values, and lived experiences. This process provided the participants with the necessary information so they may make informed consent to participate in the study. Therefore, I developed a protocol that was transparent and informative of the purpose of the study and of my unique background, and this information was provided to all participants. This document included why the site was chosen, what activities would occur, and what participants could expect to happen through my

observations and interviews. I explained that the study would not be unnecessarily disruptive and that I would share with members the information that will be included in the report prior to submitting the final copy to the university.

A case of this nature may reveal leadership strategies and practices related to leading evidence-use processes that could assist other rural school districts as they strive to improve student performance. Stake (1995) maintained that “case study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances” (p. xi). Over the past 10 years, evidence-use in schools has been a focus of federal and state school reform initiatives. Evidence-based decision making is most commonly interpreted at the school level, and the research has focused on the following areas of standardized test scores (Ikemoto & Marsh, 2007; Lachat & Smith, 2005), information about teacher practice (Wayman & Stringfield, 2006), program evaluation results (Cousins et al., 2006), and research-based programs (Datnow, 2000). The majority of the literature on evidence-use in school systems is conducted at the building level and there is sparse empirical evidence on district-level evidence-use. Therefore, the examination of the practices and strategies of an effective district and the rural superintendent who is successfully leading district evidence-use processes may contribute to the literature on effective rural district practices.

Leadership for Learning framework was the lens of this single case study. This framework was appropriate for this study because it is built upon a set of foundational concepts about leadership, learning, and their potential connections (Knapp, Copland, Ford, Markholt, 2003). Knapp and colleagues explain, “That notion of instructional leadership misses a more inclusive picture of leadership that embraces work carried out simultaneously by individuals at different levels of the system, and with different purviews over and proximity to instruction”

(p. 14). To promote and sustain student learning requires a model or framework that is structured to facilitate continual improvements and professional reflection.

Despite the superintendent positioning outside the day-to-day activity of the school building, superintendents can have an effect on student performance. Hackmann (2014) stated,

Even though school superintendents and other central office administrators may be far removed from teaching and learning practices occurring within the individual classroom, learning-centered leaders at all administrative levels can work collaboratively to successfully establish a district-wide culture that has a measureable influence on student learning. (p. 5)

This study integrated Leadership for Learning five areas of action, sustained by supportive superintendent behavioral strategies, and a collaborative evidence-use district process that can work to establish a culture that focuses on student improvement.

### **Site Selection**

In this study, the unit of analysis was the rural school district. I was interested in examining the unique perspective of one rural superintendent as he led district reform efforts utilizing the school improvement lever of evidence-use. The superintendent is nested within a unique district; therefore, identifying the superintendent and district carefully and within a set criteria strengthened the case. In sampling, Creswell (2009) suggests using a purposeful selection strategy to identify sites or participants that will best answer the research questions. Because evidence-use by district personnel is an important factor in this study, it was necessary to identify a school district that is utilizing a formal evidence-use process to improve student achievement. At the time of this research, the state of Illinois was engaged with two federal grants that selected Illinois districts are managing that utilizes evidence-use processes to improve student outcomes, Race to the Top (RttT) and School Improvement Grants (SIGs), and there was one school improvement planning technology platform that outlines a process for districts or schools to set

measurable goals and integrates a formalized process to monitor progress (i.e., Illinois Rising Star). In fact, the RttT grant requires that Rising Star platform be utilized in planning and progress monitoring.

Race to the Top (RttT) is a federal competitive grant program with the goal to rapidly implement key education reform so districts can transform their educational environments to close achievement gaps while increasing student performance (ISBE, n.d.). In December 2011, Illinois was awarded a \$42.8 million RttT grant. ISBE outlined the following RttT overarching goals: (a) participating districts comprehensively address the RttT requirements, leading to dramatic student growth; serve as leaders of the reform agenda for the entire State; and build capacities for statewide implementation of key initiatives and systems. ISBE explained how the federal monies will be used to strengthen Illinois' ongoing school reform work on projects and programs in four areas including the adoption of more rigorous standards and assessments, recruiting, evaluation, and retaining highly-effective teachers and principals, building data systems that measure students success, and building state capacity and support.

Another federal grant opportunity offered to selected Illinois schools was the School Improvement Grants (SIGs) allocated through Section 103(g) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which authorizes U. S. Secretary of Education to award states with a SIG for the purpose of school improvement for the lowest achieving schools (Center for Innovation and Improvement. The SIG requires districts to adopt one of four intervention models: (a) Turnaround Model, (b) Restart Model, (c) Closure Model, or (d) Transformational Model. Districts must focus on the analysis and use of student performance data to improve instruction as the SIG consider student growth a means of showing improvement (Center for Innovation and

Improvement, n.d.). The formal analysis of data to drive decision making in SIG schools provided an ideal context to examine evidence-use outlined in this study.

According to ISBE (n.d.), the Illinois Rising Star School Improvement process is a technological tool for school continuous improvement planning located within the Illinois Interactive Report Card. The Rising Star system is a research-based tool customized for the State of Illinois to support school and district level continuous improvement planning processes. For the purpose of this study, districts utilizing the Rising Star continuous improvement planning tool were considered ideal because it allowed for the setting of student achievement goals and included a mechanism to monitor school and district progress toward meeting goals.

The identification of formalized reform processes that utilize evidence currently conducted in Illinois was not only important but also critical to the identification of those districts and superintendent leaders that are successfully making substantial improvements. Two resources were used to identify districts. The first was the ISBE website, which contained the names of districts that were awarded Federal RttT or School Improvement Grants (SIG). The second strategy was to identify potential research sites that utilized the Rising Star School Improvement planning tool through the review of district and school data on the Illinois Interactive Report Card (IIRC) website. The IIRC website posts comprehensive district information that includes district type, location, demographics, student performance data, and survey information. I examined the IIRC website student performance data evidence to determine whether gains in student achievement are trending upward.

The ISBE website and the IIRC were good resources to identify potential sites and participants for the study. Once the potential sites were identified it was advantageous to define criteria for inclusion. For the purpose of this study, an analysis of four factors assisted in

sampling. Miles and Huberman (1994) defined four aspects when choosing a site and participants that include (a) the *setting* where the study will be conducted, (b) the *participants* who will be studied, (c) the *events* the researcher will be studying, and (d) the *process* and its evolution. Below is a purposeful sampling framework that was followed for this study.

A superintendent who has a history of effectively leading school reform and developing a learning community that focuses on higher student performance was sought. I reviewed Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) and Prairie State Achievement Exam (PSAE) trend data of potential participants on IIRC. The kindergarten through eighth grade trend data ideally should reveal a 5% increase in overall student reading performance over the most recent 2-year period. To aid in the identification of a potential superintendent participant for this study, I contacted the 54 State of Illinois Regional Superintendents via email soliciting referrals of individuals who met the criteria outlined in this study. An email (Appendix A) was sent to each Regional Office Superintendent asking for recommendations aligned to the following criteria:

- The Superintendent is leading a formalized district improvement process that utilizes the analysis of student performance data prior to defining goals and objectives and an established data analysis review process to progress monitor district's improvement.
- The Superintendent has a reputation for effective and collaborative leadership of school and district initiatives.
- The Superintendent's unit district is situated in a rural location and the central office has no more than two administrators.

Due to the Illinois state assessment transition, it was important to rely on the ROE superintendents and educational professionals' recommendations and review local assessment data of promising participants. Nine superintendents were recommended by their respective Regional Office of Education Superintendents. The nominated superintendents were contacted by email notifying them of their nomination with a request for a brief telephone interview

(Appendix C). Two superintendents agreed to participate in the phone screening interview. The interviews allowed me to assess whether the superintendents met the criteria outlined above and determine the individual's willingness to permit his/her districts and personnel to participate in the study (Appendix J). Because evidence-use process was the school improvement lever that was examined in this study, it was critical that the site district was conducting activities that included the use and analysis of student performance data to inform decision making. Further, it was important that the superintendent was utilizing a formal and structured data-use process and is heavily involved in leading school reform. After I conducted the superintendent screening telephone interviews and reviewing the information on each nominated district, I selected the district that best fit the case study criteria.

### **Human Subjects Protection**

Human subjects in research studies must be ensured so participants experience no harm while participating in the study; their individual rights must be protected, and an assurance of confidentiality is required. Approval to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Institutional Review Board. Informed consent was obtained from all participants in advance of interviews or observations, and the informed consent form clearly articulated the participants' rights as human subjects (Appendices F, G, and H). Interview questions and observation protocols guided all interactions (Appendices J, K, L, and M). Interview and observation data was transcribed using pseudonyms.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Data collection in this single-case study involved semi-structured interviews (Appendices K, L, and M), observations (Appendix M), and reviewing artifacts. Interviews were conducted individually or in small focus groups in person, and on the telephone. Stake (1995) explained

that a key function of case study interviewing is to obtain descriptions and interpretations from the participants; this process provides the many different perspectives and realities of the case.

This study initially utilized semi-structured interview protocols that included open-ended questions to guide the conversations but allowed for free-flow in discussion (Appendices K, L, and M). The data collection was conducted from October 2015 through February 2016. The initial interview questions are grounded in the Knapp, Copland, Ford, Markholt, McLaughlin, Milliken, and Talbert (2003) Leadership for Learning framework and focused on exploring leading evidence-use processes. Four 45-60 minute structured interviews were conducted with the superintendent in his office at the beginning and throughout the data collection phase (Appendix K). An emergent process guided subsequent interviews and follow-up conversations were conducted as needed to clarify or expand on information and to gain a deeper understanding of the case. Informal follow-up interviews were conducted in person and on the telephone.

The district administration data collection method included one 45-minute interview with the district curriculum coordinator and three 40-minute interviews with the elementary, junior high, and high school principals. Examining superintendent practices related to school reform efforts should include the input of the district governing board. A 35-minute structured interview was conducted with the Board of Education President at a mutually agreed upon location (Appendix L).

A semi-structured focus group protocol was used to guide interviews with the district and school improvement team leaders (e.g., principals, teacher leaders) to gather data related to the evidence-use process (Appendix M). Two 40-minute focus group interviews were conducted with the district Math and English and Language Arts (ELA) curriculum committees. The



participants of the two focus group interviews were administrators and teacher leaders from their respective school buildings. Each individual and focus group interview was transcribed and returned, affording each interview participant the opportunity to edit their responses to ensure the transcript was accurate and reflective of their thoughts on the questions posed.

All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed to assist in analysis. In addition, notes were taken at each formal and informal interview. Participant rights were shared at the beginning of each interview. It was reiterated that at any point in an interview, if a participant would like to stop, he or she is free to do so. After all interviews were conducted and transcribed, a copy was sent electronically to the participants so they could review and confirm accuracy and make any changes. The processes of member checking helps ensure the essence and meaning of the participants' thoughts are accurate (Creswell, 2007).

A second form of evidence included observations and an observation protocol was used to record data (Appendix N). Creswell (2007) explained that field notes can be taken of the observed activity and behavior of individuals at the research site. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) recommended using an observational protocol that included descriptive notes (e.g., description of participants, setting, dialogue, and events) and reflective notes (e.g., observer's thoughts and impressions). A total of five observations were conducted, three district committee meetings, one stakeholder meeting, and one data analysis goal setting meeting were observed. The committee meetings observed lasted on average 90 minutes and included one teacher evaluation steering committee, one district math committee meeting, and one district English-Language Arts committee meeting. One 60-minute district improvement meeting was observed that included school board members, students, parents, administrators, and teachers. Finally, one 3-hour

Measures of Academic Performance (MAP) school and district data analysis and goal setting meeting was observed. MAP is the district's on-line local assessment system.

A third form of evidence collected were district school improvement artifacts (e.g., agendas of district improvement meetings, and student performance data) to provide a more in-depth understanding of the case. The artifacts reviewed included 4 years of Norman School District trend data for the Illinois Standard Achievement Test (ISAT) and one year of the Partnership for Assessment and College and Career Readiness (PARCC) report. I reviewed the following data analysis training materials entitled: reports portfolio for MAP, focusing on growth MAP workbook, and individual student MAP data. I thoroughly reviewed the district's curriculum coordinators website that included assessment information, district-wide initiatives, resources for parents, and school improvement initiatives. I reviewed SMART goal setting worksheets and grade-level and team agendas related to goal setting. I also retained agendas from the various meetings observed. Finally, I gathered photo evidence of the public posting of the district vision and mission and interesting cultural artifacts. The data analysis examined how evidence is used at the district and school levels, how it informs decision making, and the relationship between the superintendent and schools' evidence-use. The various data collection methods (i.e., interviews, observations, and review of artifacts) elicited richer data to communicate the essence of this unique case.

Managing data and the process of data collection was important in keeping organized and adhering to a timeline. A matrix of tasks to accomplish was developed and was added and deleted as the case study evolved. Multiple sources of data were collected (i.e., interviews, observations, and review of artifacts). Electronic field notes were collected during interviews and observations to capture impressions of the events. The notes indicated if the source was primary

(i.e., taken directly from the source or event) or secondary (i.e., reported secondhand account of an event) and included notes on the degree of reliability and validity (Creswell, 2009). I sought to understand the participants' perspectives related to the issues.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Stake (1995) described “analysis as giving meaning to first impressions as well as to final compilations. Analysis essentially means taking something apart” (p. 71). The analysis of interviews, observations, and artifacts in this research study followed a traditional case examination process from general to specific. Case study research includes a comprehensive depiction of the location or participants followed by analysis of the data for themes or issues (Stake, 1995; Wolcott, 1994). Creswell (2009) outlined six steps in analyzing qualitative research that was followed in this study, including: (a) organize and prepare the data for analysis, (b) read through all the data collected, (c) begin a coding process to reveal themes, (d) create description of themes, (e) describe the prominent themes and how they will inform the narrative process, and (f) interpret the data and what this means to the case. Data analysis was ongoing and re-examined as the case unfolded.

Each step in the analysis process was important, and special care was taken in the coding process. Tesch (1990) offered useful strategies in the coding process that was employed in this study. The strategies included reading through the data to get a sense of its totality of the data, examining the documents one at a time to determine meaning, generating a list of topics, and then clustering similar topics together. The topics were arranged in columns and assigned a code that was aligned to corresponding text. This method provided a systematic structure that fleshed out themes and topics (Tesch, 1990). This study utilized the above strategies to analyze the data and adhered to the traditional model of qualitative research, allowing tentative themes to emerge

throughout the data analysis process. The data organization process included building the categories, themes, and patterns from a bottom-up approach that organized the information into more abstract units of information (Creswell, 2009). The process of continually working between the data and the tentative themes helped to establish a complete set of themes.

### **Triangulation and Reliability**

The interviews, observations, and artifact review helped to triangulate data. Stake (1995) suggests using four types of triangulation: (a) data source triangulation, (b) investigator triangulation, (c) theory triangulation, and (d) methodological triangulation. For the purpose of this study, I utilized data source triangulation and methodological triangulation. Data source triangulation examines whether the phenomenon observed is consistent across other circumstances, and methodological triangulation involves observing and examining other records for example district improvement data such as agendas, minutes, and student performance data. The investigator and theory triangulation approaches were implemented. A professional with expertise in qualitative research methods also was consulted, to confirm the validity of identified themes. I participated frequently in member checking to ensure the essence of each participant's experience was communicated clearly.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter outlined the methodology for a single case study examining one effective rural school district as the rural superintendent facilitated a formalized district reform process that utilizes evidence-use processes. The study is grounded in the Leadership for Learning framework. Leadership for learning provides leaders with a framework to institute reform through the integration of collaborative and supportive behavioral practices that inspires

continuous improvements. This chapter described data collection procedures, including interviews, observations, and document analysis and the plan employed to triangulate the data.

## **Chapter 4**

### **The Case**

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to examine one exemplary Illinois rural school district and the practices of the district superintendent who participates in a formalized evidence-use process to increase student performance. This chapter provides a detailed description of the case study district and the superintendent who serves as a leader of learning. A purposeful sampling strategy was employed to identify the district and leader. A single-case study methodology was used to collect data from October 2015 through February 2016. The Leadership for Learning Framework was the lens that guided an inductive process of analysis of the interviews, observations, artifacts, and researcher notes data. Knapp, Copland, Ford, Markholt, McLaughlin, Milliken, and Talbert (2003) five areas of action directed the analysis of district data: (a) establishing a focus on learning; (b) building professional communities that take learning seriously; (c) engaging external environments that matter for learning; (d) acting strategically and collaboratively along pathways of activity aimed at different aspects of student, professional and system learning; (e) and creating coherence (pp. 19-43). Confidentiality of the district and its participants was maintained through the use of pseudonyms. In the following section, characteristics of the school district community will be described followed by an overview of school district data and student performance trends. Next, the district leadership will be introduced followed by a brief discussion about the district's evidence-use processes. Finally, a review of overarching themes revealed in the case study data analysis will be presented.

## **Context of the Community**

The school district context cannot be fully appreciated without a description of the community. Norman School District is located in a rural community in Illinois. The town of Norman is surrounded by farmland, and local agriculture is in the forefront with cornfields and grain bins speckling the landscape. As I drove into Norman, I noticed signs in yards signaling “You are entering Cardinal Country.” School pride clearly is evident throughout the community. The homes are reflective of the middle class, with a mix of bungalows, wood frame, and Victorian architecture. Some houses have been renovated, with impressive examples of restored Queen Anne style architecture, although often situated directly next door are homes in need of repair. Similar to many rural communities that struggle to maintain stable populations, several “For Sale” signs are sprinkled throughout the community. The town is separated by a rural route highway, with homes sprawling on both sides of the main road. The business district lies on the west end of town and runs perpendicular to the rural route. The center of commerce is lined with 1950s-style storefronts that sporadically have been updated to present a more modern-day feel. Streets leading to the school district campus are tree lined, with a Midwestern feel that reminds you of days gone by. The Norman Rockwell characteristics continue, as I could easily imagine children walking to school in groups or excitedly running door-to-door through the leaves in their Halloween costumes. Driving over the redbirds stenciled over the surface of the campus drive, I noted the contiguous school building was a newer, attractive structure that easily filled a two-block area. The central district offices are located in the same building as the secondary programs. The attractive school building and parking lot are well maintained, with stop signs and cardinal birds on the surface of the lot that interestingly guides the flow of traffic. Approaching the entrance to the district office, I noticed two benches flanking the doors, one memorializing a

former student who passed away and the other with the inscription “All of us do not have equal talents but all of us should have an equal opportunity to develop our talents –John F. Kennedy.” Like an opening paragraphs of a good book, the bench at the school district door foreshadows the events to come in this case study of one exemplary rural school district.

### **Context of the School District**

Norman School District is a PK-12 district located in a rural setting in Illinois. The district serves approximately 1,400 students, with two elementary schools, one junior high school, and one high school. The district is located in a rural area of Illinois and within 30 miles of a small urban community. The district has two elementary schools, one junior high school, and one high school. The pre-school through second grade building serves slightly under 300 primary grade students, with class sizes not exceeding 17, and 59% of the student population are classified as living in low income homes. The third through fifth grade elementary enrollment is slightly over 300, with 20 students per classroom, and 58% of students classified as low income. The junior high school serves approximately 350 students, the average class size is 24, and 50% of the students are considered low income. The high school student population is approximately 450, with class sizes not exceeding 16, and 38% of the high school students are classified as low income. Over the last 5 years, the student enrollment declined by 101 students. In comparison, the district’s low income student population is growing. Between 2014 and 2015, the low income population increased by 11%.

Despite the increase in low income student population, the district’s student achievement data are trending upward (Table 2). The new Illinois state assessment, Partnership for Assessment and College and Career Readiness (PARCC), which was administered statewide for the first time during the 2014-15 school year, revealed the district reading achievement scores



were 4% higher than the state average and the math achievement scores were 5% higher than student performance state-wide.

Table 2

*Illinois State Achievement Tests- Math and Reading*

State of Illinois testing	District average	State of Illinois average data
2012-13 ISAT		
Performance—Reading	58.0%	59.0%
Performance—Math	55.0%	59.0%
2013-14 ISAT		
Performance—Reading	59.0%	57.0%
Performance—Math	63.0%	60.0%
2014-15 ISAT		
Performance—Reading	42.0%	38.0%
Performance—Math	33.0%	28.0%

*Note.* Illinois Standards Achievement Test performance in Reading and Math indicates the percentage of students meeting and exceeding State standards. The 2014-15 school years the State of Illinois transitioned from the ISAT to the Partnership for Assessment and College and Career Readiness (PARCC).

The Norman School District student population has very little ethnic diversity. The district student enrollment is approximately 91.6% White; 0.8% African American; 5.4% Hispanic; and 2% Asian, American Indian, Pacific Islander, and multi-racial. However, the district is diverse in terms of socio-economic status, with 49% of students qualifying for free and reduced lunches. As the number of low-income families has grown within the community in the last 5 years, district leaders have taken steps to respond to the changing socio-economic status through conducting professional development on educating students in poverty and enhancing student and family supports. Due to its low income student enrollments, the district receives federal Title I funds.

Norman School District employs slightly over 100 full-time teaching staff. Ninety-nine percent of the teachers are White and the remaining 1% is Hispanic; 77% are females and 23%

are males. The district teachers are all identified as highly qualified and 48% hold a master's degree or higher. The average teachers' annual salary is \$43,000 and is nearly \$20,000 below the state average teachers' salary. The student-to-administrator ratio is 196:1, compared to the state average of 176:1.

To address the needs of students with learning needs, a common practice of rural area districts is to form a cooperative to provide services or contract with specialized service providers. Norman School District participates in a special education cooperative where the district contracts for specialized services, such as, psychology, social work, speech and language pathology, and certified (ELL) teachers. Sixteen percent of the district's overall student population is identified as receiving special education services, which is 2% higher than the state average. The district's average class size is 19, compared to the state average of 21. The district's per-pupil operating cost is over \$2,800 below the state average. Similarly, the per-pupil state average for instructional cost is \$1,700 more than the districts instructional expenditures for each student. The district spends less revenue on operations and instruction expenditures than the state average. Further, the student transient population is 2% less than the state average, which suggests families are moving out of the district at a lower rate.

Table 3

*Context of the School District*

Data	District	State average
Per pupil operating expenditure	\$9,696	\$12,521
Per pupil instructional expenditure	\$5,701	\$7,419
Student enrollment	1,400	
White students	91.6%	49.0%
African-American	0.8%	18.0%
Hispanic students	5.4%	25.0%
Asian/Pacific Islander	0.6%	5.0%

(continued)

Table 3 (continued)

Data	District	State average
American Indian	0.1%	-----
Multi-racial students	1.1%	3.0%
Pacific Islander	0.4%	-----
Student mobility	10.0%	12.0%

*Note.* Adapted from (Illinois Interactive Report Card (n.d.)).

Norman School District employs one superintendent, one curriculum coordinator at the district level, five building-level administrators, and 108 full-time teachers. The superintendent of schools, Mr. Ethan Harris, grew up in a rural Illinois community and has worked exclusively in rural school districts as an educator. He began his career in a neighboring school district as a teacher and coach for 4 years and then served as an assistant principal for 2 years. The first position Ethan held in Norman School District was as elementary principal. He served in the role of elementary principal for 6 years and was approached by the Board of Education about him moving into the superintendent position. Ethan has been the Norman School District superintendent for 14 years. Ms. Jessica James is the other district-level administrator. Jessica has been employed by the district for 14 years. Initially, Jessica served in the role of elementary principal for 4 years, and for the past 10 years she has served as the district's curriculum coordinator. All building principals have been employed in their administrative roles in the district for 4 years or less.

Norman School District teaching staff has changed in the last few years to a younger staff as veteran teachers retired. Elementary principal Lily explained,

Just before I came, there was a huge exodus of teachers that have been here for 20-plus years, so just with me coming and having that young staff from the beginning, there was a lot of learning that needed to take place.

The participants in this study were a mix of district-level leaders, building principals, and teachers who served on school improvement district committees. Individual interviews were

conducted with the superintendent, curriculum coordinator, Board of Education president, and three building principals. Two focus group interviews were conducted: the first included a mix of participant representation from the administration and teachers, and the second included teachers. Table 4 provides the research participants' profiles.

Table 4

*Participant Profile*

Name	Gender	Position	District Level
Mr. Ethan Harris	Male	Superintendent	Central office
Ms. Jessica James	Female	Curriculum coordinator	Central office
Mrs. Erin Brown	Female	Board president	Board of Education
Mr. Aaron Smith	Male	Principal	High school
Mr. Ryan Johnson	Male	Principal	Junior high school
Mr. Robert Taylor	Male	Principal	3-5 elementary
Mrs. Lily Jones	Female	Principal	K-2 elementary
Mrs. Amy Davis	Female	Teacher	Elementary school
Mrs. Carol Moore	Female	ELA teacher	Elementary school
Mrs. Katie Miller	Female	Teacher	Junior high school
Ms. Grace Anderson	Female	Teacher	High school
Ms. Chloe White	Female	Teacher	High school
Mr. Jack Wilson	Male	Director	Special education cooperative

Mr. Ethan Harris has worked in the Norman School District for 20 years, 14 as superintendent. He presents as an approachable, positive, and principled person with a strong and energetic presence. Ethan's tenure is not the norm in the superintendency. According to Marzano and Waters (2009), the average superintendent tenure is 5-7 years; over the course of their career, superintendents may serve a total of 14-17 years in two to three districts. His decision to work and live in the town of Norman was purposeful. He explained, "I've been blessed. Norman is where my wife and I decided to raise our family." He is committed to the Norman School District. He shared, "I get out of bed and say 'Wow.' I mean, I feel lucky. I feel I'm in a great place, I'm supported and I have passion about what I'm doing." Through his tenure as

superintendent, Ethan has led the district in a transformational school reform process. Junior high teacher Katie explained:

This is year number 25 for me at Norman School District, and in those years, early on it was the coasting period—the “old school” days—you just did what you did. And then, we really started to realize we really needed to raise the bar for students at Norman School District. Once we came up with the “Excellence through Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships” and Common Core kicked in, I have seen a huge change around here.

Norman School District has two central office administrators, which Ethan acknowledges requires him to be in charge of most all aspects of the district. Ethan explained that relationships matter in the rural superintendency:

You know the bigger district has a finance person, they have a curriculum person, and they have an HR person. I think being a rural superintendent; you can become knowledgeable in many things. I think you have to kind of hang your hat on a few things to become experts on, and then you have to depend upon building relationships, again, with staff, administration . . . Superintendents in other districts are critical . . . Those relationships are critical . . . We use each other and we bounce those ideas back and forth, and I think that’s critical.

Due to having only two central office administrators, Ethan sees collaboration as an important strategy. Networking with those outside the district as well as with district stakeholders builds relationships but also is a mechanism for aligning resources to the school community’s needs.

Ethan explained how he keeps learning central:

I spend most my time talking with the board, the administration, and building those relationships with our staff and parents, talking about teaching and learning. I think more or less is, is not so much telling them, but it is listening to the concerns that they have and then trying to find out ways to solve those issues or provide the training.

Despite the competing demands, Ethan keeps a laser intent on what matters—teaching and learning. He stated,

I guess one thing that I’m always doing is talking about instruction, achievement, and school improvement initiatives. I believe I continuously model this to my administrative team, staff and the Board. I try not to get caught up in things that have little to do with the mission of our district which is to provide each student with a great education.

As I was immersed in interviews and district meetings around school improvement and data analysis, I noted Ethan framed these discussions around excellence. I also noted some simple behaviors, which often may go unnoticed, spoke volumes about this leader. For example, after the district-wide school improvement team meeting, I was visiting with an educator when I noticed Ethan spy a crumpled piece of paper lying on the floor in the far corner of the room. He walked over and picked up the paper. At a subsequent visit, the superintendent, junior high school principal, and I were walking down the school hallway. Mr. Harris saw a piece of paper on the floor, and the principal reached down and picked it up. Mr. Harris said to the principal, “I am glad you picked it up. If you had not, I would have.” When I asked about his picking up trash and what that meant, he laughed a bit sheepishly but then explained:

I'm passionate about Norman School District. I'm passionate about my job. I want things to exceed our expectations, not meet our expectations. It is just not the custodian's job to clean the building. . . . I didn't even realize I did that.

Over the course of my data collection, I observed instances where excellence was communicated in action and words. Ethan articulated high expectations and the desire that the district strives for excellence. His statements and interactions with staff and the Board of Education members were positive and engaging. When he spoke with others about topics around teaching and learning, he framed the discussion around the question, what is best practice and what is in the best interests of students. A “what is in the best interest of students” message seemed to shape the superintendent's day-to-day work and communication style.

### **Evidence-Use Process**

This section describes the Norman School District practices that support a continuous improvement process. Four central themes emerged from the interviews, observations, and associated artifacts that include: shared and lived vision and mission, culture of excellence,

building system capacity, and evidence as a medium for leading. Norman School District created their vision and mission with stakeholder participation that included administrators, teachers, students, Board of Education, and community members. The vision and mission are prominently displayed throughout the district's buildings and frequently cited by the professional staff. A culture of excellence in professional practice is noted. Leadership practices, decision making, and system responsiveness is structured to promote professional, student, and system learning. Finally, evidence-use as a medium for leading continuous school improvement is evident in the district use of data to drive instructional decision making. The four themes will be discussed in detail in the Chapter 5 in relation to the case study research questions.

### **Conclusion**

Norman School District is an example of one exemplary rural school district with high achievement, stable and established leadership, and community-wide investment in the school district. The superintendent's leadership practices promotes a culture of collaboration and relationship building, articulates a focus on excellence, and creates the opportunities to build the capacity of the members of the learning community. A robust evidence-use process is in place to drive instructional improvements.

## Chapter 5

### Case Study Findings

This single-case study investigated one exemplary rural Illinois school district's use of data to drive instructional decision making and the role of the district superintendent in leading successful evidence-use processes that result in student achievement trending upward. The following three research questions guided this study:

1. What district leadership strategies and practices matter to evidence use?
2. How does the rural district structure the process of evidence-use that is focused on student, professional, and system learning?
3. What barriers and constraints are encountered and what supports are lacking that inhibit effective district evidence-use processes that promote continual systems learning?

This chapter reveals the uniqueness of the case through the examination of the research findings. The data analysis process and revealed findings were informed by the Leadership for Learning Framework, where leadership tasks and action areas structured the analysis around district evidence-use processes. This chapter presents the findings related to the three research questions. These findings explored what district leadership practices matter to effective evidence-use, how the rural district structures the process of evidence-use, and what challenges are encountered as the district analyzes data to guide instructional decision making.

#### **Research Question One: What District Leadership Practices Matter to Evidence-Use?**

The first question explores Superintendent Ethan Harris's leadership strategies and practices he employed as he strived to facilitate the process of evidence-use in the district. Four key leadership strategies and practices themes emerged from the data that contributed to effective evidence-use processes: superintendent established a focus on learning, superintendent established high expectations for learning, superintendent utilized evidence as a medium for



leading, and superintendent “generated will” with stakeholders through the development of good relationships.

**Promoting a focus on learning.** The data analysis revealed that the superintendent facilitated a focus on learning through the establishment of the district’s vision and mission. The district’s vision and mission statement was adopted in April 2009:

It is the mission of Norman School District (NSD) to prepare each student to be a successful citizen as demonstrated through strong character, responsible actions, and a passion for life-long learning. NSD students will be empowered with the skills that allow them to read with comprehension, communicate clearly, utilize technology, think critically, work effectively with others, and use information to solve problems. NSD is committed to a systematic approach of support and intervention to assist each individual in reaching his or her full potential. We are dedicated to providing a safe environment while fostering a climate of high expectations for our students, staff, and the communities we serve: “Excellence Through Rigor, Relevance and Relationships”

Norman School District orients the work of the district around their vision and mission, and district stakeholders demonstrated their commitment to the vision and mission in their words and actions. As I observed the district improvement committee meeting, I noted in my field notes:

The room is filled with administrators, teachers, a few students, and several community members. There are approximately 30 people attending this meeting at 2:30 in the afternoon! It is unusual to have that many people attend a meeting in the middle of the work day. To have this turn out in the middle of the work day is interesting.

Ethan utilized three leadership strategies and practices to make learning central. First, he implemented and facilitated a vision and mission development process that engaged all stakeholders. The Board of Education President, Erin Brown, described the process and impact that the vision and mission have had on the district:

I was part of that process, getting information from stakeholders and trying to come up with what our mission statement and focus was going to be. I think the administrators do a good job of tying that into the decisions that they make, and why we want to make things relevant and rigorous. I think it is not just a catch phrase that is on the wall, and I do believe they implement that and use that as that check and balance for decisions they are making. We had committees where we had community involvement, parent

involvement, and met as we kind of teased out what we felt was important, and came up with that final mission statement.

The second strategy the superintendent employed was to keep the vision and mission front and central in the minds of stakeholders. He ensured that the shared vision and mission statements were prominently displayed in the school buildings and conference rooms, and he regularly used them as a way to orient and focus the learning community toward its essential task: teaching and learning. The vision and mission was not only posted on the district's walls, but also on recruitment and communication materials. The district curriculum coordinator, Jessica, prominently displayed the vision and mission statement on the curriculum committee teacher recruitment brochure. Grace, a high school teacher, commented on how the superintendent's vision orientation strategy and practice helped her to internalize the district vision and mission:

Visibly seeing it daily as you walk to the restroom. You are seeing it. At least, I do. I don't just see it. I read it every time. Pushing students, pushing themselves, learning. . . . Being lifelong learners. I see that every day and I hope the kids do.

Posting these statements throughout the school districts sends a visual message of the importance of their shared vision of excellence.

The third strategy Ethan demonstrated was to verbally orient the centrality of the vision and mission through communications. Elementary principal Lily explained:

Ethan mentions it all the time. He always comes back to, "What's our vision? What's our mission?" . . . I think having his support from the very top, always reminding us what the mission is and what are we here for is about the kids.

The stakeholder development of the vision, the posting of the vision in the district, and the verbal orientation toward the vision and mission are effective leadership strategies and practices because it reminded educators of the organization's purpose.

Rural districts often have high involvement from the community. Having a good school district is important to small communities. Good schools draw families, and with dwindling population in the rural areas, an excellent school system is a strength. As Ethan shared the results of the PARCC student performance scores at the district improvement committee, one school board member commented, “I am happy to hear how well we did.” The Norman community takes pride in the school and in its accomplishments. Ethan explained, “If you look how our mayor speaks of our community, he talks about what a great education system it is and it is the pride of our community. . . . It is important and their school district is a priority in this area.” Pride in the schools is evident from the community to the classroom. Having a reputation for good schools and supportive leadership also helps rural districts retain teachers. The vision and mission contributes to a strong professional culture and supports vision coherence from the community down to the classrooms—all understand the goal of the district. The vision and mission lays the foundation for excellent educational experiences. One young elementary teacher, Amy Davis, maintained:

I entered a few years ago and I came from U of I [University of Illinois] and entering it was like . . . I could not imagine being anywhere else, you know. It is just like, such an awesome place to be...The relationships . . . just everything that our mission statement is does match with what we are, which I think is really cool to see. It is not just up there. We live it and we breathe it every day.

Amy expressed enthusiasm, passion, and contentment with her position in Norman School District. Retaining novice and invested teachers is important to any school district, but it is especially important to rural districts that often compete with larger communities for highly qualified teachers.

**Maintaining high expectations.** Ethan demonstrated high standards in his words and actions. Like his high expectations for himself, he also held high standards for employees. The

findings revealed a theme of high expectations of excellence established by the superintendent. He effectively established high expectations around teaching and learning through the requirements that administrators and teachers use research-based best instructional practices, set goals for student achievement, and interact with one another in a professional and respectful manner. He communicated these expectations by reminding others of the purpose of school. He explained, “I spend most my time talking with the board, the administration, and building those relationships with our staff and parents talking about teaching and learning.”

He has communicated this message of high expectations for teaching and learning effectively with his staff. A focus group male participant reported, “Student achievement, bottom line, for him. There are things that we are required to do and he just does not want to slop something down. He wants it to be valuable for us to use with the students.” Ethan explained it this way: “We really want to be on the forefront of things. We do not ever want to sit and look like we are really behind in this, like we are playing catch up.” He has high expectations that the organization is on the cutting edge of reform and best practice. The review of district professional development artifacts established the superintendent as an active participant in the differentiated professional development offerings. He opens the meeting, welcomes staff, and introduces the training. The district professional development artifact provides teachers with a detailed timeline on initiatives, expectations around teachers designing student learning objectives that is tied to their evaluations, and specifies an explanation of the various professional development opportunities.

The superintendent has high expectations for student achievement, but also how they conduct themselves as they work through the process of school improvement. One female teacher explained:

I feel like we just have a climate where it is not okay to fail. That if somebody is struggling, then people are just going to build them up. There is definitely an expectation, I think, of everyone that we want to be the best school district there is. I believe that everybody believes that and does everything they can to make that happen.

It is obvious that Ethan has developed a climate of support through the establishment of expectations for professional behavior.

High expectations are apparent regarding teaching and learning and interpersonal practice, not only for educators but also for students. The curriculum coordinator, Jessica, stated, “I believe that we have rigor in our curriculum. We want our kids to be persistent. We want them to be determined to achieve and do better.” The district leadership is of one mind when defining what it is they want for students’ education. A continual focus on high expectations for professional, student, and systems learning is admirable given the reduction in funding and the transition to the New Illinois Standards and Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) state assessment. Ethan shared:

We have seen student performance increase, even in the face of less state dollars, lack of state funding. . . . Our poverty rate has exploded. We have seen an increase in student performance. . . . I’m particularly proud of our district for being able to do that because it has been a lot of work. I hope that continues to trend upward.

**Evidence-use as a medium for leading.** The research data revealed the theme that district administrators’ utilize evidence-use processes as a medium for leading for learning in four ways: (a) reviewing district data publicly, (b) leadership modeling evidence-use processes, (c) superintendent establishing evidence-use expectations around instructional leadership activities, and (d) district investing in evidence-use resources. First, as the district’s evidence-use capacity has grown, so has the district’s public reporting of student achievement data. Ethan stated:

I would maybe share results myself with the board a couple times a year, now at least eight times per year. . . . We share school improvement reports with the board on

different initiatives, assessment scores, teacher institute, and school improvement initiatives.

A review of the district school board minutes revealed that district data, school improvement efforts, and instructional resource allocation is discussed at the regular monthly board meetings. For example, in June 2015, the Board of Education and administration discussed allocating resources for elementary instructional materials, in July and August, school improvement initiatives were discussed, and in December, the administration discussed the release of the PARCC scores. Ethan established the expectation that data would be presented in a transparent and public manner. He explained his rationale for why he utilized evidence in a public forum: “If you are not using that data in the things that you present and talk about, then your principals aren't going to either. They're not going to find it important.” The idea of leadership modeling evidence-use behaviors was echoed by Jessica, the curriculum coordinator:

I think anything you do modeling is going to be extremely important because if people see you doing that and that is the expectation that you are held to as well, it makes it that much more relevant, I think, to everybody else. I think modeling and leadership is just so critical, because you cannot say one thing and then act another way because people will see through that immediately.

Second, Ethan employed leadership strategies and practices that include setting expectations around teaching and learning. He requires administrators to use evidence-use processes in their respective buildings. Multiple forms of evidence are used to justify new initiatives, track teachers and administrative performance, and identify student learning gaps. Grade-level team meeting artifacts revealed that future collaboration would be centered around educating students and parents about why attending school regularly each and every day is important. A second question posed was: How can we reward good behavior and celebrate the good things going on? Meeting the needs of student populations is also discussed. For example, one meeting minutes revealed a conversation about student poverty. Teachers were pondering

the impact of poverty on learning and what things could they do at school to support students?

The conversations taking place regularly in Norman School District about teaching and learning are both formal and informal. The curriculum coordinator, Jessica, established expectation around goal setting. One November 4, 2015 email correspondence from Jessica to a junior high grade-level team stated:

We will continue to discuss this in team time today and look to focus our vision of improvement through creating SMART goals at future team meetings. . . . I so value the conversations we are having lately. Really appreciate the collaboration, professionalism and the continual commitment to living our vision statement.

Individual goal setting and the collection of data building-wide is valuable evidence. The administrators keep evidential records of the formal and informal “walk-through” evaluative visits they make to the classrooms. Ethan stated,

I think that is a priority . . . the more feedback you are giving to staff, the better they are going to perform. If there are any issues . . . you want to be able to provide that timely input and feedback for reflection, so you are only hurting those children within those classrooms.

The superintendent’s expectation is clear: administrators’ primary role is as instructional leader.

Seven years ago the district implemented the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP), a nationally normed local assessment that is used for benchmarking student performance. In Norman School District, MAP is used to track students’ progress three times per year—fall, winter, and spring. Over the last 7 years, the district has received extensive data analysis training on how to use MAP in the school setting and subsequently has grown in its capacity to analyze and interpret data. The teachers’ and administrators’ use of data has increased, allowing them to make informed instructional decisions based upon the student performance data results. Jessica explained,

We want to use evidence to make sure that what we’re doing is best practice and it is helping our students to succeed. We want to use evidence to find out what are we lacking

in, what are we not giving our students enough of, where we're not giving enough support.

The elementary school principal, Lily, explained how they have progressed using data to intervene and close skill deficits. She stated, "Now, over the last 4 years, we have gotten a better hold of it because we have looked at data, and we have set up so many supports for these kids." It is evident from the principal's comments that the district is gaining an understanding of how data can provide the necessary information on where they need to supplement curriculum or structure interventions to close achievement gaps.

District leaders and educators are not only reviewing achievement data but they also are using multiple forms of data to inform their decision making. For example, trend data revealed that the low income population in the district was increasing. In order to prepare the district to effectively meet the needs of their students' changing economic status, they implemented professional development around the topic of educating students from impoverished backgrounds. Jessica explained that the need to respond to the changing circumstances of the student population:

That has been something that we have been having to be aware of and knowing that with that comes some special issues, understanding situational poverty versus generational poverty and doing some different things on poverty and how it impacts learning. It is definitely something that we've had to take a look at and be aware of and try to do some training on and around.

The district has been consistently utilizing evidence-use processes for over 7 years. Evidence-use is a process of learning how to analyze data, determining what types of evidence reveals useful information that informs instruction. As they have drilled down into their data, they are building the capacity to intervene and close achievement gaps as well as continue to focus on teaching students 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. As Ethan maintained:



We are in a different place than we were before we started using data. . . . I can't sit here and say that we base every decision upon evidence, but I would say that we're trying to accomplish that. The initiatives that we put in place or the decisions that we make are based upon data more now than ever before. I think our staff is feeling more comfortable with that.

The observation of the data analysis training supports this assertion. The MAP trainer reviewed the history of the data analysis training received by district teachers. The training was purposely scheduled to extend the attendees expertise in analyzing student growth and establishing student generated improvement goals.

**Generating will.** The final theme is the superintendent's leadership practices and strategies that generate the will of stakeholders to keep learning central. The data revealed that Ethan generates will in three ways: (a) utilizing evidence-based decision making, (b) leveraging district resources, and (c) developing good relationships with others. Rural superintendents have finite resources and must prioritize the district resource allocation. First, Ethan generates will by utilizing evidence as the basis for decision making. Norman School District makes district-wide programming and initiative decisions at the board level. The decision to spend on instruction is based upon research evidence and a best practice instruction rationale. The process of decision making in Norman School District is collaborative, transparent, and thoughtful. Historically, the superintendent presents the information and evidence to support the initiative to the board for discussion. Few big decisions are made in one Board of Education meeting, but usually require 2 or 3 months to finalize decisions. The multi-month process of decision making allows the superintendent to keep the board and community informed of district decisions. School board agendas and minutes support the focus on teaching and learning initiatives and reporting. The established district improvement committee has representatives from the community, school board, student body, and faculty as evidenced by the December 1, 2015 agenda. An observation

of a district improvement committee meeting included student performance data review and overview of instructional initiatives.

Second, leveraging resources to support the education environment is a focus of the district and aides in generating the will of stakeholders. Ethan explained, “their biggest pot of money is being spent on instruction. That is what they should be the most informed upon.”

Despite the finite resources, Ethan makes learning central by leveraging resources. He stated, “I always make sure that most of my time and most of our money goes toward learning. Norman School District makes careful and thoughtful decisions about how to utilize resources. Ethan’s role in keeping learning the central focus is through his recommendation where resources should be allocated. He explained:

You talk about how I prioritize, how we prioritize in teaching and learning? I didn't ask for a finance director, I didn't ask for an HR director, I asked for a curriculum coordinator. . . . Teaching and learning should be the main focus of the school district. We added a curriculum coordinator because curriculum was getting ignored. It really came out of several conversations with our board that I just said, I just feel like the most important thing we're doing here is getting ignored. The mission of what we are supposed to be accomplishing is not being fulfilled.

Thus, hiring a full-time curriculum coordinator was viewed as essential for the district to move forward with gains in student learning. Ethan was willing to make sacrifices in other district-level personnel areas in order to ensure that the district had sufficient capacity to maintain an intense focus on teaching and learning. Norman School District’s superintendent generates will by making learning central through the communication of instructional needs and the leveraging of district resources assists in generating will. Jessica explained:

I think that we identify those things that are a priority and that we want to continue to see growth in, and we support the administrators and the teachers in doing it whenever possible. As long as our superintendent is saying we can still afford it, then it continues to be our focus. I just think you’ve got to just reach out and just figure out ways to leverage the resources that you have, which in a lot of cases it is just somebody else that knows more about something than you do.

The data revealed a third leadership strategy and practice that generates will and matters to leading evidence-use processes: building good relationships with others. Relationship is important to this education community, so important that it is included in their vision statement. Ethan builds relationships by listening and talking with others about teaching and learning, mentoring, being visible, and helping others realize success:

I spend most my time talking with the board, the administration, and building those relationships with our staff and parents talking about teaching and learning. I think more or less is, is not so much telling them, but it is listening to the concerns that they have and then trying to find out ways to solve those issues or provide the training that they are wanting. . . . Actively listening to their concerns, making them feel important. While they are there, while they are sitting in front of you.

As superintendent, Ethan is immersed in the day-to-day activities of the district. As he interacts with others, he demonstrates active listening. He communicates closely with administrators and staff to determine district needs. One focus group teacher stated, “As a teacher, having their support, and then talking us off our ledges, okay, I got this to do. . . . I want to make sure I am doing the right thing . . . providing the right environment for my students, emotionally, academically.” The emotional support of teachers and the allocation of resources are valued. Ethan said, “Then it is my job to make sure there is money and the barriers that might stop them from accomplishing their goal are removed so we can move forward.” Leading for learning requires trusting staff to share the education needs and the willingness to allocate resources in a manner that supports educators’ efforts in the classroom. Ethan takes the time to mentor and guide his leaders so they, too, can have a positive impact on their teachers. In this regard, junior high principal Ryan stated:

Being here, being around Mr. Harris, being able to share ideas with him and his thoughts I get to glean from his experience. . . . I can tell you this from working with him, him trusting in me and me trusting in him.

His administrators learn from their leader and feel supported, but his teachers also benefit from his presence and attention. An elementary teacher, Carol said, “He makes appearances in the building, he's there. He's watching the students, he's interacting with them. He's not in there every day but you do see him interacting with the kids.” Amy, also an elementary teacher, said, “He stopped in for my numbers talk before and so that was a surprise, too. He makes a point to be there.” When the superintendent is interested in what is happening in the classroom, teachers respond favorably. High school teacher Chloe sees how he takes the information he gathers and brings the pieces together to impact teaching and learning:

Well, like he said in his speech—relationships—get to know us; get to know what we feel like is important because we're working with the kids every day. He does do that, he listens to us, he listens to what we think we need, and then he listens elsewhere, too. I think he just brings all of it to us together and makes the decisions collaboratively. You can tell that he really does listen to the things that everyone has said before. He provides for us and asks what kinds of things we're looking for. He talks to Jessica about the resources that would benefit our students and just tries to make those available with what funds are available.

A superintendent who uses evidence to make decisions, leverages resources to support instruction, gives educators a voice, and sees the value in building strong working relationships with others generates the will of the organization to keep learning central and focus on what matters—teaching and student learning.

**Research Question Two: How Does the Rural District Structure the Process of Evidence-Use that is Focused on Student, Professional, and System Learning?**

The second research question explores the districts evidence-use process that promotes student, professional, and system learning. Four key themes that emerged from the data facilitated significant systemic learning: (a) collaborative structures, (b) building capacity, (c) mutual reliance in evidence-use between administration and teachers, and (d) reflection. This section discusses the study findings related to the structure of the evidence-use process.

**Developing collaborative structures.** Norman School District has a strong culture of collaboration that supports evidence-use processes. Formal and informal events of teachers collaborating together, leaders collaborating, and administrator and teacher collaboration were evident. Ethan acted as an information channel from the classroom to the board room. He collected information about the needs of the district and then communicated those needs to the Board of Education. For example, Norman School District is contemplating a building plan. The January 13, 2016 Board of Education minutes revealed that Ethan has developed a Community Engagement Plan, in which the district will meet with the community on several occasions to gather feedback on their opinions related to school facility expansion. Elementary teacher Carol reported, "I think he just brings all of it to us together and makes the decisions collaboratively." The district has worked over the course of several years to build a culture of collaboration, and administrators have created the conditions in which teachers can collaborate. The elementary principal, Lily, explained how collaboration plays a role in evidence-use processes:

I feel like I have built more collaboration because I am letting them do the talking, and I really want them to drive the conversation, not me. I just think it has come from experience, but like I said, it is come from Mr. Harris. It has. I think overall, as a district, we have a pretty good understanding of evidence, and that is just due to the fact that we do collaborate and we do communicate so much as administrators, and it is also due to the fact that we do look for opportunities for professional development, and learning more about data, and how to read it, and how to use it to set goals, and to better our schools, and help better our teachers.

Teachers reported to the administration that they needed more time to plan, analyze data, and work to make improvements. The superintendent shared the teachers' desires to increase collaboration with the Board of Education, and the board was responsive to their requests. The board president, Erin, reported:

We implemented the early outs based on some of the information that we were getting back from our teachers that they didn't have collaboration time, and so we have a set early out every Tuesday. Initially that was really hard for everybody to get used to. We were like, "I don't know that we like this." But I really think that it has allowed that team

time that we were missing as we were trying to get our curriculum to align from grade level to grade level, and then across the grade level as well.

The early dismissals of students helped to provide teachers with time to review their student data and develop instructional strategies that were focused on improving student learning. The second strategy that enhanced the collaboration between teachers and administrators was the design of block schedules in the elementary and junior high school buildings. Elementary principal Lily reported, “I would say making the time to meet with my staff is what has made us successful. I think that making that block schedule that we have, it allows teachers to have a 50-minute block where they can meet on their own, and I do have teams that will meet without me.” The culture of collaboration is institutionalized at Norman School District and promotes professional learning. Junior high teacher Katie explained:

I think it is encouraged and I don't even know that it needs to be encouraged. I see teachers naturally collaborating during block time, collaborating in the hallways . . . when kids are passing through . . . I see it. I feel like that's just the climate that's been created.

Teachers’ professional learning is enhanced through collaborative processes. Norman School District teachers have formal collaboration built within the course of their day, but they also have developed an extensive collaborative system of support that branches across the district and between content areas due to the opportunities to participate in professional development and serve on leadership committees district-wide. Teachers serve on the teacher evaluation steering committee, district Math and English-Language Arts curriculum committees, the district school improvement committees, and various building-level committees. Collaborative processes have built a system of support for teachers that were not previously in existence. Elementary principal Lily explained:

I can't believe the change in this building in the last two years or the last three years. They've said to me, I feel like I have more people I can go to, more people I can collaborate with. I feel like Special Ed teachers are understanding more how to support me. I am understanding more how to work with them.

As a district, the teachers and administrators review the data of initiatives and programs and determine if they are getting the results that they hoped. Jessica explained, “We talk about those kinds of things and look at data and then make decisions about, did that program do what we thought it was going to do.” The evidence-use process is built upon a culture of collaboration and a process of continually making the adjustments in practice or strategy to improve instruction and student achievement.

**Building capacity.** Managing the process of change in an organization requires leaders to raise an urgency of why change is necessary. Curriculum director Jessica shared one rationale she communicated with staff to promote and support a culture of continuous improvement:

If you went to a doctor 20 years ago they wouldn't be doing some things the way they do now, but you wouldn't say they did it wrong 20 years ago, they were doing the best they knew how to do, it is just you do the best you can until you know how to do better.

Promoting change with a focus on improving teaching and learning requires training. Since the district's adoption of the Measures of Academic Performance (MAP) assessment system 7 years ago, district educators have been collectively and collaboratively examining student performance data. Initially data analysis was focused upon standardized achievement data and based upon a set of national norms. As staff received training over time, their competency has grown and they have drilled down into the data to examine trends, gap analysis, growth measures, and student goal setting. Professional development over time has assisted the district in building their capacity to analyze and make decisions around data. Ethan explained, “I would probably tell you we spend a lot of money, and I would say a lot, more than most districts on professional development. Getting people in that are experts in the field.” Elementary literacy expert, Dr. Michael Heggerty, and teacher empowerment and motivation speaker, Mr. Todd Whitaker, are recent presenters. Professional development and learning new skills is important, but also critical

is the learning that takes place as educators analyze, discuss, and make decisions around the data.

Junior high principal Ryan explained how Ethan models using data to build capacity:

He's always using data with us, so really for me I try to do it the same way with my teachers. Yup. He's good. Mr. Harris is great. I mean he keeps us on task, keeps us on target. Always something to work on.

Ethan keeps learning central through modeling evidence-use processes and holding discussions around teaching and learning.

The process of district-wide analysis and discussion of data promotes learning across the system. As professionals continually work with the data and make subsequent instructional decisions driven by what the data revealed, they are learning how to impact their teaching practices in real time. Elementary principal Lily discussed how the process of utilizing data has built teachers' capacity to analyze and interpret data effectively and has enhanced the professional discourse around the data:

Our conversations at grade level team are so much richer than they were 3 years ago because they can take MAP data, and they can say, "Well, my kids are really struggling here in informational text, so I need to look over here and figure out what skills we need to work on to make sure we improve this because I want them to perform well on PARCC, and I want them to be able . . . read informational text and pull out details."

Along with richer discussions, district administrators are required to set school improvement goals.

Establishing district, school, and student goals for improvement is a practice the district employs. Junior high principal Ryan explained the decision to implement strategic and measurable goals links administrators to the teaching and learning in the classrooms and provides the focus of continuous improvement:

We always set SMART goals based on data. I know in my building, we look at that data at the beginning of the year in team meetings from the previous year to see how we met the goals that we had set and then, we use the new data from the new year to set goals for this coming school year.



Administrators and teachers are puzzling out the process of evidence-use to determine the best way to use data to drive instruction. Conversations were conducted related to the purpose of using some evidence and what it is being used for. High school principal Aaron shared, “Like okay, I get it. This is the way that we can create student schedules based on this data. This is the way that my science teachers can use this data.” Additionally, questions are not only being asked about the purpose of the data but also about individuals’ responsibility with using evidence.

Aaron explained,

Personally, if we don't train ourselves and our staff on how to really use the data, then it is pointless data. It is just data for the sake of jumping through a hoop just for you to tell us we need to jump through. When we provide that training people know how to use it, then it becomes data that can become meaningful.

Norman School District’s evidence-use process has evolved over time as teachers learn about ways to use evidence to drive instructional decision making. Teachers have grown in their capacity to use data. Administrators and teachers are using data that is in turn communicated to students and parents. Students are affected not only by teachers making instructional decisions based upon information revealed in the data but they also notice that when teachers are paying attention to individual students it impacts students motivation. High school teacher Grace reported:

When the kids realize that all of the teachers are working together and they are talking specifically about the students they realize “you mean you guys got together and talked about me?” Then it seems to hit home with them and they'll try a little harder.

The high school principal, Aaron, discussed how it is important for stakeholders to see the purpose of goal setting: “We have a lot of students’ goal setting around it to again getting that information out in front of the kids and in front of our staff . . . so that they understand why we are doing it and the usefulness of it.” The district has taken their evidence-use process a step further by engaging the students in examining the data and making personal learning decisions

around their data. An observation of Measures of Academic Performance (MAP) training on student growth was conducted. At this meeting, building teams learned the process of student goal setting using the MAP data. They discussed the best way to present data and help students set realistic growth goals. Junior high principal Ryan was thinking about next steps to engage students:

I think another thing to enhance evidence I keep going back to with my people is I want our students to have more stake and skin in the game and I want to get it to a place where students are individually responsible for setting their own growth targets with adult help. The part I look forward to mostly is trying to figure out how to incorporate individual goal setting because I think that will be the next step that will push us even further. Once we realized we do not celebrate success enough. Then the other part was we want to get in to students having, as they say, more skin in the game, so individual student goal setting.

The Norman School District evidence-use process has evolved over time as educators' capacity has developed through professional development and real life experiences around analyzing and interpreting data.

**District leadership and teachers' mutual reliance and trust.** The administrators and teachers collaborate frequently over student achievement data and together they determine the appropriate course of action. A degree of mutual reliance was observed as information flowed from the district level to the classroom and from the classroom to the district. The curriculum coordinator, Jessica, shared the district's expected outcome: "Our philosophy and our goal and our expectation is we want excellence across the board, it can't be isolated. We want excellent teachers to share what they know and share what they do."

The administration and teachers have a mutually reliant evidence-use relationship. The teachers depend on the administration for support in instruction and resources, and the administration relies on the teacher for information related to how to best support the work in the classroom. Teachers' input is valued, and they are respected in the district. The evidence-use

process of collaboration is one mechanism that allows the flow of information and knowledge across and between educators and leaders of Norman School District.

In the age of accountability and punitive methods toward schools to raise student achievement, Norman School District takes a different approach in their daily professional interactions. Ethan demonstrates respect and values the contribution of teachers:

I try to be more supportive and a listener than I do of telling them this is what we have to do. I feel like they have a better idea of what their needs are for their staff and students than I do.

He models supportive behaviors toward administrators and a reliance on their professional perspective. In turn, the administrators model similar behaviors with their staff. Junior high principal Ryan reported, “I don't even know if I'm going to call it quality but letting go, trust capacity leaders like we just said, being able to trust people around me.” Similarly, elementary principal Lily demonstrated her reliance on the professional educators in the district:

I got a lot of people I bounce ideas off of . . . like I've got a great social worker. I've got a great school psychologist I have some really great teacher leaders that I could go to and say, “Here's what I'm thinking. How do you think that's going to be perceived, or how do you think that's going to go over?” They'll be very honest with me, and I take everything they say, and I do it. . . . I have some really great leaders here that I count on.

The data reveals how administrators and teachers rely on one another to educate students and how a culture of professional respect and trust supports evidence-use processes. Leadership is more relationship oriented and less directive. “You know I never really give direct explicit instructions of expectations . . . I try to lead by example. Being early, being here late, being in your classrooms, being visible,” stated junior high principal Ryan.

Administration and teachers have a mutually reliant relationship. The district relies on the input of teachers on what is working and what resources are needed, and the teachers rely on the administrators to leverage resources so they can do their jobs to the best of their ability. The

communication is very important to the system. A focus group teacher commented upon Ethan's support of teachers:

But it is basically been just watching him at PD. You can tell that he really does listen to the things that everyone has said before. He provides for us and asks what kinds of things we're looking for. He talks to our curriculum coordinator about the resources that would benefit our students and just tries to make those available with what funds are available. I think he just brings all of it to us together and makes the decisions collaboratively.

There is a two-way communication channel established from district leadership to the teachers.

The Board of Education president, Erin, commented on the effects of the mutual reliant relationship between district leaders and teachers:

I think we have a nice balance of trying to get the feedback from staff and from the administrators in what they're recommending for their building, and having choices in making those decisions before we make them. That it is not just direct, it is driven down. I think that leads it to be more successful.

The Board of Education relies upon the superintendent for information, the superintendent relies upon administrators and staff for feedback, and the district depends on the superintendent and Board of Education to support them in their endeavors to educate children.

**Reflecting on practice.** Reflecting on professional practice is a systemic routine in Norman School District Professional, system, and student learning is extended by the administrators and staff as they reflect upon the fidelity of current practices, participate in group reflection as they analyze data, implement guided reflection around specific questions, and as teachers lead students' reflection in the classroom. Ethan shared a statement a former administrator made that impacted him as a leader: "We need to start looking at our practices and putting them into question." Leaders of learning ask educators to reflect on their practice to identify ways to improve. Ethan explained why it is important to expect teachers to reflect. He said, "If there is a staff member struggling you want to be able to provide that timely input and feedback for reflection to fix that . . . you're only hurting those children within those

classrooms.” Reflection is an important aspect of professional growth to enhance student experience at Norman School District. Elementary principal Lily gave an example of how she leads reflective conversations:

I’ll say what I need to say, and then I just stop talking, and I let them reflect and talk to me. . . . I try not to say too much about it and let them tell me all about it. You know the sheet I’ve showed you with the 5-year MAP trend data and their reflections from it. . . . Even if it is one sentence, I’m going to start pulling this group twice a day instead of one. At least I know they’ve really internalized it, they thought about it, they reflected on it, and I feel like if they give me a reflection, they’re actually going to follow through and do it.

In comparison, the junior high principal, Ryan, explained:

At the junior high, we did it where we started off as a faculty meeting and then, broke off into grade level teams to just generate reflections on, "What does it mean to you? What ideas do you have?" Teachers submitted that to me and then, this Tuesday, what we did is I had them get together as departments and do the same thing.

The process of reflection is organic and looks different at each building. Reflection should be individualized, and not scripted, as each educator has a unique learning style. Reflection is conducted not only on individual practices but also as a communication feedback loop.

Administrators and teacher leaders receive and extended contract opportunities to work throughout the summer on teaching and learning initiatives. They request teacher input and reflection so as they are making decisions, they have real-time data regarding teachers’ perspectives on the given topic. I observed the district was gathering information regarding a new textbook pilot. The curriculum coordinator, Jessica, asserted, “This year it will stand alone. Provide a reflection sheet that comes back to the committee this summer.” As the superintendent reflected upon the district’s evidence-use process and the reflective discussions, he explained, “I think what’s becoming is this new piece, the evaluation piece where it is somewhat feedback and reflection from staff or students. It is also the data driven piece. Actual assessment scores, surveys, whatever feedback we may have.” The orientation of the professional reflection process,

whether individual or school-level reflection, is situated in continual improvement of instruction that benefits students. The special education administrator, Jack Wilson, shared an initial message from the superintendent:

I appreciate the fact that Ethan, from the very first day I worked with him many years ago, always said, "It is never our kids. It is not your kids and our kids. It is our kids. All of them. Special education and general education alike, they're all our responsibility.

A student centered focus is evident at Norman School District with a mission to provide rigorous learning experiences for children. The primary mechanism to deliver the curriculum is the teacher. Jessica explained the philosophy of teacher support to support their delivery of an excellent educational experiences:

Hopefully, if I can bring things that are evidence based or show teachers that whatever it is that we are doing or encourage them, enlist them in that process, hopefully give them ownership, then that's going to impact what's going to happen with students. That's really what it comes down to, is what happens when the door closes and it is time to teach.

A strategic focus on developing highly qualified educators through collaboration, mutual reliance, building capacity, and reflection is noted to matter to evidence-use process.

**Research Question Three: What Barriers and Constraints are Encountered and What Supports are Lacking that Inhibit Effective District Evidence-Use Processes that Promote Continual Systems Learning?**

The third research question explored the barriers and constraints the district experienced as they embark on evidence-use process that promotes continual systems learning. Three key themes emerged related to evidence-use barriers that inhibit effective evidence-use process: (a) optimal assessment conditions, (b) striking the right balance in testing; and (c) communicating findings in a productive manner. The following section will discuss the study findings related to barriers and constraints in the process of evidence-use.

**Creating optimal evidence-use conditions.** This case study revealed two barriers to the evidence-use process: time and technology. First, Norman School District has similar struggles as other school districts in reserving time to conduct school improvement initiatives and providing teachers the necessary time to analyze and interpret data. Time allocation for professional development or collaboration time is minimal in comparison to the amount of time invested in classroom instruction daily. Arguably, building the capacity of teachers to educate students and sift through the large amounts of student performance data is important if student instruction is to be individualized and gaps strategically closed. High school teacher Grace explained:

Another thing with the time is just looking at all the data and then, actually being able to use it. . . . It is like you get all this good stuff and you just don't have time to be analyzing it and then, following up with your student. You're on to the next thing and you're already evaluating again. I think it is tough that way.

The junior high school principal, Ryan, expressed similar concerns related to time, commenting: “I just wish there was more time to do it. I just wish there was more.” Norman School District has taken steps to provide teachers more time with early out dismissal once per week and block scheduling. Administrators and teachers see the value of adding more time for the purpose of working with student performance data, but finding the time is a challenge.

Second, Norman School District identified technological barriers as impeding effective evidence-processes. Scheduling of testing and determining how often students should be tested are questions the district continues to ponder. In Illinois, with the transition from the paper and pencil Illinois State Achievement Test (ISAT) to the online testing Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Career (PARCC), scheduling of tests and students readiness to be tested online is a challenge. Teacher Chloe, reported:

Scheduling, technology, readiness to use technology. If it is relatable to the curriculum, how well does it align to the curriculum and common core. It is one of those things that you're constantly assessing, "Okay, how well does everything fit together?"

Further, as Illinois transitions from ISAT to the PARCC assessment that is aligned to the Common Core national standards, the district is assessing whether their current local MAP assessment is aligned with the new PARCC state testing. MAP is a nationally normed assessment, but determining how that fits within the new assessment framework is a constraint on evidence-use. Developing coherence between the state and local assessment is important to the evidence-use process. A final constraint to optimal evidence-use processes is related to technological infrastructure issues such as, scheduling and availability of computers for students to take the assessment. Elementary teacher Amy reported,

I just know . . . scheduling and technology together, that can be frustrating at times because we only have one computer lab. So to take the test, that class needs to finish and if it takes longer then the next classes get bumped back and we just have to make it work.

**Striking the right balance in testing.** Norman School district's evidence-use process continues to evolve as curriculum and federal/state standards change and assessment needs change. The board president, Erin, explained, "I think the biggest is, as we try to figure out what requirements there going to be as it relates to testing, how much testing are we going to have." The board leadership is considering the question of testing as well as the teachers. The district artifact data revealed that teacher teams at the junior high school are asking each other the very same questions to try and determine the right amount of testing, "Are we testing too much? What ideas do we have to limit academic disruptions as much as possible? Does all this testing hurt student motivation?" they ponder. Board President Erin also commented on the assessment practices and a concern about striking a balance in testing:

I think the biggest is, as we try to figure out what requirements there going to be as it relates to testing, how much testing are we going to have? Last year was insane the amount of time we had our children out of classrooms being tested.



Given the new Illinois Learning Standards aligned to Common Core and new PARCC state assessment, discussion around how often students should be assessed is not only taking place within the district but also at the state level. Too much testing is a constraint to effective evidence-use processes.

**Transparency and data reporting.** Norman School District has developed a culture of high expectations, candor, and collaboration district-wide. The presentation of data in a productive way that encourages candid discussion around improvement is a theme the data revealed. Elementary principal Lily explained,

Data is either saying good things or bad things. It is a very sensitive message in how you bring your teachers together to talk about it. When you're reflecting on data, you just got to be careful in how you do that message.

The administration is cognizant of how a message can be received in a less than positive manner. They strive to be responsible with the messages they put forward to individuals and to the public. The strategy of keeping data as a central focus in a public manner is still a topic of discussion they continue to consider. Junior high principal Ryan shared:

Here is one piece that we have in our school. We have student data boards that are in our hallway. Each grade level has a student data board. I put those up my first year that I was here and we've had them, I would say this: we are very inconsistent on how we post data. Between myself and the guidance counselor we're trying to figure out ways to use it more and make it more relevant.

The discussion of the public display of data is also a discussion at the district level. The district administrators carefully consider the type of message they present to the community. They appreciate the benefit of recognizing high achievement, but also are cognizant of how messages can be construed. Ethan shared:

In fact, in our admin meeting we were talking about that, just last week. About how we recognize great work without it being offensive. Sometimes it is challenging because I'm just like, let's just do it. If they get offended, they get offended. At the same time, we've

made so much head way I don't want to be also creating a culture of jealousy secrecy, maybe some pushback that might not be the best.

The administration is learning to balance how data interpretation is presented and considering the unintended consequences of public display of evidence. I observed administrators pondering how the presentation of data could promote a culture of competition or jealousy. They expressed that they wanted to consider the benefits and potential reactions of teachers.

The inclusion of student growth measures in the teacher evaluation process is a new initiative the district is required to integrate into their practice. The Illinois Performance Evaluation and Reform Act established a mandate that student growth be included in teachers' summative evaluation ratings. Norman School District teachers are designing student learning objectives (SLO's) that are established in coordination with their evaluator and then monitored with pre- and post-testing process. The implementation of student growth measurers into evaluation has focused teachers' attention upon evidence-use processes. Jessica said, "Now that teachers are using MAP as the assessment on SLO's, they are paying more attention."

## **Conclusion**

This chapter outlined the findings of a single-case study where a rural school district's evidence use processes and the role of the superintendent in leading district-wide improvement efforts focused on increasing student achievement were examined. Prior to the implementation of this single case study, no previous research had been conducted in the rural district on the topic of evidence-use processes and district leadership. The theoretical construct that informed this study is rooted in the Leadership for Learning Framework (Knapp et al., 2010) and is an appropriate lens for examining district improvement and leadership processes.

The findings revealed the superintendent demonstrated behaviors and practices that facilitated and supported evidence-use process and subsequently the district engaged in practices

that promoted professional, student, and systems learning. The findings revealed four themes that included the superintendent focused on learning, established high expectations for learning, modeled evidence as a medium for leading improvements, and “generated will” with stakeholders through the development of good relationships. Next, four key themes emerged from the data regarding what matters in effective evidence-use processes that included the district focusing on collaboration, building staff members’ capacity as educators through meaningful professional development and leadership opportunities, establishing a mutually reliant information exchange relationship, and engaging in professional reflection. Finally, the findings revealed three key themes related to evidence-use barriers and constraints that inhibit effective evidence-use process that included: (a) optimal assessment conditions, (b) striking the right balance in testing, and (c) communicating findings in a productive manner. The following chapter will outline the findings, discussion, implications, and recommendations from the findings of this case study.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations**

This chapter provides a summary of the research, including the purpose of the study, the research methodology, and discussion of the key findings. The discussion section expands upon the results of the case-study findings and may be of interest to rural district leaders, educators, and researchers on potential implications. In addition, the research findings may garner insight on ways to lead evidence-use processes that promote student, professional, and systems learning. The chapter concludes with the presentation of recommendations for district leaders, practice, and policy and suggestions for future research.

### **Overview of Research Methodology**

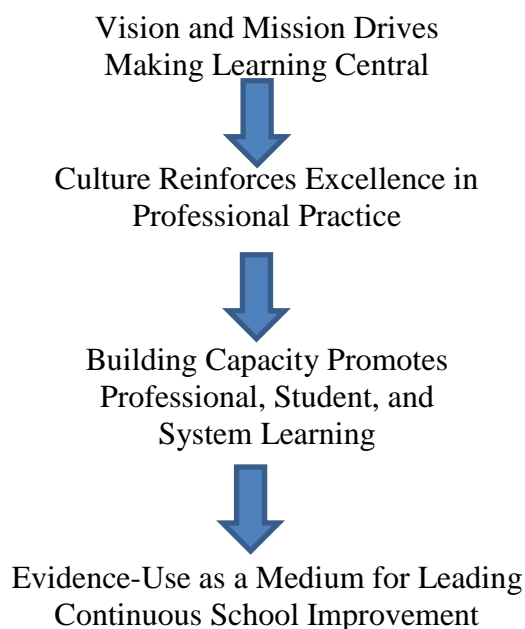
The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine one exemplary rural school district and the role of the superintendent in facilitating evidence-use processes that improve student achievement. The lever of district improvement investigated was the use of evidence to drive instructional, curricular, and assessment decision making. Due to limited administrative resources, the rural district superintendent often struggles conducting the all-encompassing district administrative responsibilities and must choose strategically where to allocate administrative time and oversight of school reform efforts. This study utilized the Leadership for Learning Framework (Knapp et al., 2010). Knapp et al. (2003) explained, “That notion of instructional leadership misses a more inclusive picture of leadership that embraces work carried out simultaneously by individuals at different levels of the system, and with different purviews over and proximity to instruction” (p. 14). In this study, this framework provided a lens to examine superintendent practices with a focus on what fundamentally matters in schools—teaching and learning. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What district leadership strategies and practices matter to evidence use?
2. How does the rural district structure the process of evidence-use that is focused on student, professional, and system learning?
3. What barriers and constraints are encountered and what supports are lacking that inhibit effective district evidence-use processes that promote continual systems learning?

The methodology was a single-site case study of one exemplary Illinois rural school district, and purposeful sampling was conducted to identify the site aligned to predetermined criteria. Norman School District is a Pre-K-12 school district located in a rural setting in downstate Illinois. The district serves a population of 1,400 students and employs seven administrators and slightly over 100 teachers. Superintendent Ethan Harris has a 20-year leadership history in Norman School District, 4 years as a building administrator and 14 as superintendent. The data collection process included individual interviews with the superintendent of schools, district and building administration, the school board president, and two district-level school improvement committee focus groups. In addition, approximately nine hours of site observations were conducted of district-level school improvement committee meetings where evidence was examined, and a review was conducted of district artifacts related to evidence-use processes, leadership, and student performance measures. An audit trail was maintained and frequent member checking was conducted to ensure that I was capturing the essence of the participant's responses. The case study data was analyzed using a traditional inductive approach method to identify tentative codes and themes. Theme review consultations were conducted with two professional colleagues who served as "critical friends" and also with the district superintendent. The critical friends and superintendent were in agreement with the findings from the study. The Leadership for Learning framework was used to orient the analysis.

## Findings

The findings from this research study are briefly outlined below. In Figure 2, the research findings can be conceptualized in four overarching themes that the superintendent and district demonstrate in behavior and practices are essential to evidence-use processes. The findings are outlined relative to each research question listed below.



*Figure 2.* Four themes.

### **Research Question One: What District Leadership Practices Matter to Evidence-Use?**

The findings from individual and focus group interviews, observations, and artifact review revealed that the superintendent demonstrated practices that facilitated and established effective evidence-use processes that focused upon improving teaching and student learning. In addition, the superintendent's leadership behaviors, which were facilitated by his personal values of honesty, servant leadership, and commitment, aided this leader in making learning central.

The district vision and mission was the mechanism the superintendent employed to orient the community around of common understanding of the purpose of education in Norman School District. Superintendent Ethan Harris facilitated a process of vision and mission development with stakeholders, continually using this mutually agreed upon statement as a point of reference to keep stakeholders oriented toward their agreed upon purpose. The process of developing and establishing a vision and mission was a powerful leadership strategy to orient the organization around teaching and learning. Ethan explained:

You talk about how I prioritize, how we prioritize in teaching and learning? I didn't ask for a finance director, I didn't ask for an HR director, I asked for a curriculum coordinator. I just believe that just putting the emphasis on that . . . she's not really a superintendent or assistant superintendent, she's called curriculum coordinator. Even that states, I think, volumes about what is a priority in our small school district. It is curriculum. . . . Teaching and learning should be the main focus of the school district.

Ethan was strategic in leadership staffing. In order to hire a district-level curriculum coordinator, he reduced one building-level assistant principal position. He was successful in making the case as the community was oriented toward supporting teaching and learning. A focus on curriculum and instructional support was a strategic leadership choice in administrative staffing. Despite, the finite funds, the district made decisions around what they valued—teaching and learning.

Next, he established high expectations for professional practice by instituting non-negotiable practices that included the requirement that research-based instructional practices be employed, established student achievement goals, and required professional conduct from faculty and staff. The third leadership behavior and practice that was revealed as an important factor in making learning central was leaders utilizing evidence-use processes as a medium for leading through public data review, leaders modeling data driven decision making, leaders establishing expectations around evidence-use, and the district investing in evidence-use resources to support teaching and learning endeavors. A notable leadership strategy Ethan employed was all

initiatives and significant purchases were first studied for viability and evidence was required to be presented to support decision making. Curriculum Coordinator Jessica demonstrated the resource allocation decision making process:

I was more of a big picture thinker, let's try this, let's try that, and my philosophy got developed because I would take things . . . to the superintendent of schools and say, hey, what do you think about that, and his response to me would always be, you need to come back to me when this is a little more thought out. . . . I think that directed my philosophical attitude about using evidence because I was just directed do that. . . . I feel like from our school board to our administration, if you are going to bring something you need to bring the reasoning or rationale behind it.

Ethan is open to listening to new ideas and innovation, but guides his staff to study the issue and provide a rationale supported with empirical data.

Developing good relationships with stakeholders is of utmost importance to the superintendent and the district. Relationship is noted in their vision statement, "Excellence through Rigor, Relevance and Relationships." Ethan commented that if he were to re-write the mission statement, the only change he would make would be to put relationship first. Evidence of productive professional relationships was observed from the Board of Education to the classroom teacher. The administration in the district demonstrated respect in their behaviors and actions, and teacher voice and expertise are valued, even necessary, when decisions were made about resource allocation. In summary, Ethan makes learning central in Norman School District through the process of orienting the district to its purpose, structuring a tightly coupled evidence-use process, establishing high expectations, leveraging resources to support teaching and learning, and building strong working relationships.



**Research Question Two: How Does the Rural District Structure the Process of Evidence-Use that is Focused on Student, Professional, and System Learning?**

Findings revealed that the rural district structures the process of evidence-use that is focused on student, professional, and systems learning through the engagement of the educators. Four emergent themes were revealed from the data that facilitated significant systemic learning: (a) structuring of collaboration opportunities, (b) providing differentiated professional development and leadership feedback to build capacity of staff to educate more effectively, (c) reflecting on practice, and (d) instituting a communication channel between the teachers and administration.

The interviews, observations, and review of artifacts revealed that collaboration around teaching and learning was evident from the school board to the classroom. Ethan regularly engaged the Board of Education members on district committees and at formal meetings. The district administration provided the Board of Education with the necessary background information and data around student performance and potential initiatives. The Board then had the necessary information to discuss and collaborate with district personnel to set goals and allocate resources. The superintendent served as the communication channel to the Board of Education and the district.

At the district level, curriculum and improvement committees were staffed with administrator and teacher representatives who enhanced individual and systems learning. As personal capacity to teach and lead effectively improved so did student achievement, as evidenced by student performance trending upward in recent years. District administrators invest a significant amount of funds on professional development. They identify their goals based upon the student performance data and design district, professional development focuses around the

goals. The administration chose to bring professional development into the district so that more educators could benefit from the training rather than sending a few teachers to workshops outside the district. It was noted that the district administration designed introductory and advanced training rather than a singular training model of professional development. For example, differentiated professional development was provided around analyzing and interpreting data generated from the MAP local assessment. The findings revealed that district administrators understood the importance of continuing to build the capacity of staff that was dependent upon teachers various professional developmental stages. Moreover, the administration provided timely feedback to teachers through formal and informal communication. Administrators conducted classroom walkthroughs, participated fully in building and district meetings, and modeled expected professional and evidence-use practices.

Reflecting on professional practice is a systemic strategy that promoted individual educators growth and development. Teachers and administrators formally reflect on their individual professional development experience and they reflect as a group around questions posed during their department or grade-level collaboration time. The district administration asks the teachers to reflect on their professional development experience, and teachers' reflection statements are then shared with the Board of Education. Ethan recognizes that it is valuable for staff to reflect and examine practices, considering what they have learned. He also understands that the Board of Education approves professional development expenditures, and the sharing of teacher professional development reflections gives the teachers a voice to the board. In addition, the submission of teachers' reflective statements to the Board of Education also provides the board useful information on the value they are receiving from the professional development.

It was evident that there is a mutual reliant relationship between the administration and teachers. In the simplest terms, the information that is communicated between and among administrators and teachers is valuable “evidence” to drive decision making. Teachers rely on the district administration to provide the assessment structure and the needed training and resources. The administration relies on the teachers’ input and their unique perspective on what is needed for them to successfully educate students. The principals recognize and value the knowledge, perspectives, and skills of the teachers. They encourage teacher leaders to share the instructional techniques that are effective with students. Each educator has a unique and defined role in Norman School District, and they rely on one another to be successful.

**Research Question Three: What Barriers and Constraints are Encountered and What Supports are Lacking that Inhibit Effective District Evidence-Use Processes that Promote Continual Systems Learning?**

Administrators and teachers discussed the barriers and constraints encountered and the supports lacking that inhibited effective district evidence use processes. Three themes emerged from the data results that included challenges creating optimal assessment conditions, determining the right balance in testing, and communicating findings in a productive manner. First, technology needs and scheduling of students to take tests online are constraints. In the transition to more online testing, the district must ensure the technology infrastructure (e.g., computers, labs) is available to conduct assessments. For example, the Illinois state assessment is transitioning from a paper and pencil version to an online testing format. Administrators are challenged with ensuring an optimal testing environment for students because the test is new and students need to become familiar with the new assessment format. The scheduling of students to take the test with their class, and providing a device for each child, is a constraint for Norman

School District. Second, the online implementation of Measures of Academic Performance and the new Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) create challenges in respect to the amount of time students are being assessed. As online testing becomes more common, the administrators and teachers discuss how to strike the right balance in the amount of testing of students. Finally, a constraint to evidence-use is how assessment results are communicated, to whom, and for what purpose. The administration values their staff and strives to build their capacity as educators. They are cautious about how to share student performance data and are invested in doing so, but are challenged with displaying evidence in a productive and non-divisive manner. However, the administration is intentional about using evidence to support decision making and will continue to examine ways to present data in a constructive way.

### **Limitations**

The case study method was ideal in examining one exemplary district and superintendent who is successfully leading school reform efforts through the utilization of evidence-use processes. However, a case study has inherent limitations related to a small sample size and a brief data collection process. This case study was limited in the sampling procedures, self-reporting by the study participants, researcher potential bias, and generalizability. The sampling procedures were limited in this study. The Illinois Regional Office of Education (ROE) superintendents and other educational professional recommendation resources (e.g., school improvement providers, university professors) were asked to endorse an effective small rural school district superintendent leader of learning who has a reputation as a collaborative superintendent and who is utilizing evidence-use as a lever of improving student performance. It is feasible the ROE superintendents could have unintentionally omitted recommending an

effective rural district leader of learning. In addition, it is possible the ROE superintendents were not familiar with every superintendent in their respective areas. In fact, this scenario is a real possibility because Illinois is currently transitioning from the former Illinois State Assessment Test (ISAT) to the new Partnership for Assessment and College and Career Readiness (PARCC) measure. ISAT and PARCC assessment trend data cannot be compared in this first year. The ROE superintendent could not review the state testing data to inform their recommendations. To strengthen the sampling procedures, other recommendation resources were sought from professionals in the field of education.

The second limitation of this study is the participants' self-reporting. This study relied on semi-structured interviews with a rural superintendent, administrators, a school board president, and with focus groups. It is understood that the information obtained through the interviews may not be complete, as it is individuals' perceptions and understanding of an event or experience. The triangulation of information helped to minimize self-reporting limitations. The researcher is a rural district superintendent with experience leading school reform. Researcher bias was possible. The leadership for learning framework helped the researcher to stay grounded within the unique case. Finally, this case study is a unique example of an exemplary rural school district that cannot be generalized to other contexts; although, the case may be instructive to other rural superintendents who are challenged with managing their districts and leading for learning.

## **Discussion**

This study explored one selected school reform strategy—evidence-use processes—as a strategic method for the rural superintendent to employ to guide school improvement efforts. In many rural districts, the superintendent is often the sole district-level administrator and is charged with overseeing all aspects of the district business and instructional leadership. The

supposition of this study is rural superintendents are challenged with the primary responsibility of managing competing administrative demands and must choose strategically the practices that will enact improvements. A district and superintendent who utilize evidence-use processes to improve teaching and learning were identified to examine whether using data to drive instructional decision making is an effective school reform lever.

The theoretical lens that guided this study was the Leadership for Learning framework. In this section, an overview of the Leadership for Learning framework will be outlined, followed by the presentation of this study's conceptual model. The findings from the study concluded in three overarching themes: (a) learning centered leadership, (b) building system capacity, (c) and evidence-use as a medium for leading. These main findings will be explored and how they connect to previous research. One objective of the study was to determine the value of the leadership for learning framework as it applies to the rural superintendency (Knapp, Copland, Honig, Ford, Markholt, McLaughlin, Milliken, & Talbert, 2003). A final discussion will ensue on how this study lends support to the Leadership for Learning framework and how the research findings address the gap in the empirical literature.

### **Conceptual Model of Leadership for Learning in Evidence-Use Process**

The primary objective of the conceptual model of rural district improvement is for the rural superintendent to sustain a focus on teaching and learning through engaging in Leadership for Learning action areas to advance student learning in coordination with the employment of evidence-use process as the selected reform lever. In this conceptual model, there is one central ring. The inner ring represents the predominant lens: Leadership for Learning. The lens of the Leadership for Learning framework facilitated by the rural superintendent as he or she leads

evidence-use processes is depicted by the offset circle and represents one lever to improve student achievement.

In the conceptual model of Leadership for Learning in Evidence-Use Processes, the rural superintendent structures district improvement processes around the lever of district improvement: evidence-use. The development of evidence-use processes are built upon the Leadership for Learning areas of action that include establishing a focus on learning, engaging external environments, creating coherence, acting strategically and sharing leadership, and building professional communities. Teacher leadership, collaboration, and a focus on generating will and building capacity supports the establishment of each action area. In each action area, the superintendent develops a structure that guides continuous improvement and demonstrate supportive behaviors and practices that facilitate continual progress toward improvement.

The rural superintendent facilitates the evidence-use process and act as a channel to allow the flow of information between schools and the central office. Evidence is continuously shared from the central office to the school and from the school to the central office, depicting the mutually dependent relationship. The rural superintendent depends on the data from the building levels, and the school principals and teachers rely on the central office evidence to ensure the entire system is accurately represented and pertinent data is analyzed. The arrow flowing from the right of the rural superintendent arrow signifies the structure and process of evidence-use; the arrow flowing to the left of the rural superintendent signifies the impact of evidence-use processes on continual student, system, and professional learning. The Leadership for Learning framework coupled with the rural superintendent facilitating the lever of evidence-use processes promotes professional, student, and system learning.

The following section expounds upon the three primary themes revealed in the findings: (a) learning-centered leadership, (b) building system capacity, and (c) evidence-use as a medium for leading. These themes are consistent with and affirm previous research related to superintendent leadership practices. Blanco (2009) identified strategic planning, building capacity, sharing of a common vision, and a focus on data-driven results as mechanisms that lead to improved student performance.

**Learning-centered leadership.** The first finding in this study revealed that learning-centered leadership strategies and practices oriented the organization toward its main purpose of teaching and learning. The analysis of interviews, observations, and artifacts revealed that Superintendent Ethan Harris made learning central through engaging stakeholders in defining the district mission and vision, ensuring they were front and central in district buildings, and publishing and prominently posting the vision and mission on district materials and the website. Ethan's efforts to orient the district, align district activities, and make learning central are consistent with previous research. Rorrer and colleagues (2008) maintained the process of reorienting the organization involves refining and aligning organizational structures and processes (Cawelti, 2001; Corcoran, Fuhrman, & Belcher, 2001; Desimone, Porter, Birman, Garet, & Yoon, 2002; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003) and changing the district culture (Elmore & Barney, 1997; McLaughlin, 1992). Ethan executed a powerful organizational reform and orientation strategy by engaging the community in defining the central purpose of the school system. Subsequently, he then institutionalized the learning-focused belief system through visual and verbal orientation practices.

Second, the findings revealed that as the central leader of learning, Ethan structured evidence-use processes, set high expectations for learning, and modeled evidence-use behaviors.



Ethan demonstrated behaviors and practices that are consistent with prior research that district leadership matters to student achievement. Marzano (2006) found a .24 correlation between student achievement and district leadership. Effective district leadership includes structuring the work of school reform and performing fundamental roles that orient the organization to perform at high levels. Norman School District had an established evidence-use process that included classroom, building, and district level reviews, analysis, and decision-making processes. The teachers and administration used evidence to establish goals, and instructional initiatives or programs were fully researched and evidence was used to support decision making.

Furthermore, Ethan implemented structure (i.e., vision and mission, set high expectations, established evidence-use processes, and modeled evidence-use behaviors), but he also strived to build positive working relationships with others. The findings reveal that although leader of learning must establish structure, interpersonal relationships also matter to making learning central. This finding is aligned with previous research on administrative leadership practices. McLaughlin (1992) asserted that “the relationships between teacher and districts that are powerful influences on teachers and teaching have little to do with hierarchical structure and controls and everything to do with the norms, expectations, and values that shape the district professional community” (p. 35). Ethan established a professional culture which is critical to supporting reform.

**Building capacity.** The second finding from the study revealed that building the capacity of staff to educate more effectively promotes professional, student, and systems learning. Specifically, the process of building capacity was extended through collaboration, enactment of distributed leadership, professional development opportunities, and reflection. The district has established professional learning communities. The Board of Education approved weekly, early

student dismissals to provide regular opportunities for educators to collaborate, and the district structured a block schedule at the elementary and junior high school to build collaboration time during the school day. The Board of Education and administration recognize the value of professional learning communities that are focused upon teaching and learning. In addition, teachers and administrators regularly reflect on their practice in formal and informal ways. Reflecting on practice and making needed adjustments in teaching and leading promotes individual, student, and system learning, which directly aligns to the Leadership for Learning framework and research. Norman School District's administrative effort to build capacity and generate will is consistent with the empirical literature. Leaders must link generating will with capacity building because capacity building reveals the district's ability and competency to enact its will (Rorrer et al., 2008).

Teacher leadership is prevalent in Norman School District. The district leadership values teacher work and they rely upon teachers to share their unique perspective. The findings revealed that teacher voice is vital and reliable evidence that is necessary to make instructional and resource allocation decisions. The valuing of teacher contribution and work is consistent with the education literature. Smith and O'Day (1991) explained that teachers and building leaders are the "initiators, designers, and directors of change efforts" (p. 235). Professional learning communities are strengthened by teachers functioning as teacher leaders, through their service on district leadership committees.

To promote distributed leadership, the district provides meaningful professional development to build the capacity of teachers and administrators. The district invested in administrators' capacity to lead evidence-use processes and in teachers' capacity to analyze data to inform teaching and learning changes. This professional development was essential so all

educators had the necessary skills to lead and implement changes. Further, professional development is not conducted in isolation or reserved only for selected individuals: all administrators and teachers participate in professional development together. For example, I observed an in-service training on student growth data analysis. The district- and building-level leaders positioned themselves within the teacher groups and together they learned how to determine student growth. All administrators and teachers worked collaboratively as a team to establish district and building goals. Building capacity through professional development aligns with research. Research has shown that coherence and alignment in policy, goals, instructional programs, professional development, and learning are attributes of effective schools (Knapp et al., 2003, 2006).

The interview, observations, and review of district data revealed that administrators receive direct and embedded mentoring from the superintendent. The findings revealed that the superintendent is a frequent visitor to the buildings and during these visits he collaborates with and coaches administrators. Clark and Wildy (2011) found that it is especially germane to embed mentoring of principals and teacher leaders into their day-to-day practice and to develop an administrative professional learning plan that is instructionally focused. The superintendent mentoring practices are aligned with research on building the capacity of building level administrators to lead for learning.

**Evidence-use as a medium for leading.** The structured and repeated review of data in the district's evidence-use process facilitated a continuous improvement cycle of data review, instructional decision making, reflection, and adjustment of practices. This use of data to drive decisions often is referenced as "evidence-based decision making" and is most commonly implemented at the school level (Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012); this approach also is aligned

with the Leadership for Learning framework. Honig and Venkateswaran (2012) conducted a review of evidence-use in schools and central offices, focusing on the relationship of the district office and school leaders; they reported that most studies focus primarily on evidence-use in schools and centered on standardized test data (Ikemoto & Marsh, 2007; Lachat & Smith, 2005; Supovitz & Klein, 2003). Thus, this study provides additional evidence of district-level leadership for learning practices. The interviews, observations, and artifacts revealed that the district-level focus on evidence-use to make systemic instructional decisions extends upon the current research in two ways: The district is using data to drive decision making at the district level and the Norman educators are using multiple forms of data in their decision making. The superintendent's expectation that all instructional improvement initiatives and resource allocations be justified with evidence coupled with the structured data reviews of student performance at the building, district, and school board level firmly connected the district leader as an integral part of school reform. The established evidence-use process provides a mechanism by which district practices and current functioning can be regularly examined and monitored.

The superintendent involved principals in evidence-use in two ways. First, he required that all new initiatives or programming ideas be justified by providing the empirical research that demonstrates that the new practice is documented best practice. Second, Ethan required that administrators lead evidence-use processes at the building level that included establishing SMART goals and progress monitoring those goals. Ethan's expectation that principals use evidence is supported in the research findings and in the empirical literature. Knapp, Copland, Honig, Plecki, and Portin (2010) conducted a large-scale mixed-methods study leadership in urban schools and districts and found the practice of learning-focused leadership includes (a) focusing on learning, (b) investing in instructional leadership, (c) reinventing leadership

practice, (d) establishing new working relationships, and (e) using evidence as a medium for leadership. Evidence-use is one important component in the practice of learning-focused leadership. Knapp and colleagues explained, “learning-focused leaders use evidence of many kinds as a main medium of leadership work and a constant reference point in their interaction with teachers, each other, and stakeholders” (p. 15). Ethan’s practice of establishing administrative expectations around the use of evidence is a strategic leadership for learning decision to increase student achievement.

### **Extending the Elements of Leadership for Learning and the Empirical Research**

Evidence-use is not specifically addressed in the Leadership for Learning framework (Knapp et al., 2003), although they do lend support to the framework. The study findings revealed that evidence-use processes can assist districts in focusing on teaching and student learning and could extend the elements of the Leadership for Learning framework in three ways: (a) implementing evidence-use as a central reform strategy, (b) engaging internal, as well as external, environments through the development of good relationships, and (c) building upon the mutually reliant relationship between teachers and administration to promote coherence system-wide.

In the Leadership for Learning framework, Knapp et al. (2003) describe five areas of action to advance powerful and equitable student learning that district leaders can employ:

1. establishing a focus on learning—by persistently and publicly focusing their own attention and that of others on learning and teaching;
2. building professional communities that value learning—by nurturing work cultures that value and support their members’ learning;
3. engaging external environments that matter for learning—by building relationships and securing resources from outside groups that can foster students’ or teachers’ learning;

4. acting strategically and sharing leadership—by mobilizing effort along multiple “pathways” that lead to student, professional, or system learning, and by distributing leadership across levels and among individuals in different positions; and
5. creating coherence—by connecting student, professional, and system learning with one another and with learning goals. (p. 18)

I am proposing that the Leadership for Learning framework could be strengthened by extending the creating coherence action area to include evidence-use processes: creating coherence—by connecting student, professional, and system learning with one another and with learning goals *that are established through a continuous and structured evidence-use process.*

The employment of Leadership for Learning elements coupled with evidence-use processes is an effective reform strategy for all superintendents, but particularly important to rural superintendents who have a finite amount of time to devote to instructional leadership. The findings revealed that the district leadership’s active involvement in school reform, modeling commitment and dedication, and engaged collaboration with building leaders and teachers enhanced the districts response in leveraging resources to support teaching and learning. An unexpected finding was how the leadership behaviors and practices the superintendent demonstrated to build productive relationships and his high involvement in the school improvement process assisted in “generating will” of the organization to internalize the vision and mission and enhance communication between the administration and teachers. The findings revealed that relationships matter to developing a culture of productive and exemplary practices. In this respect, the Leadership for Learning framework does not address the role of the leader of learning in developing productive interpersonal relationships with administration and teachers. In this study, the good relationships developed by the leader supported the evidence-use processes and the day-to-day efforts of the educators in this Illinois rural district.

Honig and Venkateswaran's (2012) review of empirical research found that the majority of the research on evidence-use in education did not include the school-superintendent component. However, they did suggest that the district office and school relationships do matter to school evidence use. The superintendent's contributions to schools' evidence use was outlined in four ways: (a) participates in information channeling to the schools; (b) provides staff with the necessary time to review, analyze, and develop goals for improvement; (c) establishes educator expectations on evidence-use to drive instructional decision making; and (d) provides staff with the necessary training to use data to improve instruction and promote higher levels of learning (Honig & Venkateswaran). This process suggests that there may be a reciprocal and mutually reliant relationship between central office and schools in evidence-use. I maintain that the interviews, observations, and artifacts findings indicated that the school superintendent does play a critical role in structuring and supporting the work of educators in school reform that improves student performance. Further, this study's findings extend the literature related to mutually dependent relationship between teachers and administrators in effective evidence-use processes. The superintendent and central office involvement may be more essential than previously noted. The district leaders' role could be just a peripheral system that is far removed from what goes on in the classroom, but this study's findings revealed the superintendent who engages in Leadership for Learning practices through the facilitation of evidence-use processes is a powerful lever for systemic transformational reform.

### **Implications**

The implementation of data-driven decision making is of growing interest of practitioners and scholars and heralded as an important practice. This case study of one rural exemplary school district provides insight in how rural school district leadership can effectively support

effective evidence-use processes focused upon improving student achievement. The study outlined the strategies and practices leadership employed to facilitate effective evidence-use processes and identified barriers and constraints to effective data use systems. The findings from this study present implications for rural district leaders who are challenged with leading for learning despite the many administrative demands and increasing complexity of the superintendency. Due to a multitude of work responsibilities, rural district leaders must make strategic decisions on how their time is balanced between district management duties and instructional leadership. These implications support the Leadership for Learning conceptual framework presented in this study as an effective lens for district leadership of evidence-use processes. This study provides practice information and strategies that can be employed for current and future rural superintendents who are charged with leading for learning. This section outlines potential implications emanating from this case study.

**Implications for rural school superintendents.** The findings from this single case study provide rural superintendents with several practice strategies that can be strategically employed to enact improvement in student learning. The recommended rural superintendents' leadership practices include orienting the district around a common purpose, establishing expectations for excellence for self and staff, and instituting evidence-use processes. Leaders who facilitate the development of the organization's vision and mission create a central shared belief system that can be used to orient the work of the members. Superintendents who lead for learning are clear on the central purpose of education: student learning. Student learning should be at the hub of decision making and the test for the allocation of resources, selection of professional development foci, and the prioritization of district initiatives. Rural superintendents who strive to be learning leaders must model commitment to the district and its unique vision and mission.



Establishing and sustaining a vision and mission is a framework by which the rural superintendent can concentrate efforts to guide improvements. Modeling the use of evidence to support decision making and structuring evidence-use processes facilitate the institutionalization of data-driven decision making. Moreover, strategic allocation of scarce district resources is essential. Superintendents must purposefully allocate district resources to keep learning central by hiring appropriate personnel and providing funds to support professional development that builds the instructional capacity and evidence-use capacity of educators.

An established evidence-use process clearly is an effective lever of school reform. The use of evidence in decision making, coupled with the superintendent's practices to reorient the district toward its vision, is an effective and recommended leadership strategy that serves to focus the work of the district. In addition, setting high expectations for self and staff can be a powerful unifying strategy and effectively remove barriers from individuals' possibilities. The rural superintendent has a finite amount of time daily to dedicate to the various administrative responsibilities and, therefore, must build capacity throughout the organization, so that multiple individuals have the skills and authority to promote improved student learning practices.

Working strategically and engaging the community in collaborating developing a shared vision that keeps learning central is of utmost importance. Finally, evidence-based decision making streamlines and strengthens the rural district's decision-making processes and ensures that financial resource allocation is aligned to district goals and the data provide a solid rationale that supports decision making. Despite the challenges of leading in a rural setting, the superintendent can implement leadership for learning practices to strategically balance her/his administrative demands.

**Implications for rural school districts and policy.** The rural superintendent cannot reform teaching and learning alone and must rely upon those who are in the schools and classrooms. Educators' engagement through collaboration, teacher leadership, and differentiated professional development opportunities provide the conditions that support professional, student, and system learning. Giving principals and teachers' time to collaboratively and collectively examine and interpret data, and supporting individual educators' learning through professional development can develop their skills and capacity to make informed and strategic instructional decisions.

When teachers are empowered and given a voice, they will contribute to the process of improvement. They also will communicate their needs to district leaders so they can successfully teach their students. In this age of accountability and high stakes testing, educators are experiencing stress, as they must balance the many encroaching demands and expectations upon their classroom responsibilities. Teachers who have a voice, and who believe that their voice is respected and valued, feel comfortable communicating when the demands and expectations are becoming overwhelming. Then, the building and district administration can offer supportive assistance and work to create optimal work conditions.

The final implication for district leaders and policy makers is related to funding of professional development training. Developing teachers' instructional and leadership capacity is important for all districts, but vitally so for rural educators who work in districts with limited resources. Professional development around instructional improvements and evidence-use is needed to ensure highly qualified educators staff Illinois public schools. Therefore, the local Board of Education, working in partnership with the superintendent, can ensure that sufficient funds are allocated for district- and building-level professional development.

## Recommendations for Practice

The findings from this study have prompted recommendations for educators' practice.

These recommendations also may be beneficial to those who serve in the position of school board leadership.

1. *The rural superintendent should embrace the role of leader of learning by carefully selecting the instructional leadership tasks they can perform and allocating resources to support student learning.* Due to the competing and extensive demands on rural superintendents' time, it is necessary to strategically choose how leadership time and resources are distributed. If leadership tasks and actions are chosen carefully, the rural superintendent can guide the organization to higher levels of learning and performance. Related, the superintendent should determine how best to allocate the district's resources, through employing other educators and empowering other administrators and teacher leaders who have instructional and curricular expertise that complement the superintendent's expertise.
2. *The process of establishing a vision and mission that is collaboratively developed is critical to orient the district toward a common purpose.* The vision and mission are unifying statements of the organization's beliefs about education and are powerful tools to guide the work of the district. The collaborative process of establishing the vision and mission ensures all stakeholders have a voice in identifying the purpose of the unique school district.
3. *The institution of an evidence-use process that drives the district's decision making supports the rationale for resource allocation, identifies district needs, and promotes efficient responses to students' individual learning needs.* This lever of school reform is a recommended practice that can effectively prioritize and guide the rural superintendent's work. In Illinois and many other states, state funding to school districts has been reduced. Establishing an evidence-use process that guides purchasing, human resource investment, instructional allocation and priorities is important to careful stewardship of district limited resources. The establishment of evidence-use processes to support district goals promotes strategic fiscal investment so that districts are good stewards of funds.
4. *A focus upon building the capacity of educators through collaboration, leadership opportunities, and differentiated professional development fully engages the collective intellect of the organization to continue on a pathway of continuous improvement.* Building the capacity of teachers and administrators through interaction with educators is recommended. No longer is it acceptable for educators to shut their classroom doors and teach in isolation; student growth is a priority. Therefore, opening one's practice to others and collaborating both within the school and across the district are important methods to increase capacity to instruct effectively. Differentiated professional development is recommended, as each educator is at various stages of professional development. A differentiated approach to professional development ensures all educators are engaged in

the process of self-improvement. Finally, the engagement of the stakeholders in leading and learning promotes an environment that continuously improves.

5. *Building positive working relationships is essential in supporting and sustaining a focus upon learning.* The rural superintendent should strive to build relationships by being visible in classrooms throughout the district, honoring the voices of the teachers and principals, supporting the work in the classroom through leveraging resources, and treating staff with respect and positive regard.
6. Retention of the district superintendent is important to consistency and stability in a rural district. According to Marzano and Waters (2009), the average superintendent tenure is 5-7 years; over the course of their careers, superintendents may serve a total of 14-17 years in two to three districts. The retention of the rural superintendent is important to leading for learning. Establishing a vision, guiding the district in a continuous improvement process, allocating resources to support teaching and learning, and hiring highly qualified educators is not a single event but a process that takes extended time. This case study demonstrated the positive impact of a superintendent working in a district for 20 years (14 as superintendent). Superintendent tenure affects teacher hiring and firing, continuity of school business services and building adequate fund balances, leading school reform, and fostering relationships with students, staff, the board of education and the community.

### **Recommendations for Policy**

The findings from this study suggest that evidence-use processes can help identify the rural district's learning needs and can advance school improvement efforts. The time, technology, and professional development constraints and barriers to evidence-use in this study are issues that could be addressed at the school district level. Constraints on educators' time to participate in professional development on data analysis and the opportunity to examine and interpret district data are persistent challenges within the traditional school calendar. The length of the school year, as well as the extension of teacher contract time and days, should be examined. Time built into the calendar would be a helpful mechanism to address building the capacity of teachers and administrators in the use of data to drive decision making. Moreover, the district technological infrastructure also is an important factor to ensure online assessments can be readily available to students and teachers. A district technology infrastructure integration and resource allocation plan is recommended to meet the online assessment needs and to

promote the development of students' technological literacy that supports a 21<sup>st</sup> century educational experience.

At the state level, two areas are recommended. The first is a standardized state assessment system and the second is the funding of capacity-building professional development. The establishment of a standardized state assessment system that is aligned to state standards and includes fall, mid-year, and spring assessment periods and a progress monitoring tool to track individual, grade level, school, and district-wide goal setting would be optimal. Currently, districts across the state of Illinois use a wide variety of assessments to determine student growth; consequently, the state lacks a uniform system of assessment. The Performance Evaluation Reform Act (PERA) requires that student growth be included in Illinois principals' and teachers' evaluation process. Therefore, to create coherence in the state of Illinois education and evaluation system, a more efficient approach would be for the state to adopt a standardized assessment system that is aligned to the new Illinois Learning Standards. Broadening the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) to include a mid-year assessment and the ability for districts to progress monitor would not only standardize evidence-use processes in Illinois but also would support districts' continuous improvement processes. Further, the state of Illinois should provide statewide funding for professional development that is available to all districts. Building capacity of educators to teach and lead in the rural communities is vital, yet rural school districts—due to their size and funding capacity—often lack the wealth of resources that are available in suburban and urban districts. Rural districts are challenged with offering quality professional development due to the context and the resources available.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

Recommendations for future research are presented in this section.

**First, additional research could be conducted examining the role of the central office administration in facilitating and supporting evidence-use processes.** The use of evidence in schools to drive decision making is widely discussed in the literature. Although this study contributes to the body of research that examines the superintendent's role as a learning leader, there is sparse empirical research that has investigated the use of evidence to guide school reform efforts at the central office level. Additional research in this area may promote coherence in school district continuous improvement processes, revealing a powerful strategy to promote professional, student, and systems learning.

**Second, research could be conducted examining the mutual reliance among the central office, principals, and teachers in evidence-use processes.** This study revealed an interesting finding of the mutual dependent relationship between administration and teachers in evidence-use processes. Teachers rely upon their administration to support classroom teaching and learning practices through allocating resources, and the administration relies upon the teachers to communicate student and instructional information. The process of school reform is multi-faceted and requires the investment and commitment of all members to realize student improvement goals.

**Third, additional research could be conducted examining the role of professional development in supporting effective evidence-use processes.** Professional development in data analysis and interpretation is discussed in the literature as a worthwhile improvement strategy, but what training and supports are needed so that evidence-use can guide improvements in student achievement? What professional development training is needed to build the capacity of

administrators to lead evidence-use processes and for teachers to make instructional decisions around student performance data? Answering these questions could add to the empirical research related to effective evidence-use processes in schools.

**Fourth, additional research could be conducted on the role of teacher leadership and voice in evidence-use processes.** This case study finding revealed district leadership that valued the contribution and voice of teachers. In fact, the district leaders' decision making was informed by the perspectives of the classroom teachers. The district reform efforts focused upon integrating members in the process of school improvement, which is markedly different from traditional administrative "top-down" structured reform approaches.

### **Conclusion**

Data driven decision making is one strategy that is used in school systems to inform decisions about teaching and learning practices. Numerous studies have demonstrated the benefits of using data at the school level, but there has been only limited empirical research on central office evidence-use process that promotes school achievement trending upward. This case study of one exemplary Illinois rural school district provided an account of the district's evidence-use process and the strategies and practices employed by the superintendent as he facilitated and supported effective evidence-use processes. The theoretical construct that informed this study is rooted in the Leadership for Learning Framework (Knapp et al., 2010) and is an appropriate lens for examining district improvement and leadership processes.

The research questions examined the superintendent's evidence-use leadership strategies and practices, how the process of evidence-use contributes to professional, student, and systems learning, and the constraints and barriers encountered during the implementation of an evidence-use process. The findings revealed the superintendent demonstrated behaviors and practices that

facilitated and supported evidence-use process and subsequently the district engaged in practices that promoted professional, student, and systems learning. The findings revealed the district made learning a central focus in the following manner: (a) establishing the district's vision and mission; (b) creating professional culture norms that reinforce excellence in practice; (c) building the instructional capacity of staff; and (d) utilizing evidence-use processes as a lever for continuous school improvement. The findings from this study revealed evidence-use process was an effective lever for school reform in the rural context. However, the study also revealed that larger districts may advance student learning by creating coherence system-wide through the employment of evidence-use processes. In this single-case study, the superintendent and district's concerted effort to make learning central coupled with the implementation of evidence-use processes as a lever for school reform promoted professional, student, and systems learning in this rural Illinois school district.



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## Appendix A

### ROE Superintendent Email Soliciting Participant Recommendation

Dear Sir or Madam,

This letter is written to request your assistance in identifying superintendents of schools who meet the below criteria. The purpose is to identify and recommend superintendents in your region who meet the outlined criteria as potential participants in a single-case study. This single case study seeks to understand the leadership strategies and practices demonstrated by a rural superintendent as he or she utilize one lever, evidence-use, as a catalyst of improvement. The use of data to drive decision making is most often articulated at the school level. This study seeks to understand the role of the rural superintendent in leading evidence-use process at the district level in efforts to improve student performance. As you reflect on the superintendents in your region, please refer to the below criteria. If you are unsure whether a superintendent fits the criteria, please include in your recommendation and the individual will be further assessed for inclusion. All recommendations will be kept confidential and your name will not be disclosed.

Below are the criteria that will aid you in the identification of a potential participant. Please consider the following leadership practices and behaviors and the unique setting in your determination of a recommendation.

- The Superintendent is leading a formalized district improvement process that utilizes the analysis of student performance data prior to defining goals and objectives and an established data analysis review process to progress monitor district's improvement.
- The Superintendent has a reputation for effective and collaborative leadership of school and district initiatives.
- The Superintendent has served a minimum of three years in the current district.
- The school district is a K-12 Unit District located in a rural location.

The Unit District receives Title I funding. If you have any questions regarding the recommendation process for this single case study, please feel free to email me at [jhenigm2@illinois.edu](mailto:jhenigm2@illinois.edu) or phone (217-369-9456). Please send your recommendations via email to [jhenigm2@illinois.edu](mailto:jhenigm2@illinois.edu) and include the superintendent's name, district, and any other pertinent information you wish to share. Thanking you in advance for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Jean M. Neal  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

## Appendix B

### Follow-Up: ROE Email Soliciting Participant Recommendation

Dear Sir or Madam,

One week ago, I contacted you to request your assistance in identifying superintendents of schools who meet the below criteria. The purpose is to identify and recommend superintendents in your region who meet the outlined criteria as potential participants in a single-case study. This single case study seeks to understand the leadership strategies and practices demonstrated by a rural superintendent as he or she utilize one lever, evidence-use, as a catalyst of improvement. The use of data to drive decision making is most often articulated at the school level. This study seeks to understand the role of the rural superintendent in leading evidence-use process at the district level in efforts to improve student performance. As you reflect on the superintendents in your region, please refer to the below criteria. If you are unsure whether a superintendent fits the criteria, please include in your recommendation and the individual will be further assessed for inclusion. All recommendations will be kept confidential and your name will not be disclosed.

Below are the criteria that will aid you in the identification of a potential participant. Please consider the following leadership practices and behaviors and the unique setting in your determination of a recommendation.

- The Superintendent is leading a formalized district improvement process that utilizes the analysis of student performance data prior to defining goals and objectives and an established data analysis review process to progress monitor district's improvement.
- The Superintendent has a reputation for effective and collaborative leadership of school and district initiatives.
- The Superintendent has served a minimum of three years in the current district.
- The school district is a K-12 Unit District located in a rural location.

The Unit District receives Title I funding. If you have any questions regarding the recommendation process for this single case study, please feel free to email me at [jhenigm2@illinois.edu](mailto:jhenigm2@illinois.edu) or phone (217-369-9456). Please send your recommendations via email to [jhenigm2@illinois.edu](mailto:jhenigm2@illinois.edu) and include the superintendent's name, district, and any other pertinent information you wish to share. Thanking you in advance for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Jean M. Neal  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

## Appendix C

### Superintendent Email Notification of Recommendation

Dear [Insert Name],

You are being contacted because you have been recommended to participate in a single-case study that seeks to understand the leadership strategies and practices demonstrated by a rural superintendent as he or she utilize one lever, evidence-use, as a catalyst of improvement. The use of data to drive decision making is most often articulated at the school level. This study seeks to understand the role of the rural superintendent in leading evidence-use process at the district level in efforts to improve student performance. You were recommended by an area educational leader as a superintendent who meets the following criteria:

- The Superintendent is leading a formalized district improvement process that utilizes the analysis of student performance data prior to defining goals and objectives and an established data analysis review process to progress monitor district's improvement.
- The Superintendent has a reputation for effective and collaborative leadership of school and district initiatives.
- The Superintendent has served a minimum of three years in the current district.
- The school district is a K-12 Unit District located in a rural location.

As a leader of learning in a rural setting, you have a unique perspective. If you are willing to participate, an initial screening phone interview will take place. If you are selected for inclusion in this case study, a researcher will conduct on-site interviews with you and school district members, observations will be conducted at school district meetings, and a review of district documents related to school improvement and evidence-use processes will be conducted. If you are willing to participate in this case study, please email me at [jhenigm2@illinois.edu](mailto:jhenigm2@illinois.edu) or phone (217-369-9456). If you agree to participate, an informed consent with be sent to you via email and an appointment for a phone interview will be arranged.

Sincerely,

Jean M. Neal  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

## Appendix D

### Follow-Up: Superintendent Email Notification of Recommendation

Dear [Insert Name],

One week ago, you were contacted because you have been recommended to participate in a single-case study that seeks to understand the leadership strategies and practices demonstrated by a rural superintendent as he or she utilize one lever, evidence-use, as a catalyst of improvement. The use of data to drive decision making is most often articulated at the school level. This study seeks to understand the role of the rural superintendent in leading evidence-use process at the district level in efforts to improve student performance. You were recommended by an area educational leader as a superintendent who meets the following criteria:

- The Superintendent is leading a formalized district improvement process that utilizes the analysis of student performance data prior to defining goals and objectives and an established data analysis review process to progress monitor district's improvement.
- The Superintendent has a reputation for effective and collaborative leadership of school and district initiatives.
- The Superintendent has served a minimum of three years in the current district.
- The school district is a K-12 Unit District located in a rural location.

As a leader of learning in a rural setting, you have a unique perspective. If you are willing to participate, an initial screening phone interview will take place. If you are selected for inclusion in this case study, a researcher will conduct on-site interviews with you and school district members, observations will be conducted at school district meetings, and a review of district documents related to school improvement and evidence-use processes will be conducted. If you are willing to participate in this case study, please email me at [jhenigm2@illinois.edu](mailto:jhenigm2@illinois.edu) or phone (217-369-9456). If you agree to participate, an informed consent with be sent to you via email and an appointment for a phone interview will be arranged.

Sincerely,

Jean M. Neal  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

## Appendix E

### Email Notification to Participants Who Were Not Selected

Dear [Insert Name],

Thank you for participating in the phone interview screening process for a single case study. It was a pleasure speaking with you. However, you and your district site were not selected for participation in this study at this time.

If you have any questions or concerns about the selection process, please do not hesitate to contact me at ([jhenigm2@illinois.edu](mailto:jhenigm2@illinois.edu)) or by phone at (217-369-9456).

Sincerely,

Jean M. Neal  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

## Appendix F

### Informed Consent: School District Superintendent

Dear [Insert Name],

This letter is written to request you and your school district's participation in a single-case study that seeks to understand the leadership strategies and practices demonstrated by a rural superintendent as he or she utilize one lever, evidence-use, as a catalyst of improvement. The use of data to drive decision making is most often articulated at the school level. This study seeks to understand the role of the rural superintendent in leading evidence-use process at the district level in efforts to improve student performance. This study is affiliated with Dr. Donald Hackmann, Associate Professor of the Department of Education Policy, Organization and Leadership at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Mrs. Jean Neal, doctoral candidate, and Dr. Donald Hackmann, Associate Professor, will conduct the study.

The empirical literature on evidence-use is most often articulated at the school building level. However, there is sparse academic literature on the role of the superintendent in leading evidence-use processes to improve student performance and even less on the role of the rural superintendent in leading evidence-use school reform processes. This single-case study will help fill the gap in the literature. This study will include face-to-face interviews with the district superintendent, president of the Board of Education, and a focus group of district administrative and teacher leaders who analyze aggregated student achievement data to inform instructional decision making. In addition, the case study will include observations of school, district, and Board of Education meetings where school improvement issues are discussed. Informed consent will be attained from each individual participating in an interview. An additional observation consent form will be attained for the researcher to observe formal and informal district meetings. An observation protocol will be utilized at all observations. Finally, the district school improvement artifacts (e.g., agendas and minutes of school board and district improvement meetings, and aggregated student achievement data) will be examined to gain an understanding of superintendent leadership and practices related to evidence-use. At the conclusion of the case study, emergent themes will be identified from the interviews, observations, and review of artifacts. Results of this study will be included in doctoral dissertations that may be presented at a conference or in a publication. The confidentiality of all participants and the district site location will be maintained and at no time will identifying information be shared with others.

You and your school district participation in this study is completely voluntary, and your choice to participate or not will not impact your position in your school district. Should you agree to participate in this case study, you will be asked to first participate in one initial site screening phone interview. If you and your school district are chosen to participate in this case study, you will participate in a minimum of three additional interviews not to exceed 45-60 minutes in length, your Board President will participate in one interview, and one district administrator and teacher leader team focus group will participate in two interviews at the beginning and end of the data collection phase. All interviews will not exceed the 45-60 minute time frame. Finally, the observation of district meetings related to school improvement and the review of artifacts will assist in the identification of emergent themes.

All interviews will be audio-recorded and professionally transcribed. After each interview, a transcription of the interview will be shared with participants to ensure accuracy of the answers. Participants will be given the opportunity to make corrections or additions to their responses. All identifiable information will be removed and pseudonyms will be substituted to protect confidentiality. The audio-recording will be destroyed after the recording has been transcribed. If you prefer not to be recorded, the researcher will take detailed notes. Those notes will be provided to you via email so that you may have the opportunity to review, edit, and add additional comments.

Again, you and your school district's participating in this single-case study is completely voluntary. It is not anticipated that you or any member of your district will assume any risk greater than normal life by participating in this study. However, you are free to terminate your participation at any time and for any reason without penalty. Your choice to participate or not will not impact your professional job with the district or your status with the University of Illinois. You are also free to refrain from answering any questions you do not wish to answer. You will receive a copy of the research results after this project is complete.

If you have any questions about this research study, please contact Mrs. Jean Neal by email ([jhenigm2@illinois.edu](mailto:jhenigm2@illinois.edu)) or by phone (217-369-9456). You may also reach Dr. Donald Hackmann at ([dghack@illinois.edu](mailto:dghack@illinois.edu)) or phone (217-333-0230).

Sincerely,

Jean M. Neal

### **STATEMENT OF CONSENT**

I have read and understand the above information and, on behalf of myself and the school district, voluntarily agree to participate in the research study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Position: \_\_\_\_\_

District: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this study or any concerns or complaints, please contact the University of Illinois Institutional Review Board by email ([irb@illinois.edu](mailto:irb@illinois.edu)) or phone (217-333-2670).



## Appendix G

### Informed Consent: Board of Education President

Dear [Insert Name],

This letter is written to request your participation in a single-case study that seeks to understand the leadership strategies and practices demonstrated by a rural superintendent as he or she utilize one lever, evidence-use, as a catalyst of improvement. The use of data to drive decision making is most often articulated at the school level. This study seeks to understand the role of the rural superintendent in leading evidence-use process at the district level in efforts to improve student performance. This study is affiliated with Dr. Donald Hackmann, Associate Professor of the Department of Education Policy, Organization and Leadership at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Mrs. Jean Neal, doctoral candidate, and Dr. Donald Hackmann, Associate Professor, will conduct the study.

The empirical literature on evidence-use is most often articulated at the school building level. However, there is sparse academic literature on the role of the superintendent in leading evidence-use processes to improve student performance and even less on the role of the rural superintendent in leading evidence-use school reform processes. This single-case study will help fill the gap in the literature. This study will include face-to-face interviews with the district superintendent, president of the Board of Education, and a focus group of district administrative and teacher leaders who analyze aggregated student achievement data to inform instructional decision making. In addition, the case study will include observations of school, district, and Board of Education meetings where school improvement issues are discussed. Informed consent will be attained from each individual participating in an interview. An additional observation consent form will be attained for the researcher to observe formal and informal district meetings. An observation protocol will be utilized at all observations. Finally, the district school improvement artifacts (e.g., agendas and minutes of school board and district improvement meetings, and aggregated student achievement data) will be examined to gain an understanding of superintendent leadership and practices related to evidence-use. At the conclusion of the case study, emergent themes will be identified from the interviews, observations, and review of artifacts. Results of this study will be included in doctoral dissertations that may be presented at a conference or in a publication. The confidentiality of all participants and the district site location will be maintained and at no time will identifying information be shared with others.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and your choice to participate or not will not impact your position in your school district. Should you agree to participate in this case study, you will be asked to participate in one semi-structured interview that will last approximately 45-60 minutes.

The interview will be audio-recorded and professionally transcribed. After the interview, a transcription of the interview will be shared with you via email to review to ensure accuracy of your answers. You will be given the opportunity to make corrections or additions to your responses. All identifiable information will be removed and pseudonyms will be substituted to protect confidentiality. The audio-recording will be destroyed after the recording has been

transcribed. If you prefer not to be recorded, the researcher will take detailed notes. Those notes will be provided to you via email so that you may have the opportunity to review, edit, and add additional comments.

Again, you and your school district's participating in this single-case study is completely voluntary. It is not anticipated that you or any member of your district will assume any risk greater than normal life by participating in this study. However, you are free to terminate your participation at any time and for any reason without penalty. Your choice to participate or not will not impact your position with the district or your status with the University of Illinois. You are also free to refrain from answering any questions you do not wish to answer. You will receive a copy of the research results after this project is complete.

If you have any questions about this research study, please contact Mrs. Jean Neal by email ([jhenigm2@illinois.edu](mailto:jhenigm2@illinois.edu)) or by phone (217-369-9456). You may also reach Dr. Donald Hackmann at ([dghack@illinois.edu](mailto:dghack@illinois.edu)) or phone (217-333-0230).

Sincerely,

Jean Neal

### **STATEMENT OF CONSENT**

I have read and understand the above information and, on behalf of myself and the school district, voluntarily agree to participate in the research study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Position: \_\_\_\_\_

District: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this study or any concerns or complaints, please contact the University of Illinois Institutional Review Board by email ([irb@illinois.edu](mailto:irb@illinois.edu)) or phone (217-333-2670).

## Appendix H

### Informed Consent: Focus Group

Dear [Insert Name],

This letter is written to request your participation in a single-case study that seeks to understand the leadership strategies and practices demonstrated by a rural superintendent as he or she utilize one lever, evidence-use, as a catalyst of improvement. The use of data to drive decision making is most often articulated at the school level. This study seeks to understand the role of the rural superintendent in leading evidence-use process at the district level in efforts to improve student performance. This study is affiliated with Dr. Donald Hackmann, Associate Professor of the Department of Education Policy, Organization and Leadership at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Mrs. Jean Neal, doctoral candidate, and Dr. Donald Hackmann, Associate Professor, will conduct the study.

The empirical literature on evidence-use is most often articulated at the school building level. However, there is sparse academic literature on the role of the superintendent in leading evidence-use processes to improve student performance and even less on the role of the rural superintendent in leading evidence-use school reform processes. This single-case study will help fill the gap in the literature. Results of this study will be included in doctoral dissertations that may be presented at a conference or in a publication. The confidentiality of all participants and the district site location will be maintained and at no time will identifying information be shared with others.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and your choice to participate or not will not impact your position in your school district. Should you agree to participate in this case study, you will be asked to participate in two semi-structured interview, at the beginning and end of data collection period. Each interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes.

The interview will be audio-recorded and professionally transcribed. After the interview, a transcription of the interview will be shared with you via email to review to ensure accuracy of your answers. You will be given the opportunity to make corrections or additions to your responses. All identifiable information will be removed and pseudonyms will be substituted to protect confidentiality. The audio-recording will be destroyed after the recording has been transcribed. If you prefer not to be recorded, the researcher will take detailed notes. Those notes will be provided to you via email so that you may have the opportunity to review, edit, and add additional comments.

Again, you and your school district's participating in this single-case study is completely voluntary. It is not anticipated that you or any member of your district will assume any risk greater than normal life by participating in this study. The researcher will request that all participants respect the privacy of the session. However, the researcher cannot guarantee that one or more participants will not divulge what was discussed or said after the session. You are free to terminate your participation at any time and for any reason without penalty. Your choice to participate or not will not impact your professional job with the district or your status with the

University of Illinois. You are also free to refrain from answering any questions you do not wish to answer. You will receive a copy of the research results after this project is complete.

If you have any questions about this research study, please contact Mrs. Jean Neal by email ([jhenigm2@illinois.edu](mailto:jhenigm2@illinois.edu)) or by phone (217-369-9456). You may also reach Dr. Donald Hackmann at ([dghack@illinois.edu](mailto:dghack@illinois.edu)) or phone (217-333-0230).

Sincerely,

Jean Neal

### STATEMENT OF CONSENT

I have read and understand the above information and, on behalf of myself and the school district, voluntarily agree to participate in the research study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Position: \_\_\_\_\_

District: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this study or any concerns or complaints, please contact the University of Illinois Institutional Review Board by email ([irb@illinois.edu](mailto:irb@illinois.edu)) or phone (217-333-2670).

## Appendix I

### Informed Consent: Site Observation

Dear [Insert Name],

This letter is written to request your participation in a single-case study that seeks to understand the leadership strategies and practices demonstrated by a rural superintendent as he or she utilize one lever, evidence-use, as a catalyst of improvement. The use of data to drive decision making is most often articulated at the school level. This study seeks to understand the role of the rural superintendent in leading evidence-use process at the district level in efforts to improve student performance. This study is affiliated with Dr. Donald Hackmann, Associate Professor of the Department of Education Policy, Organization and Leadership at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Mrs. Jean Neal, doctoral candidate, and Dr. Donald Hackmann, Associate Professor, will conduct the study.

The empirical literature on evidence-use is most often articulated at the school building level. However, there is sparse academic literature on the role of the superintendent in leading evidence-use processes to improve student performance and even less on the role of the rural superintendent in leading evidence-use school reform processes. This single-case study will help fill the gap in the literature. An observation protocol will be utilized at all observations. Results of this study will be included in doctoral dissertations that may be presented at a conference or in a publication. The confidentiality of all participants and the district site location will be maintained and at no time will identifying information be shared with others.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and your choice to participate or not will not impact your position in your school district. Should you agree to participate in this case study, you will be asked to permit the researcher to observe you during a presentation or other events associated with evidence-use. In all instances the participants will have the appropriate informed consent form provided to them in advance of the interview or observation. Should selected individuals be willing to participate in the interview or observation, they will return a copy of the signed informed consent form to the researcher prior to participating in interviews or observations. They may retain the original signed copy for their records. The observation will last for the duration of the event.

In the event that some individuals decline to provide informed consent but are participating in activities that are observed by the researcher, these individuals' statements and actions will not be recorded by the researcher. If there are individuals who are not consenting to observations and are not comfortable with the researcher's presence in all or part of the meeting, the observation would cease at that time. The researcher will observe only those meetings where all participants are comfortable with having the meeting observed.

The researcher will take field notes during the event. The field notes will be transcribed and all identifying information will be replaced with pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. The transcribed notes will be sent to you via email so that you can review the content for accuracy.

All participants will be given an opportunity to submit clarifying statements or make necessary amendments.

Again, your participating in this single-case study is completely voluntary. It is not anticipated that you or any member of your district will assume any risk greater than normal life by participating in this study. However, you are free to terminate your participation at any time and for any reason without penalty. Your choice to participate or not will not impact your professional job with the district or your status with the University of Illinois. You are also free to refrain from answering any questions you do not wish to answer. You will receive a copy of the research results after this project is complete.

If you have any questions about this research study, please contact Mrs. Jean Neal by email ([jhenigm2@illinois.edu](mailto:jhenigm2@illinois.edu)) or by phone (217-369-9456). You may also reach Dr. Donald Hackmann at ([dghack@illinois.edu](mailto:dghack@illinois.edu)) or phone (217-333-0230).

Sincerely,

Jean Neal

#### **STATEMENT OF CONSENT**

I have read and understand the above information and, on behalf of myself and the school district, voluntarily agree to participate in the research study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Position: \_\_\_\_\_

District: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this study or any concerns or complaints, please contact the University of Illinois Institutional Review Board by email ([irb@illinois.edu](mailto:irb@illinois.edu)) or phone (217-333-2670).

## Appendix J

### Phone Interview: Superintendent

Thank you for agreeing to participate in a screening process for a single-case study that seeks to understand the leadership strategies and practices demonstrated by a rural superintendent leading evidence-use processes. Extensive research has been conducted on effective schools, but there has been relatively little focus on the role of the central office administration, specifically the superintendent, as leaders for learning. The school district's superintendent's office is often seen as a separate entity that is removed from the everyday work in the classroom. However, the school superintendent, as the chief administrative officer of the school system, also has an important duty to facilitate, direct, and support classroom teaching and learning. As a rural superintendent, you have various roles and responsibilities associated with being an instructional leader and district manager. So, this study seeks to understand the practices and strategies you employ in leading evidence-use processes at the district level in efforts to improve student performance.

As outlined in the informed consent form, this interview will be recorded and the interview audio will be transcribed. All identifying information will be removed and replaced with pseudonyms. I will send you the transcript for your review. You will have an opportunity to amend and clarify your statements. This interview is completely voluntary, and you may stop the interview at any time. I will ask you a series of questions, feel free to elaborate as much or as little as you are comfortable.

1. Briefly describe your background and your educational training.
2. Please describe your leadership philosophy.
3. What activities do you lead or participate in that is directly related to teaching and learning?
4. What types of data do you use at the district level? What are some ways that you use that data to inform your practice?
5. How do you monitor student achievement in your district?
6. What practices and strategies do you employ as the district instructional leader
7. Do you have any questions about this study?

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this interview. As I mentioned earlier, I will be sending you an email with the transcript of this interview for your review. Please feel free to submit clarification or amendments to your interview. Should you and your district be selected to participate in this study, you will be notified by email. Thank you for your time. Have a nice day.

## Appendix K

### Semi-Structured Interview Questions: Superintendent Interview

Thank you for your participation in this study.

1. Please describe your understanding of evidence-use in the school and district setting?
2. Describe your vision for evidence-use in the school and district setting?
3. How did your philosophy of evidence-use develop?
4. What data do you and your school personnel think is important to examine to ensure students are learning?
5. What evidence-use systems and practices have you put in place? What strategies and practices would you like to put in place to enhance evidence-use in the district?
6. What is the role of training in evidence-use?
7. What are your goals for the district in evidence-use?
8. What leadership behaviors do you think matter to supporting evidence-use?
9. With the competing demands on rural superintendents, how do you accomplish leading for learning?
10. What challenges or barriers have you encountered leading for learning?
11. What do you think is important to effectively lead for learning?
12. Do you believe your leadership in evidence-use has an impact on student achievement? If so, in what way?
13. Reflecting on your experience leading for learning, what advice would you give a fellow superintendent in constructing a framework to utilize evidence-use in his or her district?



## **Appendix L**

### **Semi-Structured Interview Questions: Board of Education President**

Thank you for your participation in this study.

1. Please describe your understanding of evidence-use in the school and district setting?
2. What data do you think school personnel should examine to ensure students are learning?
3. What expectations does the Board of Education have for the superintendent and school personnel to engage in evidence-use processes?
4. Do you have evidence-use goals for the district?
5. Do you believe school personnel conducting evidence-use processes has an impact on student achievement? If so, in what way?
6. How can the superintendent as the leader of learning support evidence-use processes?
7. Reflecting on your experience as Board of Education President, what role does the Board of Education have in establishing evidence-use processes?
8. What challenges or barriers do you see as potential obstacles to evidence-use at the district and school levels?

## Appendix M

### Semi-Structured Interview Questions: Focus Group

Thank you for your participation in this study.

1. Please describe what factors encourage a focus on student learning?
2. Can you describe the evidence-use processes that are in place in your district?
3. What strategies and practices promote effective evidence-use processes?
4. Do you believe school personnel conducting evidence-use processes has an impact on student achievement? If so, in what way?
5. Reflecting on your experience using evidence in your practice, what challenges or barriers have you experienced in your evidence-use process?
6. Describe the student performance measures your school uses to assess students' progress?
7. What data do you and your school personnel think is important to examine to ensure students are learning?
8. How has the superintendent been involved in the facilitation or implementation of evidence-use processes?
9. Please describe strategies or practices the superintendent engaged in that supported evidence-use processes?
10. How can the superintendent support you as you engage in evidence-use activities focused on improving student achievement?

