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A Comparative Case Study of the Role of the School District in Influencing School Improvement: Supporting and Turning Around Low-Performing Schools

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A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY OF THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL DISTRICT IN
INFLUENCING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT: SUPPORTING AND TURNING
AROUND LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS

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Doctor of Philosophy

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APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the efforts of school districts in developing and sustaining their capacity to improve student achievement in response to increased accountability. The study sought to confirm what the research says regarding the role of the school district in influencing school improvement. While there is a significant body of research identifying elements for turning around low-performing schools, limited information exists on the roles of school district leaders in influencing school improvement. The study employed comparative case study methodology to examine the details of two school districts that had engaged in turning around low-achieving schools through the viewpoint of the study's participants (superintendents, assistant superintendents, district leaders overseeing school improvement, and school principals). This study identified the roles and practices of district leaders and determined the strategies used to successfully turn around low performing schools and sustain higher achievement. Increasing achievement across schools necessitates considering how school districts support school improvement and sustain district capacity to improve student achievement. Based on the findings, the study offers recommendations for district leadership practice in supporting school improvement and school turnaround.

KEY WORDS: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT, SCHOOL TURNAROUND, LOW ACHIEVING, DISTRICT ROLES, DISTRICT LEADERS, LOW-PERFORMING, SUPERINTENDENT

A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY OF THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL DISTRICT IN
INFLUENCING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT: SUPPORTING AND TURNING
AROUND LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

School turnaround has changed significantly over the last decade from a focus on isolated reform elements such as modifying reading programs, improving teachers, or redesigning individual schools to a more comprehensive approach of building the capacity of a school district's ability to create sustained reform. In 2002, the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE, 2002a) introduced the Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) Program that was authorized under Title I, Part F of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The focus of the CSR Program was to raise student achievement through proven methods and strategies that produce comprehensive school reform. Grants were awarded to approximately 3,000 Title I schools in all 50 states that demonstrated the greatest need to improve student achievement. Schools used the grants to contract outside partners experienced in school-wide reform to develop programs that addressed 11 components in this area (USDOE, 2002a). This program became an important element for school improvement under the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, also known as No Child Left Behind of 2001 (NCLB, 2002).

The reauthorization included a section entitled 1003(g), School Improvement Grants (SIGs), which are grants awarded by the U.S. Department of Education to state education agencies (SEAs). States subgranted the funds to school districts in order to support school improvement efforts for the lowest achieving schools in each state (USDOE, 2012b). In 2009, President Obama and his administration significantly

increased the funding of SIG grants and modified the strategies under school reform. New program rules also required that states create lists of their lowest achieving schools to form the pool for determining eligibility for subgrants. The identified schools were divided into three tiers of the lowest achieving schools in a state (Lachlan-Haché, Naik, & Casserly, 2012). The SIG program, which had contained 11 elements for school-wide reform, now contained only four intervention models with more stringent reforms for schools identified as having the greatest need. These four prescriptive models, known as the turnaround model, restart model, school closure model, and transformation model address the specific changes needed for schools and staff.

Role of School Districts in Reform Initiatives

The dismal track record of school districts carrying out and sustaining school reform has led policymakers and reformers to conclude that while the district is part of the reform problem, it should not be part of the solution (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003). For years school-wide reform efforts only focused on the schools, while disregarding the school districts' role in turning around low-achieving schools. Driving excellent instruction and achievement across schools necessitates considering how school districts can best be structured to help schools meet unique student needs while maintaining alignment and system coherence (Zavadsky, 2013). The challenges of meeting the requirements of the Federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and of closing the achievement gap require rethinking the roles, responsibilities, and relationships within school districts and among schools within a district (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004).

Recent studies now are examining the role school districts have in turning around low-performing schools. A study by the Virginia Foundation for Educational Leadership

found collaboration between the school board, central office administration, school administration, and school faculty was critical in the success of school improvement efforts (Jones & Wheeler, 2011). This study of five school districts found the central office administration was engaged actively in school improvement efforts. Schools in turnaround often identified districts as being key initiators and supporters of school reform (Aladjem et al., 2010). School district offices and the people who work in them are not simply part of the background noise in school turnaround. School district administrators exercise essential leadership, in partnership with school leaders, to build capacity throughout public educational systems for teaching and learning improvements (Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, & Newton, 2010).

Elements of School Districts' System of Support

Literature regarding how to improve low-performing schools discusses the importance of specific district actions needed in the reform effort (Aladjem et al., 2010; Jones & Wheeler, 2011; Shannon & Bylsma, 2004; Zavadsky, 2013). School reform research has suggested that multiple factors contribute to improvement: leadership and staffing, school climate, instructional improvement strategies, and external support (Aladjem et al., 2010). School districts need effective and rigorous strategies to achieve the goals of excellence and equity—high expectations for all students (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004). A report by the California Collaborative on District Reform suggested that effective efforts at school turnaround can benefit from a systemic approach that leverages resources and expertise while addressing barriers to improvement that are bigger than an individual school site (Knudson, Shambaugh, & O'Day, 2011). While it is rare for school districts to be doing the same thing for school turnaround, recent research

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has discovered common elements on how school districts have supported low-performing schools. The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction for the state of Washington found a relationship between school district policy, programs, and practices and the improvement of student learning (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004). There are four broad categories that are seen as important to district effectiveness but not sufficient in isolation: effective leadership, quality teaching and learning, support for system-wide improvement, and clear and collaborative relationships (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004).

Scaling improvement beyond one great teacher or school requires aligning the parts of the system around key elements. Zavadsky's (2013) case studies of school districts in Philadelphia, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Denver, Sacramento, and Long Beach identified key elements of school turnaround. The study revealed how complex systems are addressing essential elements of school improvement through human capital strategies, rigorous and engaging instruction, continuous performance management, positive cultures of high expectations, collective accountability, targeted interventions, and strong connections with families and communities. The Virginia Foundation for Educational Leadership found 16 common themes in its study of district systems that support continued improvement in their high need schools (Jones & Wheeler, 2011). Districts serve as the logical catalyst and hub for ensuring that schools get what they need without causing undue distractions from teaching. This requires balance, clarity, and the best division of labor between districts and schools (Zavadsky, 2013).

Statement of the Problem

In the summer of 2012, the U.S. Department of Education granted certain states flexibility from certain requirements of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act

(ESEA) of 1965 (USDOE, 2012a), as amended by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002). One of the key components identified within the ESEA flexibility was to address inconsistencies in state accountability models and to define persistently lowest-achieving schools. The provisions within the waiver require states to identify these low-achieving schools as priority and focus schools. Priority schools represent the lowest 5% of Title I schools that are identified based on overall reading and mathematics achievement. Focus schools represent 10% of a state's Title I schools that are identified based on achievement gaps in reading and mathematics. The waiver also requires the states and school districts to implement interventions consistent with the turnaround principles and interventions designed to enhance the entire educational program (USDOE, 2012a). During this period, states began to develop legislation that would take over low-performing schools. In 2013, the Virginia legislature introduced a bill (SB 1324) allowing the state to take over historically low-performing schools. The bill intended to establish the Opportunity Educational Institution (Virginia General Assembly, 2013), which was intended to take authority away from school boards and school districts overseeing certain schools that had lost their state accreditation for three consecutive years. This legislation, while controversial, demonstrated a fundamental shift from a focus on struggling schools to the school districts responsible for their turnaround.

As federal and state governments continue to hold districts with the lowest achieving schools accountable, it is imperative districts examine both school-level and district practices and policies that contribute to increased student achievement. School can no longer be viewed as the only organizational structure in which school improvement takes place (Brady, 2003; Fullan, 2007; Shannon & Bylsma, 2004;

Zavadsky, 2013). Brady (2003) found in his study of three low-performing schools in New York City; Memphis, Tennessee; and Prince George's County, Maryland that school-focused interventions resulted in only half of the schools moving from under-performing to being successful. Until districts have an understanding of their role in turning around low-performing schools, failure will continue.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to review the efforts of two school districts, located in the southeastern part of the United States, in developing and sustaining its capacity to improve student achievement in response to increased accountability. The study sought to confirm what the research says regarding the role of the school district in influencing school improvement.

The Broad Foundation framework provided a lens through which to study building capacity and improving a school system, schools, teachers, and student achievement (The Broad Prize for Urban Education, 2013). The foundation developed a framework of performance that is used to judge the quality of practices being implemented in school districts and that is based on a comprehensive review of the research literature on effective district practices conducted over the past 10 years. It is comprised of three categories: teaching and learning, district leadership, and organizational structure and climate. The Broad Foundation understood that scaling improvement beyond one great teacher or school requires aligning the parts of the system around core elements into a strategic reform framework (Zavadsky, 2012). This multi-level perspective provided the means to study various aspects of school improvement in response to federal, state, and local policies. This research utilized qualitative research

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methods to compare one school district that had been successful in building and sustaining the capacity to improve its schools to another school district in the process of turning around low-performing schools.

Research Questions

The research questions to be addressed in this field research project included:

1. What are the **key elements** of a school district's system of support that turn around low-performing schools?

2. What are the district's **roles** in supporting low-performing schools?

3. What are the **strategies** a district can implement to turn around low-performing schools?

Definition of Key Terms

Assessment (Formative). Ongoing assessment (district, school, and classroom level) used to modify and improve instruction while it is in progress. Examples include informal observation, quizzes, homework, worksheets, daily assignments, performance assessments, and scoring rubrics.

Assessment (Summative). Assessment that evaluates what students have learned after instruction is completed. Examples include tests, final exams, and culminating projects. This information often is used in determining a grade, placement, or promotion.

Continuous School Improvement. The processes and practices that move schools along a path towards increased student achievement and organizational effectiveness. A set of operational activities outlining the targets, actions, and resources necessary for effective teaching and learning is included. It is a process that is owned by everyone involved in the life of the school.

Curriculum. A defined scope and sequence of what students will learn and be able to do in all content areas throughout their educational experience.

Curriculum Alignment. The process of ensuring that a school and district's stated curriculum is taught and assessed, is aligned with state academic standards, and is consistent in all grade levels and subject areas, both horizontally and vertically.

Improvement Plan. A document that sets forth the goals, measurable objectives, strategies, activities, and allocated resources to be strategically implemented by the educational institution in its efforts to improve academic and operational performance.

Instructional Activities. Actions carried out in the process of teaching a given curricular standard/benchmark/content expectation, the result of design, delivery, and assessment of an instructional goal.

Professional Development. Opportunities provided to teachers and other staff members to enhance their professional ability and instructional capacity.

School Improvement Grants (SIGs). Grants awarded by the U.S. Department of Education to state education agencies (SEAs) under Section 1003(g) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (USDOE, 2002c).

School Improvement Plan. A tool for creating and managing change. This written plan identifies student performance goals and supporting data, assessments, evidence, best interventions, professional development, resources, timeline, and persons responsible for implementing the actions identified with the plan.

School Turnaround. An intensive intervention and leadership development initiative that helps turn around failing or underperforming schools. This model is one of four strategies available to American local education agencies (LEAs) under the School

Improvement Grants programs. The other three programs include Restart,

Transformation, and School Closures.

Significance of the Study

The desire to improve the lowest performing schools often is driven by school level reforms, but only rarely is attention paid to the district's role in school improvement. School level and single focus reforms fail because they do not acknowledge the importance of the larger system in supporting and creating the capacity for its lowest performing schools to improve (Zavadsky, 2013). Improvements of the lowest performing schools can and should be part of a more coordinated district strategy. To this end, the requirements for school improvement planning and implementation should include explicit acknowledgement of the district's role (Knudson et al., 2011).

Long-term school turnaround often requires systemic, district level approaches by customizing the conditions of each specific school (Knudson et al., 2011). Districts serve as the logical catalyst and hub for ensuring that schools get what they need without causing undue distractions from teaching. This requires balance and clarity on the best division of labor between districts and schools (Zavadsky, 2013). This study investigated how one school district strengthened its capacity, turned around low-achieving schools, and transformed improvement into sustained success for all schools, and drew comparisons to another school district in the process of turning around low-performing schools.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

Limitations refer to the restrictions in the study that the researcher has no means of controlling (Rudestam & Newton, 2014). The ability to generalize was limited to

selecting districts that had engaged in school improvement efforts designed to turn around low-achieving schools. This study did not exclude school districts that changed leadership within their organization. However, changes in district administrative staff and school leadership were important characteristics considered when analyzing the results.

Delimitations refer to the limitations in the research design that have been deliberate by the researcher (Rudestam & Newton, 2014). This study examined only two rural districts and was specific to the leadership roles found within those districts. School districts across the country vary widely in their average student population and settings of urban and rural as well as the structure and roles within a central office.

Two districts were selected carefully in order to identify one district that was able to turnaround low-performing schools while sustaining higher achievement for all schools and a second district that was in the process of turning around low-performing schools. The first district in this study had schools identified as the lowest-achieving schools under the 2009 SIG program and had none of its schools identified as priority or focus schools as defined under the 2012 ESEA flexibility provisions. The second district in the study had schools identified as the lowest-achieving schools under the 2009 SIG program and at the time of the study identified priority schools as defined under the 2012 ESEA flexibility provisions. The findings and conclusions developed in this case study were based on the examination of the identified school district in the southeastern part of the United States. Consistent with case study methodology, detailed descriptions assist readers in determining the extent to which this research matches their own situations (Merriam, 2007). Ultimately, however, it will be up to the reader to decide the transferability of this study's findings and conclusions.

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CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The focus of this chapter is the examination of the literature related to the roles of school districts in influencing school improvement. This topic is of critical importance to the field of education because it provides insights into: (a) helping school districts develop systems that support school turnaround, (b) helping school districts define the roles of their central office in supporting school-improvement, and (c) helping school districts identify key strategies for turning around low-performing schools and sustaining achievement in all schools.

The chapter begins with a historical perspective of school reform starting with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002), and provides the political context that explains the challenges school district leaders face in increasing the performance of the nation's lowest-achieving schools. The chapter reviews the literature on educational reforms as well as frameworks used by districts to turn around low-performing schools. Additionally, the review examines the key elements within school district leadership, district operations and support, and effective teaching and student learning.

Initial Challenges Presented by No Child Left Behind

Since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002), school districts across the United States have been working hard to comply with the accountability expectations that the law requires. The act is a comprehensive federal initiative that was designed to improve the educational performance of all students. At the core of NCLB are specific components designed to address school improvement and

increase accountability for low-achieving schools. Figure 1 illustrates key components of the legislation that are addressed in the literature review.

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)	State level achievement targets for mathematics, reading, and science that increase at least every three years.
Schools in Need of Improvement	Schools failing to meet the criteria of Adequate Yearly Progress for two consecutive years are subject to immediate interventions by states.
Public School Choice	Title I schools failing to meet the criteria of Adequate Yearly Progress for two consecutive years must offer eligible children the opportunity to transfer to a higher performing local school
Supplemental Educational Services	Title I schools failing to meet the criteria of Adequate Yearly Progress for three consecutive years must offer eligible children free tutoring or after-school assistance.

Figure 1. Key components of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) legislation.

Adequate Yearly Progress

Under NCLB, every state is required to develop specific grade-level benchmarks. Each state must administer assessments to evaluate the percentage of proficient students in specific schools and school districts as identified by their achievement of grade-level benchmarks (Shaul & Ganson, 2005). Each state shall establish a timeline for adequate yearly progress (AYP) targets and the achievement level targets must increase at least every three years with the provision that by the year 2014, 100% of the students should meet proficiency standards in mathematics, reading, and science (USDOE, 2002b). The

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accountability provisions in NCLB are intended to close the achievement gap between high and low achieving students while closing the achievement gaps between minority and non-minority students along with advantaged and disadvantaged students. The NCLB Act makes provisions for schools that do not demonstrate AYP. Those schools that do not meet AYP for two years in a row are identified as "schools in need of improvement" and are subject to immediate interventions by their state education agency. First steps include technical assistance such as training and other systems of support. Further interventions take place if the school continued to fail to make adequate yearly progress. Expanding educational options for children in low performing schools is one of the major tenants of NCLB policy and represents major reform initiatives for public education school improvement that have impacted both school districts and state education agencies. However, there were significant reforms within the NCLB accountability system that removed the authority from both the school and school district.

Public School Choice

The first accountability reform was public school choice, which was the first federal law that made this option available for students who were enrolled in underachieving or unsafe schools (USDOE, 2002b). According to the NCLB Act, public schools receiving federal Title I funding but failing to meet the criteria of AYP for two consecutive years must offer eligible children the opportunity to transfer to a higher performing local school. There has been much educational research that has explored the characteristics of achievement gap and school choice (Betts & Loveless, 2005; Center on Educational Policy, 2006); however, limited studies have analyzed the various dimensions of these educational phenomena in the context of the NCLB Act. A study by

Haifeng and Cowen (2009) examined factors that contributed to the differentiation between failing schools and choice schools. Their study of public school choice in South Carolina found that failing schools were not only clustered in inner city communities, but also were found in suburban and rural settings. Therefore, public schools with large minority enrollments and high poverty rate were more likely to fail, regardless of geographic locale, reflecting the widespread achievement gap between minority/low-income students and their affluent, White peers. Schools identified as in improvement and having to offer choice were found to have high levels of poverty, high teacher turnover rate, and low neighborhood socioeconomic status and were significant predictors of academic achievement measured (Haifeng & Cowen, 2009).

Education officials and policymakers have recognized parental involvement as central to creating more effective school communities and improved performance. Districts across the nation have established magnet schools, charter schools, and other models to attract parents to their community. The school choice policy assumes that situating schools in a market-based environment will force schools to compete for students by improving the quality of the educational product (Beal & Hendry, 2012). Despite parents' central role in contemporary school reform efforts and a growing body of literature that explores parental involvement in school choice (Epstein, 1995; Izzo, Weissberg, Kasprow, & Fendrich, 1999) the majority of these studies are large-scale anonymous surveys. Relatively few focus on parents' experiences as critical factors in the school choice process or how increased parental engagement affects democratic education (Teske & Schneider, 2001).

Supplemental Educational Services

The second reform under NCLB was supplemental educational services (SES), which refers to free extra academic assistance, such as tutoring or remedial help, that is provided to students in subjects such as reading, language arts, and math. This extra help can be provided before or after school, on weekends, or in the summer (USDOE, 2002b). According to NCLB, public schools receiving federal Title I funding, but failing to meet the criteria of AYP for three or more consecutive years, must offer supplemental educational services in addition to school choice. Each state is required to identify organizations that qualify to provide extra educational services. School districts are required to make a list available to parents of state-approved supplemental educational service providers in the area and let them choose the provider that will best meet the educational needs of their child.

In 2009, the U.S. Department of Education offered states a waiver to offer SES instead of public school choice for those Title I schools in improvement. Under this provision, Title I schools that do not make AYP for two consecutive years must offer SES provided by state-approved companies, the majority of which are private. Typically, these companies offer tutoring in mathematics and English during after school programs (Koyama, 2011). However, SES providers are not held to the same accountability and high standards as schools found within NLCB. According to the law, the content of practices of SES should align with the states, but there is limited state or district oversight of the curriculum, lessons, and assessments used by the SES providers (Koyama, 2011). Initially, states were challenged by the implementation of SES in getting list of vendors from which school districts could choose. At the start of implementation in the Fall of

2002, only 15 states had complied with arranging a list of approved supplemental educational service providers (Center on Education Policy, 2004). The study also found rural districts were at a disadvantage compared to urban and suburban districts due to a limited amount of providers willing or able to serve students in their location. A study by Muñoz, Ross, and Neergaard (2009) revealed many instances where tutoring sessions were cancelled or not implemented to the degree intended, and parents were uninformed about tutoring options or their child's progress. The teacher or school leaders were unaware their students were receiving SES tutoring and did not work together to determine the students' academic strengths and weaknesses.

Summary of NCLB Challenges

School choice and supplemental educational services were in place to incentivize schools and school districts to improve student achievement, but were disconnected from the systems of support and the schools held accountable for their students' education. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) requires states to provide assistance to districts in improving the schools under the statewide systems of support provision of the Act (Redding & Walberg, 2008). Initially schools sought assistance from the states because the NCLB requires states to provide such help under the statewide systems of support. However, needs differ from school to school and states lacked the capacity to deal with each school's individual needs. A study conducted with a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation found that states were constrained to design their NCLB support systems around what they thought they could accomplish, rather than the individualized supports needed by schools (American Institutes for Research, 2008).

The challenges of meeting the expectations of NCLB required school districts to examine the roles, responsibilities, and relationships within their organization and among the schools they serve. Shannon and Bylsma (2004) stated school districts need effective and rigorous strategies to achieve the goals of excellence and equity as well as high expectations for all students. The requirements under NCLB forced state agencies to change the way they operated from compliance to supportive role. This created significant challenges because most state agencies were not designed to function in a supportive capacity. Vega-Matos and Purnell (2000) addressed the concern that state agencies often are fragmented, limiting funding to schools in improvement for a limited time frame or for specific purposes such as supporting a demonstration of effort, but not for programmatic change over the long term. If governance needed in the reform effort requires shared responsibility of the stakeholders, the roles for the state agency must change from that of monitoring and compliance to that of technical assistance. The nine characteristics of high performing schools, based on the research of effective schools and school improvement, have provided a sound foundation for improving schools and increasing the achievement of all students (Shannon & Bylsma, 2003).

On September 23, 2011, the U.S. Department of Education (2012a) offered each state the opportunity to request flexibility on behalf of itself, its local educational agencies (LEAs), and its schools in order to better focus on improving student learning and increasing the quality of instruction. This voluntary opportunity for flexibility regarding specific requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 was in exchange for rigorous and comprehensive state-developed plans designed to improve

educational outcomes for all students, close achievement gaps, increase equity, and improve the quality of instruction.

Scale-up Educational Reform

To "scale up" educational reform, system-wide changes must be made (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004). There is a peculiar irony to school reform, the existence of which lends insight into the nature of the scale-up problem. Research shows that pockets of good educational practice can be found almost anywhere, signifying that good education is not a matter of esoteric knowledge and implying that education systems could do a great deal more with the resources they already have (Healey & DeStefano, 1997). Recent research has been analyzing schools districts' roles in turning around low-performing schools and their impact on sustaining student achievement for all schools in their district. The Broad Foundation annually provides $1M awards to school districts that demonstrate the greatest overall performance and improvement in student achievement while reducing achievement gaps among low-income students and students of color (The Broad Prize for Urban Education, 2013). Over the last seven years these school districts have served as the body of research on how to turn around low-performing schools. School level and single focus reforms fail because they do not acknowledge the importance of the larger system in supporting and creating capacity for its lowest performing schools to improve (Zavadsky, 2013).

District-wide Approach to Turnaround

States such as California, Washington, and Virginia have focused their work on the needs of districts in serving low-performing schools. The California Collaborative on District Reform developed specific themes based on the district perspective on school

turnaround. The research illustrated specific strategies that school districts could use to create a coherent district-wide approach to turnaround (Knudson et al., 2011). Improvements of the lowest performing schools can and should be part of a more coordinated district strategy. To this end, the requirements for school improvement planning and implementation should include explicit acknowledgement of the district's role (Knudson et al., 2011). A study by the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction for the state of Washington (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004) found a relationship between school district policy, programs, practices, and the improvement of student learning. The illustration in Figure 2 shows four broad categories: effective leadership, quality teaching and learning, support for system-wide improvement, and clear and collaborative relationships that are seen as important to district effectiveness but not sufficient in isolation (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004).

Framework for Reform

Three studies that examined school district improvement initiatives found similar elements and strategies for turning around low-performing schools. Zavadsky's (2012) case studies of school districts in Philadelphia, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Denver, Sacramento, and Long Beach identified five key elements of school turnaround. The Virginia Foundation for Educational Leadership found 16 common themes in its study of school district systems that support continued improvement in their high need schools (Jones & Wheeler, 2011). The Broad Foundation identified nine effective practices through its research of awarded school districts and based on a comprehensive review of the research literature (The Broad Prize for Urban Education, 2013).

QUALITY TEACHING AND LEARNING

High Expectations and Accountability for Adults

Coordinated and Aligned Curriculum and Assessment

Coordinated & Embedded Professional Development

Quality Classroom Instruction

Focus on All Students Learning

Dynamic and Distributed Leadership

Sustained Improvement Efforts Over Time

EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

SUPPORT FOR SYSTEMWIDE IMPROVEMENT

Effective Use of Data

Strategic Allocation of Resources

Policy and Program Coherence

CLEAR AND COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Professional Culture & Collaborative Relationships

Clear Understanding of School District Roles & Responsibilities

Interpreting and Managing the External Environment

Improvement

Time

Figure 2. Characteristics of improved school districts. Adapted from *Characteristics of Improved School Districts* (p. 13), by G. S. Shannon and P. Bylsma, 2004, Olympia, WA: Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. Copyright 2004 by Superintendent of Public Instruction, Olympia, Washington. Reprinted with permission.

Zavadsky's (2012) case studies identified effective human capital strategies, rigorous and engaging instruction, continuous performance management, positive cultures of high expectations, and collective accountability as essential elements for school turnaround. These elements collectively impact the role of the central office in supporting school turnaround. Driving achievement across schools necessitates considering how school districts can best be structured to help schools meet unique student needs while maintaining alignment and system coherence (Zavadsky, 2013).

The Virginia Foundation for Educational Leadership (Jones & Wheeler, 2011) conducted a study to examine school improvement efforts in Virginia. The study involved five school districts with schools identified in improvement and included rural

and urban school districts of varying sizes. The study found while it was rare for school districts or individual schools to be doing the same thing, common themes were readily apparent. How the school district or school addressed each theme was driven by the uniqueness of their needs and their specific school improvement goals (Jones & Wheeler, 2011). Table 1 contains the 16 common themes identified study conducted by the Virginia Foundation for Educational Leadership.

The Broad Foundation understood that scaling improvement beyond one great teacher or school required aligning the parts of the system around core elements into a strategic reform framework (Zavadsky, 2012). The foundation developed a framework of performance (Table 2) that is used to judge the quality of practices being implemented in school districts. The framework is based on a comprehensive review of the research literature and effective district practices conducted over the past 10 years.

Table 1

The Virginia Model: Profiles and Common Themes

Common Theme	Description
School Board Knowledge and Support	School boards were aware of the school improvement process.
Importance of Vision	Districts and schools recognized that vision was critically important.
Recognizing the DNA of the School	What works in one school may not be successfully replicated in other schools.
Intentionality	Superintendents, central office staff, and principals were very intentional about what they did.
Focused, Involved Central Office	The superintendent, the assistant superintendent, and the director of instruction were extremely knowledgeable of school reform efforts.
Data, Data, and More Data	Schools in improvement were data-driven.
Attitude Challenge and Change	All schools had challenges when they first were identified as needing improvement.
School-Based Administrative Leadership	The principal and the school-based leadership team played a pivotal role in the improvement of student achievement.
Expanding Leadership Capacity in the School	There was recognition that additional leaders were needed to be developed within the school.
Communication Structure with Transparency	There was a clearly defined communication structure that was transparent from the school board down to the individual teacher and parents.
Research-Based Instructional Strategies	School districts and schools in improvement emphasized the need to focus on research-based instructional strategies.
Alignment of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment	Alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment was a major component of school reform in all districts and schools in improvement.
Planning, Meeting, and Training Time for Teachers	Schools in improvement revised their daily schedule to provide common planning time for teachers, which allowed both horizontal and vertical curriculum discussions.
Standards are the Floor, Not the Ceiling	The Standards of Learning were the primary emphasis for instruction. However, all schools continued to offer arts and movement programs because they valued the contribution these programs made to the development of the whole child.
Remediation Programs Based on Identified Criteria	Schools in improvement had a remediation programs offered both during school and after school.
Non-Negotiables	Schools profiled used non-negotiables, which included school district and school-based models, strategies, techniques, or programs that had to be implemented with fidelity.

Note. Adapted from *The Virginia model: Profiles and common themes. Division strategies to support schools in improvement* (pp. 36-41) by R. E. Jones & G. A. Wheeler, G. A., 2011, Richmond, VA: The Virginia Foundation for Educational Leadership. Copyright 2011 by the Virginia Department of Education, Richmond, VA. Adapted with permission.

Table 2

Schools' Best Practice Framework

Teaching and Learning	Governance and Leadership	Organizational Structure and Culture
• Curriculum • Instruction • Assessment	• Instructional Leadership • Board and Executive Leadership • Performance and Accountability	• Effective Teachers • Effective Operations • Organizational Culture

Note. Adapted from *Characteristics of improved school districts* by The Broad Foundation, 2013, http://www.broadprize.org/publiccharterschools/framework.html. Copyright 2011 by the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation. Adapted with permission.

The elements, themes, and effective practices identified by these studies can be categorized into three domains: teaching and learning, district leadership, and operations and support systems. The research provides a framework to describe the key elements, roles, and strategies necessary to turn around low-performing schools. Table 3 outlines a framework of domains and elements for turning around low-performing schools. Data from the literature were analyzed and divided into three domains: teaching and learning strategies, school district leadership strategies, and district operations and support systems.

Table 3

Framework for Reform

Domain	Elements for Turning Around Low-performing Schools
Teaching and Learning	• Alignment Of Curriculum • Rigorous And Engaging Instruction • Assessment • Student Support Systems
District Leadership	• Instructional Leadership • District Oversight • Strategic Planning • Continuous Improvement And Accountability
Operations and Support System	• Effective Resource Allocation • Professional Development • Organizational Structures • Connections with Families and Community

Teaching and Learning

The influence of the individual teacher on student achievement is a central component for school turnaround efforts. However, no single strategy will transform classroom instruction unless systemic supports are in place (Knudson et al., 2011). District leaders play a key role in the development and implementation of curriculum, instruction, assessments, and student support systems. The focus on all students learning to high standards requires quality teaching and learning. Thus, improved districts need to have high expectations and accountability for all staff in the system because they have the main responsibility to improve student learning (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004).

Alignment of Curriculum

Research findings have found that a common curriculum with clear, intelligible standards that are aligned with appropriate assessments is critical to school improvement (Fullan, 2007; Marzano, 2003). However, a lack of a clearly articulated curriculum can hinder improvement efforts and result in curriculum chaos (Schmoker, 2006). Ensuring alignment between standards, curriculum, and assessments is the responsibility of the district. Therefore, the district serves as the central venue for coordinating curriculum approaches and decisions (Center on Education Policy, 2004). Curriculum development should be a shared task between district leaders and teachers. Entrusting that job solely to teachers and school leaders often results in a fragmented process. Yet having district curriculum directors develop it on their own fails to leverage what teachers have learned through execution of the current curriculum (Zavadsky, 2013). Districts communicate specific expectations for instructional practice and curriculum sets the stage for improving teaching and learning (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004). The district provides effective curricular supports and ensures that teachers can effectively teach the curriculum at the appropriate level of depth in the time available (The Broad Prize for Urban Education, 2013).

Rigorous and Engaging Instruction

Turning around chronically failing schools requires an adequate pipeline of educators with strong instructional skills and a passionate desire to work in challenging schools (Zavadsky, 2013). When districts establish instruction as a priority, they provide encouragement and support for improved teaching and learning in schools, incrementally ratcheting improved student achievement (Fullan, Rolheiser, Mascall, & Edge, 2005).

Improved districts pay close attention to classroom practice and provide guidance and oversight for improving teaching and learning. Districts emphasize principles of good instruction and communicate clear expectations for what to teach (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004). The guidance under the School Improvement Grants (SIG) provided by the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE, 2012b) requires schools that implement the turnaround model to identify an instructional program that is research based and vertically aligned as well as aligned with state academic standards.

District leaders play an important role by providing a guiding instructional framework, ensuring teachers employ effective instructional differentiation techniques, and ensuring teachers routinely and consistently provide challenging and engaging instruction related to grade-level standards (The Broad Prize for Urban Education, 2013). Transforming the culture means changing the way leaders do things. Effective leaders know that the hard work of re-culturing is the *sine qua non* of progress (Fullan, 2001). To monitor instructional change, the principal, coaches, and central office staff conduct observations and walkthroughs. District staff provide feedback to principals and ensure the principal followed up with teachers (Jones & Wheeler, 2011). School district leaders are facilitators, providing curriculum, pacing guides, and supplementary materials while creating opportunities for teachers to plan instruction. Districts need to be clear about how to scale effective instructional methods without micromanaging teaching or becoming slaves to scripts (Zavadsky, 2013).

Assessment

Effective districts have cohesive, comprehensive, and user friendly systems for assessing and reporting student performance and ensuring that all administrators and

teachers develop appropriate skills and tools for analyzing data to improve instruction (The Broad Prize for Urban Education, 2013). A focus on classroom instruction includes interim assessments, extra help and enrichment for students, and frequent practice to help students retain their mastery of skills (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004). Teachers who use common assessments collaborate to create the measures and develop greater clarity about their purpose for teaching and how learning can be addressed (Fisher & Frey, 2007). Formative assessments provide crucial data on the progress of the implementation of the curriculum as well as help to identify potential targets for intervention (Lindahl & Beach, 2013). A study of "90/90/90" schools by Reeves (2004) found one of the main characteristics of schools that have achieved success is the use of frequent common assessments. Reeves defined 90/90/90 schools as those in which over 90% of the students are eligible for free and reduced lunch, above 90% of the students are from ethnic minorities, and over 90% of the students have met or achieved high academic achievement. However, it is a common belief that students are over-tested and that if teachers devote too much time to testing, then teachers will not have time to teach (Reeves, 2006). Students' experiences of assessment practice are an important source of information on the nature of the relationship between assessment and learning (Buhagiar & Chetcuti, 2014).

Assessment is considered to be an integral part of teaching and learning. The focus should be on student involvement and authentic, meaningful assessment leading to the development of a variety of assessment forms (Falchikov, 2005). To be effective, the frequent common assessments used by most successful schools are not isolated but integral parts of the teaching and learning cycle (Reeves, 2006). Assessment is intended

to inform teaching, and then leadership provides the time and resources for teachers to respond to the assessment results, and students use assessment feedback as a series of cues for improved performance (Reeves, 2006). A district central office is better positioned than schools to coordinate and align the crucial reform elements within and across schools, such as helpful interim assessments that are used to identify and provide professional development aligned to teacher and student needs (Zavadsky, 2013). Districts should focus professional development on ensuring that teachers understand their grade level and content specific standards, how those standards are assessed, and what to do when students do not perform well (Fisher & Frey, 2007).

Student Support Systems

While the research on effective schools mentions interventions such as before and after school programs (Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore, & Lash, 2007; Corallo & McDonald, 2001) it is important for districts to take a broader look at interventions for school turnaround. It is essential for districts to have a range of interventions in their tool kits to address the unique needs of students, teachers, and leaders (Zavadsky, 2013). Successful schools provide decisive and immediate interventions such as changing schedules, providing double classes or extending time for literacy and math, breaking down major projects into incremental steps, and otherwise providing preventative assistance for students in need (Reeves, 2006). Instructional techniques that are useful for interventions, such as the use of flexible student grouping, also help teachers learn to better differentiate instruction for students (Zavadsky, 2013).

The district provides effective instructional supports for all students by ensuring teachers routinely identify students in need of remediation or enrichment using reliable

data from multiple sources and by ensuring that they receive appropriate intervention or assistance needed to make progress and stay in school (The Broad Prize for Urban Education, 2013). Districts target interventions to low performing students and/or schools by providing additional resources, attention, oversight, and feedback (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004). While focusing on the lowest performing schools, districts use the school improvement process to drive schools forward and utilize a bank of interventions such as shifting funds, providing additional help, and targeting programs and quality teachers to the lowest performing schools (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004). Districts use prevention as an intervention through their continuous monitoring of data to identify problems that are easy to mitigate within a regular school day and classroom, rather than waiting until more intensive interventions are needed (Zavadsky, 2013). Table 4 identifies the most frequently cited key elements in the literature organized under the domain of teaching and learning.

Table 4

Frequency Analysis: Teaching and Learning Strategies to Turn Around Low-performing

Schools

	Strategy			
Research	Alignment of Curriculum	Rigorous and Engaging Instruction	Assessment	Student Support Systems
The Broad Prize for Urban Education (2013)*	●	●	●	●
Buhagiar & Chetcuti (2014)	●		●	
Center on Education Policy (2004)	●			
Falchikov (2005)			●	
Fisher & Frey (2007)			●	
Fullen (2001)		●		
Fullan (2007)	●			
Fullan et al. (2005)*		●		
Jones & Wheeler (2011)*		●		
Lindahl & Beach (2013)			●	
Marzano (2003)	●			
Reeves (2006)			●	●
Schmoker (2006)	●			
Shannon & Bylsma (2004)*	●	●	●	●
Zavadsky (2013)*	●	●	●	●

Note. * = empirical studies.

School District Leadership

Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003) examined the effects of leadership practices on student achievement. They analyzed studies conducted over a 30-year period and identified 21 leadership responsibilities that are significantly associated with student achievement. The results of the meta-analysis of 30 years of research found a substantial relationship between leadership and student achievement (Waters et al., 2003). Almost every research study or article on turnaround points to leaders as the main catalysts for changing what happens in chronically low performing schools (The Broad Prize for Urban Education, 2013; DuFour, 2012; Firestone & Martinez, 2007; Zavadsky, 2012). While school leadership is a crucial factor, principals and other school leaders are selected, supported, and directed by policy and practice driven by school district leadership (Zavadsky, 2012). The district leaders' commitment to strategies that engage district and school personnel in organizational learning should be focused on deep understanding of the particular learning challenges and conditions of each school. This is key to differentiating district support for improvement in a more adaptive as opposed to bureaucratic way (Anderson, Mascall, Stiegelbauer, & Park, 2012). Effective leadership that focuses on all students' learning is at the core of improved school districts. Leadership is committed, persistent, proactive, and distributed through the system (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004).

Instructional Leadership

Instructional leadership plays an essential role in school turnaround. School districts develop instructional leaders through professional development, direct support, and opportunities to collaborate. To accomplish this, districts should provide regularly

scheduled collaboration time for school and district instructional leaders to share best practices and engage in joint problem-solving (The Broad Prize for Urban Education, 2013). It also requires a multifaceted approach that will provide schools with strong leaders and teachers, the tools and structures to implement frequent progress monitoring, and the flexibility and support for school personnel to intervene appropriately and quickly (Zavadsky, 2013). Effective district leaders recognize they unilaterally cannot transform traditional schools into high-performing schools from the central office. Therefore, they work with principals to create a guiding coalition of key teacher leaders within each school to build enthusiasm for the process (DuFour, 2012). Teacher leaders also can take some of the same leadership tasks as the district, such as procuring and distributing resources, monitoring progress, and providing professional development (Firestone & Martinez, 2007). Teacher leaders have an important role in turnaround efforts.

District Oversight

An essential component of school district oversight is the effective use of data for supporting school turnaround. School districts need to have a cohesive, comprehensive, and user-friendly system for assessing and reporting student performance that ensures all administrators and teachers develop appropriate skills and tools for analyzing data to improve instruction (The Broad Prize for Urban Education, 2013). Zavadsky (2013) called this oversight performance management, which is the ability to make course corrections at all levels before small problems become bigger; this is essential to the improvement process. Performance management means more than simply testing and collecting data. It means having a data system that houses multiple types of data such as assessment, course-taking, and discipline data; useful assessments that reflect what was

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taught and learned; structured monitoring systems; and time to review, interpret, and respond to data.

In addition, districts need to build a culture that trusts the data and how they will use it (Zavadsky, 2013). The challenge for leaders is to use data, not as a surveillance activity but in the service of improvement (Wallace & Alkin, 2008). A move from accountability as surveillance to accountability for improvement requires a fundamental change. Educators ought to be the prime consumers of data and become experts in interpreting data and transforming them into knowledge (Earl & Fullan, 2003). In addition to setting the expectation of "data driven decision making" (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004, p. 36), districts take responsibility for collecting data, analyzing them, and providing them to schools in manageable, understandable forms.

Strategic Planning

Strategic planning is a tool often used by districts to help build coherence with school improvement. Strategic planning can increase the likelihood that all components such as staffing, budgeting, and professional development are connected with the district vision (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004). The strategic plan is developed using a systematic planning process that engages relevant stakeholders and is built on research-based practices. Effective school improvement plans consistently are aligned with the district strategic plan (The Broad Prize for Urban Education, 2013). Systemic reform requires close connection and alignment from the district level to the school level. District leaders first conducted a thorough system assessment, then worked with various leaders and teachers to determine short and long term goals, reduced bureaucratic layers and obstacles, and created a strategic plan with clear goals and activities (Zavadsky, 2013).

Rather than a "one-size-fits-all" approach, districts must find ways to differentiate treatments to schools based on their unique performance needs and related conditions. At the same time, they must create and implement integration strategies that bring coherence into systems of schools and into the improvement efforts of those schools, which imply common as well as differentiated expectations, relations, and inputs to schools (Anderson et al., 2012).

Continuous Improvement and Accountability

The focus on all students learning to high standards requires quality teaching and learning. Therefore, improved districts need to have high expectations and accountability for adults in the system because the adults have the main responsibility to improve student learning (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004). The district plays a critical role by providing clear and consistent expectations for student performance and providing intensive supports for underperforming staff and schools. The district holds itself accountable for providing positive working conditions for all staff and engaging in continuous improvement based on feedback (The Broad Prize for Urban Education, 2013). Data has become the vehicle of choice for ensuring accountability, and school leaders are caught in the nexus of accountability and improvement trying to make sense of the role that data can and should play in school leadership (Earl & Fullan, 2003).

The Broad Foundation research discovered school districts had to balance the needs of the improvement schools along with the needs of the whole district (The Broad Prize for Urban Education, 2013). The district routinely and proactively provided intensive targeted supports for underperforming employees (including district and school administrators, teachers, and other staff) in order to improve their effectiveness while

they aggressively and systematically provided intensive targeted technical assistance and

other supports to all schools with chronic performance issues and to schools at risk of

being identified for improvement through state/federal legislation (The Broad Prize for

Urban Education, 2013). To change this, these elements of good instruction needed to be

reinforced and clarified regularly and redundantly. Schmoker (2009) suggested someone

in the district should make regular, brief classroom visits to ensure strategies are being

implemented and then provide feedback to school staff. As long as the districts outline

clear goals, maintain focus, connect the essential reform elements, and balance autonomy

and accountability, the conditions can be set for scalable and sustainable success

(Zavadsky, 2013). Table 5 identifies the most frequently cited key elements in the

literature organized under the domain of district leadership.

Table 5

Frequency Analysis: School District Leadership Strategies to Turn Around Low-performing Schools

Research	Encourage Instructional Leadership	Provide Oversight and Support on Use of Data	Develop Strategic Plans	Ensure Accountability
		Strategy		
Anderson et al. (2012)*			●	
The Broad Prize for Urban Education (2013)*	●	●	●	●
DuFour (2012)	●			
Earl & Fullen (2003)		●		●
Firestone & Martinez (2007)*	●			
Schmoker (2009)				●
Shannon & Bylsma (2004)*		●	●	●
Wallace & Alkin (2008)		●		
Zavadsky (2013)*	●	●	●	●

Note. * = empirical studies.

District Operations and Support Systems

Turning around low-achieving schools requires alignment from a district that is focused on lending expertise and providing oversight, support, and resources (Zavadsky, 2012). Historically, school districts differentiated support for schools in relation to organizational differences in school types and in compliance with legislated categorical differences in students served and programs offered by particular schools (Anderson et al., 2012). Over the years policies have shifted in the policy arena from equal resource

allocation to equitably distributing resources for better achievement results. With the No

Child Left Behind (2002) requirements for AYP, state governments, and local district

authorities now are expected to differentiate support on the basis of student results on

state proficiency tests, with the expectation that this will contribute to improvement in

student learning outcomes on government prescribed indicators of quality (USDOE,

2007).

Effective Resource Allocation

Improved districts provide, allocate, reallocate, and find resources to ensure

quality instruction. Districts provide additional resources—financial as well as human

and social capital—to support low performers. Districts give schools some autonomy

over staffing, schedules, and budgets within parameters that establish their roles and

responsibilities (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004). A systemic approach in which the school

district aligns its resources and strategies to confront common challenges and support

effective solutions might best address the needs of struggling schools (Knudson et al.,

2011). Research from the Broad Foundation identified a series of effective practices

within fiscal and human resources that impact performance and improvement in student

achievement (The Broad Prize for Urban Education, 2013). Districts need to implement a

prudent financial planning process that allocates funds in alignment with district priorities

included in the strategic plan, regularly evaluates spending decisions as they relate to

impact on student achievement, and makes changes based on these evaluations. It also is

important for districts to have an efficient and effective human resource management

system that strategically places highly effective administrators and teachers in schools

with the highest needs to promote the achievement of all students (The Broad Prize for

Urban Education, 2013). However, managing talented teachers and leaders involves much more than just recruiting, selecting, developing, and retaining staff. It means understanding how to obtain and distribute the right leaders and teachers, then lining up all parts of the system to help them meet their goals successfully (Zavadsky, 2013).

Professional Development

Research studies have emphasized the importance of professional development to build the capacity of educators, schools, and districts to meet challenging learning goals (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004). An abundance of professional development (PD) opportunities exist for educators and administrators at all educational levels. Despite the availability of PD, many such workshops are unsuccessful (Balan, Manko, & Phillips, 2011). The key to professional development for both leaders and teachers is for it to be relevant, accessible, accountable by use of follow up activities, and aligned to school and district goals (Zavadsky, 2013). The U.S. Department of Education (2012b) requires schools receiving School Improvement Grants (SIG) to provide staff ongoing, high-quality, job-embedded professional development that is aligned with the school's comprehensive instructional program and designed with school staff to ensure that they are equipped to facilitate effective teaching and learning and have the capacity to successfully implement school reform strategies. The study from the Virginia Foundation of Educational Leadership (Jones & Wheeler, 2011) found the schools in improvement were treated uniquely, and each of the schools had the opportunity to create a professional development plan based on school data. For example, Portsmouth City Schools developed a Professional Growth Cooperative Model for all teachers and administrators that provided staff the opportunity to choose up to 12 hours of professional

development. New teachers and teachers identified as needing extra assistance received additional professional development training during the year (Jones & Wheeler, 2011). Critical to this process is educational leadership that promotes student learning through PD that empowers teachers, cultivates a climate for learning, and fosters collaboration (Fullan, 2001).

Research has shown an increase of districts across the country adopting models of professional learning communities (PLCs) as a means for improving teachers' instructional practices and student achievement (Burke, Marx, & Berry, 2011). Successful professional development is ongoing, collective, job-embedded, and most effective when schools and districts function as professional learning communities (DuFour, 2014). Therefore, the district provides a system for supporting vertical and horizontal teacher collaboration and for evaluating the effectiveness of professional development. This is accomplished through regularly scheduled vertical and horizontal collaboration time for teachers, through providing the expertise and resources, and through routinely evaluating and refining professional development practices to ensure that content learned is being implemented with fidelity and is effective in helping students reach high levels of achievement (The Broad Prize for Urban Education, 2013).

Organizational Structures

The organizational structure can have a meaningful impact on the district's ability to support student achievement and district goals. District staff and organizational components are focused first on student learning. Leadership conveys the importance of the focus and takes action to implement strategies that improve learning (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004). However, districts must make many decisions when embarking on a

strategy designed to dramatically improve instruction in chronically failing schools. One of the first considerations is how to structurally organize, place, and govern the work (Zavadsky, 2012). Leverage for improved organizational performance happens through networks, not individuals (Reeves, 2006). A national study by the Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy (Honig et al., 2010) found central office administrators needed to shift their work from delivering services that they controlled to taking responsibility for work projects and marshaling resources from throughout and sometimes beyond the central office to address them. School district administrators exercise essential leadership, in partnership with school leaders, to build capacity throughout public educational systems for teaching and learning improvements (Honig et al., 2010). Districts need to ensure organizational coherence through organizational structure and policies and practices, effective two-way communication and cross-functional support for individual schools, and effectively balancing centralized and decentralized decision making (The Broad Prize for Urban Education, 2013).

As individual schools improve, the kinds of support provided by the district should change. It typically becomes less directive and interventionist, allowing for more discretion and control. It also becomes more responsive to perceived needs as defined by school personnel and encourages more lateral sharing among schools of solutions to common problems. The underlying principle is that differentiated support is not aimed merely at turning around failing or at risk schools, but also at creating conditions and processes that enable schools to engage in continuous improvement (Anderson et al., 2012). If the only source of inspiration for improvement is motivation provided by the individual leader and schools, then islands of excellence may result and be recognized,

but the long-term system-wide improvement will continue to be an illusion (Reeves, 2006). Districts organize their struggling schools into a cohort structure, which brings scale and alignment to their strategies. A cohort can provide alignment across schools that have similar needs and makes coordination of oversight, training, and performance management easier to implement and manage (Zavadsky, 2012).

Connections with Families and Community

One of the most important relationships in districts and schools is with parents. Because low parent involvement is a common concern with chronically failing schools, reconnecting with parents to schools is crucial (Zavadsky, 2013). Improved school districts have relationships that are collaborative and reflect the needs and strengths of the district, schools, and community stakeholders (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004). Recently there has been a greater interest in community involvement. Such involvement is valued as a means to generate both needed resources to support school improvement efforts and students' learning as well as community support for educational expenditures and school referendums (Sanders & Lewis, 2005).

There should be an intentional effort to communicate what is important to families and the community. Communication about the importance of student achievement comes from both the school and the central office. It is very important for student learning outcomes to be consistently communicated to parents, teachers, students, and the community (Jones & Wheeler, 2011). The guidance under the School Improvement Grants (SIG) provided by the U.S. Department of Education (2012b) requires school districts to engage family and community in programs that support a range of activities, such as a family literacy program for parents who need to improve

their skills in order to support their children's learning, designed to build the capacity of parents and school staff to work together to improve student academic achievement.

Yet, regardless of federal and state mandates, the success of parent involvement in schools varies considerably. The literature all too frequently has described a "managed" or "transactional" relationship, largely designed to limit access and minimize professional exposure to "risk" (Barr & Bizar, 2001). Fullan (2001) stated there is a difference between "tinkering" with change and "reculturing," which involves changing norms, values, vision, and relationships. The leadership of parent involvement can contribute to improved success as part of a comprehensive capacity building approach to improving schools. Transformational leadership helps to create the enabling organizational conditions that foster the involvement, engagement, and empowerment of parents, which is "capacity building" in a collective sense of the term (Giles, 2006). To accomplish this, districts employ effective outreach efforts at every school and provide meaningful opportunities for parents to become involved in the schools and district (The Broad Prize for Urban Education, 2013). Table 6 identifies the most frequently cited key elements in the literature organized under the domain of operations and support system.

Table 6

Frequency Analysis: District Operations and Support Systems for Turning Around Low-performing Schools

	Strategy			
Research	Effective Resource Allocation	Professional Development	Organizational Structures	Connections with Family and Community
Anderson et al. (2012)*			●	
Balan et al. (2011)		●		
Barr & Bizar (2001)				●
The Broad Prize for Urban Education (2013)*	●	●	●	●
Burke et al. (2011)		●		
DuFour (2014)		●		
Fullan (2001)		●		●
Giles (2006)				●
Jones & Wheeler (2011)*		●		●
Knudson et al. (2011)	●			
Reeves (2006)			●	
Sanders & Lewis (2005)*				●
Shannon & Bylsma (2004)*	●	●	●	●
Zavadsky (2013)*	●	●	●	●

Note. * = empirical studies.

Summary

Districts serve as the logical catalyst and hub for ensuring schools get what they need to turn around low-performing schools. This requires balance and clarity on the best division of labor between districts and schools (Zavadsky, 2013). Improved districts serve and support student learning by using data effectively, strategically allocating

resources, and ensuring policy and program coherence. The themes of support affect all parts of the organization, improving districts, and clearly support the central focus on student learning (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004). Long-term school turnaround often requires systemic, district level approaches by customizing the conditions of each specific school (Knudson et al., 2011). Districts applying a systemic approach create coherence by identifying system-wide goals and outcomes; by providing a clear framework as a guide; by clarifying non-negotiables, such as curriculum standards, to maintain coherence and quality; and by encouraging schools to use resources creatively to address student needs (Zavadsky, 2013).

Chapter 2 shared the foundational research that allowed conclusions to be made about the roles of school districts in influencing school improvement. The chapter also provided research that identified key elements within school district leadership, district operations and support, effective teaching, and student learning. The elements, themes, and effective practices identified through the research were categorized into three domains: teaching and learning, district leadership, and operations and support systems. The research provided a framework to describe the key elements, roles, and strategies necessary to turn around low-performing schools. Each domain and element researched supports the framework for the interviews and data collection described in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

Crotty (1998) suggested that in developing a research study, one needs to put considerable effort into answering two questions. First, what methodologies and methods will be employed in the research and, second, how can the researcher justify the choice of methodologies and methods. This research employed a qualitative approach to examine the phenomenon of effective district leadership. Qualitative research is an umbrella concept covering several forms of inquiry that helps to understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible (Merriam, 2007). This approach is best suited to study roles of a school district and can provide greater depth of information about the nature of those roles.

The research utilized a descriptive case study to examine the district's role in school turnaround because the case study method is well suited for uncovering the interaction of notable factors characteristic within the phenomenon of developing a district's capacity to support schools and of improving student achievement in the school districts. Yin (2009) noted that a case study is a design that is particularly suited to situations in which it is impossible to separate the phenomenon's variables from their context. The context of this study necessitated investigating two school districts in order to identify contrasts, similarities, and patterns between the cases. The research utilized qualitative research methods to compare one school district that had been successful in building and sustaining the capacity to improve its schools to another school district in the process of turning around low-performing schools.

The purpose of this study is to review the efforts of two school districts, located in the southeastern part of the United States, in developing and sustaining their capacity to improve student achievement in response to increased accountability. The school districts are located in a rural setting and contain smaller student enrollment, between 1,000 to 5,000 students. The study sought to confirm what the research indicates regarding the role of the school district in influencing school improvement by providing an in-depth description of the systems that support school turnaround, the roles of the central office in supporting school turnaround, and strategies necessary for turning around low-performing schools and sustaining higher achievement. While there is a significant body of research identifying elements for turning around low-performing schools, limited information exists describing the roles of school district leaders in influencing school improvement. This study identified the roles and practices of district leaders and determined the strategies used to successfully turn around low performing schools and sustain higher achievement.

A comparative case study is an ideal methodology for conducting an investigation to address in-depth understanding for those involved in the process because it can explore how district leaders support school turnaround. Case studies examine process rather than outcomes and support the distinctive need to understand complex social phenomenon (Merriam, 2007; Yin, 2009). It is easy to conclude that low-performing schools need assistance from district leadership. However, understanding a school district's role and the strategies necessary to turn around low-performing schools is complex. Yin (2009) has described a case study as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in-depth and within its real life context, especially when the boundaries

between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. The research on turnaround points to district leaders as the main catalysts for changing what happens in chronically low-performing schools (Anderson et al., 2011; The Broad Prize for Urban Education, 2013; Shannon & Bylsma, 2004; Zvadsky, 2012). This study examined the details of two rural school districts that had engaged in turning around their low-achieving schools through the viewpoint of the study's participants (superintendents, assistant superintendents, district leaders overseeing school improvement, and school principals). The context of this study necessitated investigating two school districts that have engaged in school improvement efforts, in order to identify contrasts, similarities, or patterns between the cases. The first district served approximately 4,500 students at three high schools, four middle schools, and seven elementary schools in a 450 square mile region of the southeastern part of the United States. The second school district selected for the study served approximately 1,200 students at one high school, one middle school, and one elementary schools in a eight square mile region of the southeastern part of the United States. The study included an analysis of archived school improvement plans and job descriptions, which was used as additional data. The use of these documents is important to augment evidence from other sources and can provide other specific details to corroborate information in case studies (Yin, 2009).

This research followed the recommended protocols for case study design. Yin (2009) has suggested the desired skills an investigator should possess are the ability to ask good questions and to interpret the responses, to be a good listener, to be adaptive and flexible so as to react to various situations, to have a firm grasp of issues being studied, and to be unbiased by preconceived notions. In preparation for the study of district

leaders' roles in school turnaround, the researcher created a survey that reflected the research. The survey then was reviewed by a panel of experts who work with school turnaround at the state and district level. As a practitioner in public education, the researcher brings a great deal of experience as a former building administrator, school district leader of accountability, and a state leader responsible for federal accountability. From 2004 to 2006, the researcher worked as a school building administrator responsible for evaluating curriculum and coordinating school improvement programs. From 2006 to 2012, the researcher served as a school district leader responsible for monitoring and reporting schools' performance and overseeing the implementation of the 1003g School Improvement Grants (USDOE, 2012b). In 2012, the researcher assumed a position at a state education agency providing research and analysis and reporting on federal grant requirements, including trends on national policy developments related to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) programs (NCLB, 2002), specifically providing feedback and input on the development and implementation of ESEA flexibility provisions. The researcher's experience working with school turnaround at the school, district, and state level over the last decade provided strength to the study and reduced the limitations. Critical researchers position themselves in the text to be reflective and self-aware of their role and to be upfront by acknowledging biases and values (Creswell, 2012). The researcher entered the research study with his own set of assumptions and biases about school turnaround. However, his unique perspective and experience provided a strong grasp of the subject and a greater understanding of the research that addresses turning around low-performing schools.

Guiding Questions

The aim of this comparative case study was to understand the efforts of school districts in developing and sustaining their capacity to improve student achievement in response to increased accountability. This multi-level perspective provides the means to study various aspects of school improvement and key elements within school district leadership, district operations and support, and effective teaching and student learning. The following questions were developed to steer the investigation:

1. What are the **key elements** of a school district's system of support that turn around low performing schools?

2. What are the district's **roles** in supporting low-performing schools?

3. What are the **strategies** a district can implement to turn around low-performing schools?

Case Study as a Methodology

The researcher determined a comparative case study to be the qualitative methodology best suited for this study because it allows the researcher to uncover the roles of district leaders who support school turnaround. Using a multiple case study as a strategy can enlighten those situations where the intervention being evaluated has no clear, single set of outcomes (Yin, 2009). This methodology provides the opportunity to examine contextual conditions that are pertinent to the phenomenon of this study. A case study can illustrate the complexities of a situation and describe the influence people have on the phenomenon (Merriam, 2007). The researcher's purpose was description as he attempted to depict and conceptualize the district's role in supporting low-performing schools and their influence in building and sustaining the capacity to improve all schools.

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A comparative case study methodology allows the researcher to examine key elements of a school district's system of support that turn around low-performing schools through the perspectives of the participants involved in the phenomenon. The more cases in the study with greater variation, the more compelling an interpretation is likely to be (Merriam, 2007). The researcher sought to identify the key elements within school district leadership, district operations and support, and effective teaching and student learning that contribute to improving and sustaining achievement at schools. Comparative case study research affords the most practical opportunity for such exploration.

Case Selection

Two districts were selected carefully in order to identify one district that was able to turn around low-performing schools while sustaining higher achievement for all schools and a second district that is in the process of turning around low-performing schools. For the purposes of this study, both school districts had to meet certain criterion to be selected. This first criterion for this study was that both school districts would have had schools identified as the lowest-achieving schools under the 2009 School Improvement Grants (SIG) program (USDOE, 2012b). The U.S. Department of Education (2012b) requires school districts receiving SIG funds to be identified as having persistently lowest-achieving schools, and defines those schools as the lowest-achieving 5% of Title I schools in improvement in the state. There was limited number of districts that met these criteria in this region of the United States. The second criterion for this study was based on whether the school district currently has schools identified as priority or focus schools as defined under the 2012 ESEA flexibility provisions. One of the key components identified within the ESEA flexibility is to require states to identify low-

achieving schools as priority and focus schools. Priority schools represent the lowest 5% of Title I schools that are identified, based on overall reading and mathematics achievement. Focus schools represent 10% of a state's Title I schools that are identified, based on achievement gaps in reading and mathematics (USDOE, 2012a). The study required locating a comparable district that had engaged in school improvement efforts. The first school district identified was a rural district that was able to turnaround low-performing schools while sustaining higher achievement for all schools and had no priority of focus schools. The second school district, identified as in the process of turning around low-performing schools, was a rural district that had a priority school at the time of the study. Selecting a purposeful sample was important for this case study research. Merriam (2007) has suggested purposeful selection is appropriate when the investigator wants to understand or gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which most can be learned. Because the research questions demand investigating schools that had engaged in turning around low-performing schools, the researcher determined the federal definitions of low-performing to be practical in selecting the cases for this comparative study.

Selection of Interview Participants

Interview selection for this qualitative research was purposeful and identified participants who could best inform the research questions and enhance understanding of the phenomenon under study were selected. Creswell (2012) has suggested it is important to select for interviews appropriate candidates who are willing to share information openly and honestly. For the purpose of this study, the researcher selected four participants from each school district based on their role in school turnaround. District

leaders play an important role by providing a guiding instructional framework, ensuring teachers employ effective instructional differentiation techniques, and ensuring teachers routinely and consistently provide challenging and engaging instruction related to grade-level standards (The Broad Prize for Urban Education, 2013). The first logical participants selected for this study were the superintendents. Superintendents are responsible for the success of the school district and oversee aspects of school division leadership, support, and district operations. Ensuring alignment between standards, curriculum, and assessments is the responsibility of the district. Therefore, the district serves as the central venue for coordinating curriculum approaches and decisions (Center on Education Policy, 2004). The second set of participants selected were the assistant superintendents of curriculum and instruction. This position is responsible for the written and taught curriculum in a school district and ensures effective strategies that address teaching and learning. It also is important for districts to have an efficient and effective human resource management system that strategically places highly effective administrators and teachers in schools with the highest needs to promote the achievement of all students (The Broad Prize for Urban Education, 2013). Therefore, the third set of participants selected for the study was the directors overseeing school improvement. These positions oversee and monitor the implementation school improvement programs as well as have responsibilities for teacher hiring, professional development, and the teacher evaluation. Effective district leaders recognize they unilaterally cannot transform traditional schools into high-performing schools from the central office. Therefore, they work with principals to create a guiding coalition of key teacher leaders within each school to build enthusiasm for the process (DuFour, 2012). The last set of participants

selected for this study was the principal because the principal often is responsible for directing the support provided by the school district.

Considering the limited number of school districts that could meet the criteria, it was critical that the researcher identified those districts and request permission to interview from the superintendent before sending letters to participants. It often is difficult to gain the permission required to conduct adequate research study, particularly when the research centers on a sensitive topic such as school turnaround. The researcher used existing formal relationships as a state leader to gain access to districts that would illuminate the research questions (Yin, 2009). The researcher was granted permission by both superintendents, and worked with the district's leadership to obtain formal approval and coordinate interviews. The researcher, as an employee of the state Department of Education, provides support for educational programs to school districts in the state including the two school districts studied. This role provided the researcher additional insight into the structures and systems in place to support school turnaround. Because of this supportive role, not only was the researcher provided access for the study, the participants were comfortable and willing to share their role in turning around low-achieving schools. The study was conducted in full compliance with the ethical standards of the American Psychological Association (APA) and the Institutional Review Board (Education Internal Review Committee) of the College of William and Mary. Confidentiality of the schools, districts, and participants were ensured using a signed informed consent form (Appendix A) as prescribed in the Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol.

Data Collection Techniques

For this study, data were gathered through focused interviews and an analysis of past school improvement plans. The interviews provided in-depth information pertaining to the district leader's experience and perspectives on school turnaround. Yin (2009) has stated interviews are one of the most important sources for case studies and are essential for case study information. Interviews in this study assisted the researcher with describing the participants' roles in supporting schools and were essential in answering the research questions. The semi-structured interviews served as the primary sources of data collected. The secondary source of data was collected through a review of archived school improvement plans. Each school that is identified in improvement is required to produce an improvement plan and submit those plans to the state education agency for review. The improvement plans provided strategies and steps taken to increase academic achievement and the types of support provided by the school district for school turnaround. The review of these documents strengthened the validity of the data found in the interview. Creswell (2012) has suggested researchers review and organize all the data into categories or themes that cut across all of the sources.

Interviews

Semi-structured and focused interviews produce rich data gathered from each participant's unique perspectives and experiences. Interviews are an essential source of the case study and provide important insights into events and prior history relevant to the research (Yin, 2009). The researcher aimed to examine interpretations and facets of the district's role in supporting schools through responses of the interview participants. The interview instrument framed the 35 questions into three domains organized around a

theoretical framework. The questions were designed around common areas of the

research identified in Chapter 2. Questions were developed and categorized using the

framework for reform described in the research. The questions were designed to examine

the ways in which district leaders are engaged in the school improvement process. The

interview final protocol addressed the essential domains and elements for turning around

low-performing schools (Appendix B). The interviews ranged in time from 45 minutes to

two hours, and involved one session with each participant. The number of sessions and

time spent in each session varied, based on the amount of detail provided by participants

in response to the interview protocol and the time allotted by participants for interview.

Instrument Validation

Four major methods exist to establish the validity of an instrument: face, content,

criterion related, and construct. When developing a survey to measure a previously

unexplored construct, researchers should employ a 4-step process: (a) defining constructs

and content domain, (b) generating and judging measurement items, (c) designing and

conducting studies to develop a scale, and (d) finalizing the scale (Burton & Mazerolle,

2011). For the purpose of this study, a panel of experts was used to validate the content of

the survey questions. The panel, which was comprised of two district leaders and three

staff from the state's Office of School Improvement, was asked if the question was clear

and whether the question belonged in the identified domain, and to provide additional

comments. Having on the panel experts who work closely with school improvement

strengthened the instrument used for interviews and increased validity of the research.

Content validity is important for establishing a connection from the questions to the

theoretical framework found in the research. Fowler (2009) has suggested once a set of

questions is drafted, the next step is to subject them to a critical systematic review. The expert panel was asked to evaluate the survey questions using a content validation instrument that was collected and summarized (Appendix C). As a result of the feedback, several questions were modified for clarity and one follow-up question was eliminated. The feedback confirmed categorization and sequence of the survey questions to be used in the interview (Appendix D).

Document Collection

For the purposes of this study, it was important to analyze information attained from school improvement plans and to interpret how the schools operationalized the support provided by the district. Title I Schools receiving SIG funds under Title I, Part A must develop or revise a school improvement plan that will have the greatest likelihood of improving their performance and submit those plans to the state education agency (USDOE, 2012b). The information collected through this process was used to identify specific examples of the district leader's support and provide additional information that would not have been gained through interviews.

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Data Analysis

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Data from this study afforded the researcher the opportunity to learn firsthand how school district leaders coordinate support for low-achieving schools and the role districts have on influencing school improvement. The research employed analytical memo writing, organizing those memos within a framework of reform, and a thematic analysis to identify themes and patterns. The researcher began the analysis with reflection and analytical memo writing. According to Merriam (2007), analytic memos are short interpretations of data that can be used to guide more formalized analysis. The memos

were used during the review of the interview transcripts in order to develop preliminary codes for analysis. Analytical memos provided the foundation for further analysis of data and allow the researcher to develop an understanding of patterns within the data (Merriam, 2007). The analysis included a logical method for organizing information from the interviews and document review. In this case, the framework for reform containing the domains of teaching and learning, district leadership, and operations and support system were used to guide the research process. The framework was beneficial in identifying relevant concepts/constructs, definition of key variables, questions to be investigated, and data collection strategies (Merriam, 2007). Engaging in this process allowed the researcher to focus on each domain, organize the data, and connect findings back to the research.

Coding Interviews

The interviews were recorded and the audio files exported and initially transcribed by a transcription service. A review of the written transcripts also was done to check for sentence structure, word accuracy, and the proper use of tenses. The researcher employed open coding to examine individual interviews broadly for elements identified under the domains of teaching and learning, school division leadership, or operations and support. Meaningful comparisons were made between school districts to identify contrasts, similarities, or patterns between the two cases. From this procedure, the researcher examined the information to determine whether any meaningful patterns emerged and incorporated pattern matching. For case study analysis, one of the most desirable techniques is to use a pattern-matching logic to strengthen the case study and its internal validity (Yin, 2009). Pattern matching was used to form logical deductions and to

compare those to the empirically based patterns found in the research. After individual interviews were analyzed and coded for meaning, the researcher sought to make connections among participants' perspectives through axial coding and disaggregating data by themes. Rudestam and Newton (2014) have suggested relating categories to their subcategories and assessing how major categories relate to each other and their subcategories. The researcher examined the relationship between each participant's role as well as the connection between the three domains. According to Merriam (2007), data should be compressed and linked together in a way that conveys the meaning the researcher has derived from studying the phenomenon. A thematic analysis was used in the process of examining the data for meaning. Thematic analysis, when aggregated together, forms major ideas and the core element in qualitative data analysis (Creswell, 2012). Materials collected from the interviews, such as the digital recordings and transcriptions, were stored in a way to ensure confidentiality. Participants' anonymity will be preserved through the use of pseudonyms and modified key characteristics to avoid their identity being discovered.

Document Analysis

With qualitative research, the analysis procedure often evolves throughout the study. Documents or records can be analyzed at different points in the study and each analysis can yield new constructs, hypotheses, and insights (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). This process assisted in confirming and validating themes found through the analysis. The review of school improvement plans provided the historical context of strategies used to improve student achievement as well evidence of the role school district leaders had in supporting those strategies. Documents provided broad coverage over an extended

span of time, events, and settings (Yin, 2009). A review of the improvement plans also showed whether district leaders followed through with the support that was described in the school plans. Additionally, the plans provided evidence to support themes of the study.

Ethical Considerations

Research for this study was conducted in full compliance with the ethical standards of the American Psychological Association (APA) and the Institutional Review Board (Education Internal Review Committee) of the College of William and Mary. Because interview questions could lead participants to offer value judgments about their colleagues, schools, or the district at which they work, participants were offered the opportunity to be interviewed at an off-site location or by telephone. Every precaution was taken to ensure that interview participants were comfortable, and all interviewees were made aware that they could cancel or delay their participation at their discretion. Procedures in the study were designed to protect the confidentiality or anonymity of the participants. Each participant was given the opportunity to review and clarify transcripts from the interview and statements made during data collection.

Validity and Trustworthiness

To establish the trustworthiness of the findings, the researcher conducted member checking to validate the accuracy of the findings. Member checking involves taking the findings back to the participants during the qualitative analytic process for review (Creswell, 2012). The participants in the study were asked to review the findings and determine whether conclusions of the study are complete and authentic. As part of the member checking, participants were asked whether they agreed with the findings and if

the summaries were representative of their views. Comments from the member checking

sessions are included in the data reported for the study.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

This study sought to examine the role of the school district in influencing school

improvement. However, a limitation of this study was that it primarily focused on a

convenience sample of school districts meeting the criteria. The ability to generalize was

limited to selecting districts that had engaged in school improvement efforts designed to

turn around low-achieving schools. This study did not exclude school districts that

changed leadership within their organization. However, changes in district administrative

staff and school leadership were important characteristics considered when analyzing the

results.

A delimitation of this study was that it examined only two rural districts and was

specific to the leadership roles found within those districts. School districts across the

country vary widely in their average student population and settings of urban and rural as

well as the structure and roles within a central office. Even within the context of rural

school districts a variety of variables can exist, such as how district offices are structured,

the size of student populations within schools, and available resources to support schools.

While one could argue the delimitations of this study, the researcher felt concentrating

the research to a comparison of one school district that had been successful in building

and sustaining the capacity to improve its schools to another school district in the process

of turning around low-performing schools was the strength of this study and confirmed

the research.

CHAPTER 4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

The purpose of this comparative case study was to examine the efforts of two school districts in developing and sustaining district capacity to improve student achievement in response to increased accountability. The study sought to confirm what the research indicates regarding the role of the school district in influencing school improvement by providing an in-depth description of the systems that support school turnaround, the roles of the central office in supporting school turnaround, and strategies necessary for turning around low-performing schools and sustaining higher achievement. The researcher utilized a descriptive case study to examine the district's role in school turnaround because the case study method was well suited for uncovering the interaction of factors characteristic within the phenomenon of developing a district's capacity to support schools and of improving student achievement in the school districts. The study was placed into the context of school turnaround and revealed how complex systems address essential elements of school improvement through human capital strategies, rigorous and engaging instruction, continuous performance management, positive cultures of high expectations, collective accountability, targeted interventions, and strong connections between district leaders and schools. Therefore, the context of this study necessitated investigating two school districts in order to identify contrasts, similarities, or patterns between the cases. The research utilized qualitative research methods to compare one school district that has been successful in building and sustaining the capacity to improve its schools to another school division that is in the process of turning

around low-performing schools. This chapter presents the findings of the study and identifies contrasts, similarities, and patterns between the two school districts.

Zavadsky (2013) acknowledged the importance of the larger system in supporting and creating capacity for its lowest performing schools to improve. Improvements of the lowest performing schools can and should be part of a more coordinated district strategy. Districts are positioned to centralize and coordinate improvement efforts like curriculum support, professional development, and resources for turning around low-performing schools. To this end, the requirements for school improvement planning and implementation also should include explicit acknowledgement of the district's role (Knudson et al., 2011). This enhances the collaborative relationships that reflect the needs and strengths of the district while balancing district control and school autonomy. The research literature, presented along with the findings of this investigation, suggests that driving achievement across schools necessitates considering how school districts can best be structured to help schools meet unique student needs while maintaining alignment and system coherence (Zavadsky, 2013). Effective district leaders must understand the challenging work schools do to improve student achievement and should engage schools routinely to support school turnaround efforts. This, along with the school district's emphasis on teaching and learning, district leadership, and operation and support systems, impacts a school district's capacity to improve schools and sustain achievement (The Broad Prize for Urban Education, 2013; Jones & Wheeler, 2011; Shannon & Bylsma, 2004; Zavadsky, 2012). The domains of teaching and learning, district leadership, and operations and support provided the framework to describe the key elements, roles, and strategies necessary to turn around low-performing schools. The next

sections of this chapter detail the key examples of a school district's system of support, the district's role in supporting low-performing schools, and the strategies districts implement to turn around low-performing schools based on the framework of reform discussed in Chapter 2. The chapter draws comparisons between the first school district that has been successful in building and sustaining the capacity to improve its schools to a second school district that is in the process of turning around low-performing schools. Participants for the study included superintendents, assistant superintendents, district leaders overseeing school improvement, and school principals from two school districts. The chapter also presents common themes that emerged within each of the elements within the framework. Finally, data for each research question have been presented, and noteworthy findings highlighted.

The research questions addressed in this field research project included:

4. What are the **key elements** of a school district's system of support that turn around low-performing schools?

5. What are the district's **roles** in supporting low-performing schools?

6. What are the **strategies** a district can implement to turn around low-performing schools?

Apple County School District

The first district presented in this chapter has been successful in building and sustaining the capacity to improve its schools. Apple County School District had schools identified as the lowest-achieving schools under the 2009 SIG program, and currently none of its schools are identified as priority or focus schools as defined under the 2012 ESEA flexibility provisions. Four members of the district represented in the following

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interviews were the superintendent, assistant superintendents, director of instruction, director of human resource, and principal. The themes presented in the following section are aligned to the framework for reform that was introduced in Chapter 2. The themes discovered in the findings from the interviews align to the domains and elements for turning around low-performing schools found within the framework for reform. The themes also answer the research questions by providing examples of elements of school improvement, strategies for school turnaround, and the roles of district leaders in supporting schools.

Teaching and Learning at Apple County School District

Apple County presented a clear focus on teaching and learning with the greatest emphasis on aligning curriculum, professional development, and teacher leaders.

Aligning curriculum. The findings in the first domain of teaching and learning indicate some potential benefits of curriculum alignment from the district level to the schools. Commentary on aligning curriculum included lessons plans, assessments, and pacing guides. Mr. Daniel Williams, the director of instruction for Apple County School District, illustrated the importance of this theme in his discussion on the process they used for aligning curriculum:

> We have developed pacing guides and worked very hard initially to unpack the standards and to really look in-depth at what the standard is actually teaching….
> We looked at the curriculum framework in the sense of knowledge and skills and pulled everything together because we know that alignment of the written, taught and tested curriculum is critical….

The curriculum guides that we have developed are created by teams, not

here in the central office. We get teams of teachers together over the summer to

revisit the curriculum guides on a yearly basis so that we are sure that our pacing

is line with what is actually being taught in the classroom, that it is good pacing,

and it is not out of line with what teachers need.

This concept was a shared theme across interviews of the superintendent, assistant

superintendent, and school principal. The responsibility for developing and aligning

curriculum was shared between the district leaders and the school staff. This shared

process was exemplified by the comments from Mrs. Katherine Winters, the principal:

"The district has worked with us hand in hand as we have developed a countywide

pacing. Our teachers were part of that process, and they were active participants in

developing and alignment of the curriculum pacing."

Research findings have found that a common curriculum with clear, intelligible

standards that are aligned with appropriate assessments is critical to school improvement

(Fullan, 2007; Marzano, 2003). Aligning curriculum, found within the framework for

reform, is a key element of a school district's system of support that turns around low-

performing schools.

Professional development. The second theme, professional development, played

a dominant role in the teaching and learning domain. Professional development was

mentioned often as a strategy to address the written, taught, and tested curriculum. Dr.

Matthew Roberts, the superintendent, spoke of the importance professional development

played in the development of the curriculum:

I guess I can almost say that we're never satisfied with where we are with the

curriculum. I guess if there was a perfect document, we could all stop and just

quit and not work towards it. Now, we're evolving to a whole new world with

performance assessments, and we're really excited about that direction. But we've

got to bring everybody along and so there's going to be a lot of professional

development as we continue to evolve our curriculum and assessments.

The types of professional development mentioned by the Apple County included

on-going training, coaching, and mentoring. The director of instruction provided insight

on how professional development is used to enhance teaching and build the capacity of

teachers. The mentoring mentioned by Mr. Williams was also described by Mrs. Winters,

the principal, showing the consistency of this strategy:

The district leadership does walkthroughs and principals do formal observations,

of course. Those teachers that they feel like [they] need additional support… they

would monitor more closely, check their lesson plans, offer opportunities for

observation and mentoring with other teachers that are having success with

instruction. So more of an approach like that, with mentoring and trying to help

teachers see what's really working.

Professional development, found within the framework for reform, are the

strategies a district can implement to turn around low-performing schools. A district

central office is better positioned than schools to coordinate and align the crucial reform

elements within and across schools, such as helpful interim assessments that are used to

identify and provide professional development aligned to teacher and student needs

(Zavadsky, 2013). Schools lack the capacity at the school level to access needed

resources or to change structures and practices. Districts can provide support by assessing needs and providing professional development aligned to teacher and student needs.

Teacher leaders. Teacher leaders was the third theme that appeared to have an important role in school improvement and was used to enhance teaching and learning. Teacher leaders are teachers that assume a wide range of roles in supporting schools and often lead in a variety of ways, from leading meetings, providing training, and mentoring. Apple County School District identified teams of teachers, called acceleration teams, to meet and develop an academic intervention plan for struggling students; the district also addressed those students who may have already met the academic standards ("bubble kids"). The acceleration teams addressed interventions for the students and provided strategies for the classroom teachers. Dr. Pamela Collins, the assistant superintendent, discussed the importance the teams have on the students' success:

> That's something that we've taken an additional focus on with the acceleration program. As Dr. Roberts mentioned to you, it targets our bubble kids and those performing below, and everything is skill specific. It's very specific. So, we could have a group of five kids in the classroom that will be going to different people for their remediation based on their instructional need and that's very specific and the plans are worked out typically once a week. The acceleration team will get together and identify what the kids need to meet that skill deficit. The additional piece to that, our school is built in on IE time and that's for intervention or enrichment and when the kids are receiving the intervention, the addition of the kids that are performing above on instructional level that will receive enrichment activities.

Instructional leadership is a key element found within the framework for reform. The district enhances instructional leadership by fostering teacher leaders in their work in developing a student support system, also found within the framework of reform. Effective district leaders recognize they unilaterally cannot transform traditional schools into high-performing schools from the central office. Therefore, they work with principals to create a guiding coalition of key teacher leaders within each school to build enthusiasm for the process (DuFour, 2012).

District Leadership at Apple County School District

Apple County conveyed the importance district leadership has on school turnaround. The interviews provided a variety of themes, with the greatest emphasis on school improvement plans. However, the findings in the second domain of district leadership indicated some potential areas within district leadership worth noting. Teacher leaders and collaboration were emphasized throughout the interviews.

Teacher leaders. Teacher leaders were found to be an important theme in this domain of district leadership. Teacher leaders described in this domain are empowered to make decisions that affect school improvement efforts for the school and district. This domain also addressed how teacher leaders are identified and supported by the district. Dr. Roberts conveyed the importance teacher leaders have in school improvement and the collaboration that takes place:

I've always been a believer in teacher leadership and distributive leadership, that there's got to be a collaborative approach. If there's not a collaborative approach, then teachers have no buy in. For example, when we do our curriculum mapping,

we may identify the need, but we organize and let the teachers make the decisions.

Teacher leaders take an active role in the development and implementation of the school improvement plans. Mr. Williams, the director of instruction, and Mrs. Winters, the principal, described the importance teacher leadership has in the formation and participation of the leadership teams.

> Mr. Williams: Every school has a leadership team, and that brings together a team that makes decisions regarding school improvement and looks at needs in the school and they work with the school improvement plan. So, we actively encourage everybody to have one leadership team and we encourage teachers to attend workshops that will develop that school leadership. Teachers with their school improvement plans and their school leadership meetings, they're making a lot of decisions about what professional development the school might need, identifying some of the needs that we might support and that kind of thing. So, a lot of it is done at the school level with the school leadership teams.

> Mrs. Winters: I think we do a good job in really identifying those teachers who have that expertise and natural leadership skills. We often times ask those people to be mentor teachers or ask them to be grade level chairs. If there are district wide committees, then we really try to facilitate and try to encourage those teachers and support their leadership skills. So there's a lot of opportunities for people to develop that leadership skill, and there are committees all the time that need people, but not just people, but people with the certain skill set who

recognize good instruction, who can deliver that instruction, and those who can promote that in others.

Instructional leadership takes on a variety of roles in supporting low-performing schools. Teacher leaders can play an important part in turnaround efforts by taking on some of the same leadership tasks as the district, such as procuring and distributing resources, monitoring progress, and providing professional development (Firestone & Martinez, 2007).

Collaboration. The Apple County School District places a great emphasis on collaboration between district leaders and school staff. The commentary conveys a supportive role for the district leaders in addressing the needs of the school. Dr. Collins's interview illustrates the collaboration that takes place between the district leadership and school staff:

We worked really well as a team here and it's not a district office or school-level leadership. It's 'we're in this together' and it's not 'the district is going to make me or our principal is going to make me.' It's very collaborative throughout the entire process. So, as far as teaming and collegial support, it's just a given and that's where Dr. Roberts runs with the vision. He sees us as a central office support, and that's the modality that we use as opposed to any type of ruling with the heavy hand. It's just not that way. So, it's very collegial from top to bottom.

The collaboration mentioned by the assistant superintendent also was described by the principal, showing the consistency of this theme in district leadership. Commentary provided by Mrs. Winters reaffirms the values captured by the district

leader's interviews. Her description includes a description of how district leaders attend improvement plan meetings, which they call "data days":

District leadership are usually present at the data days, but they tend to take more of a – well they don't take an active leadership role within the data meetings. And I don't know that I would want them to. But they're there to support us here and be knowledgeable and to offer district input if that question were to arise. For example, this year with curriculum planning, in one of our data meetings in third grade it was really discussed about how lesson plans in the curriculum were designed for a 90-minute block. As a district, we expect a whole group lesson as well as a small group lesson. There's no way that you can do both in that time frame. So what should we do? And so I was able to give my input and to say, 'Dr. Collins, how do you feel about this? How were these lesson plans designed?' So that's just an example of how having them present rather than me having to say to the teachers, 'Well, I'll get back with you.' We can have that dialog and that conversation right there in the open, and in minutes everybody's expertise is being shared as opposed to just one person.

Well, and I see the district leadership and Dr. Roberts—I mean it's about them showing their vulnerability too, and them saying, 'We will help you. We will walk side by side with you. We are here to support.' It's not a matter of slapping the hand. We never felt like we were on an island all by ourselves.

Collaboration is an essential part of district oversight, as well as continuous improvement and accountability. An essential component of school district oversight is the effective use of data for supporting school turnaround. Zavadsky (2013) called this

oversight performance management, which is the ability to make course corrections at all levels before small problems become bigger; this is essential to the improvement process. Performance management means more than simply testing and collecting data. It includes districts creating a culture that trusts the data and how they will use them (Zavadsky, 2013).

Operations and Support System at Apple County School District

Apple County described many elements of operations and support with the greatest emphasis on needs assessment, professional development, and school turnaround. Turning around low-achieving schools requires alignment from a district that is focused on lending expertise and providing oversight, support, and resources (Zavadsky, 2012). The findings in this domain indicate some potential benefits. The section describes how a needs assessment was used to identify weaknesses in instruction and how the district strategically planned professional development to address the needs of teachers.

Needs assessment. Specifically, the district's description of needs assessments provided insight on how the district leadership works to support schools. Illustrating the importance of this theme, Dr. Roberts discussed the process needs assessment has in planning professional development:

> But there's another area that we became a little more strategic and purposeful with planning professional development. When we were struggling, we did a really good job with it. We probably learned this from having a focus school. We brought professional development in directly to the classroom, and a lot of small groups were discussing professional development.

It was evident that this practice was consistent and an important aspect of the district's operations and support. The commentary by Dr. Collins acknowledged that needs assessment was an essential part of professional development:

> We give a professional development allocation to each school. They have some autonomy. They have to submit a professional development plan. We review the plans to see if it matches the district needs. Typically the only thing that we provide support with at the district level would be if we see an overall district need.

> Effective resource allocation and professional development are important elements found within the framework for reform. However, effective resource allocation requires a systematic approach like a needs assessment in order to ensure districts provide, allocate, reallocate, and locate resources to support quality instruction A systemic approach in which the school district aligns its resources and strategies to confront common challenges and support effective solutions might best address the needs of struggling schools (Knudson et al., 2011).

Professional development. Not only was the district needs assessment an essential part of planning professional development, the district leadership also actively participated in the professional development offered to schools. The commentary from Mrs. Winters describes the role of the district leader's participation in professional development and the impact it had on her school:

> I told you earlier that it was professional development on reading. We had a lot of school based professional development where a trainer came in and helped us a lot with small group instruction and things of that nature, getting us to use a

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common language. All of that was very well facilitated, and there was always someone there from the district leadership. Sometimes it was Dr. Collins and Mr. Williams. Sometimes, it was just Mr. Williams, sometimes just Dr. Collins, but they were always there not just [to] hear the information, but to listen to the dialog of the teachers to see really what is it that they're struggling with.

Professional development is a key element found within the framework for reform. The example described previously describes the roles in supporting low-performing schools. District leaders in Apple County took an active role as participants in professional development. The key to professional development for both leaders and teachers is for it to be relevant, accessible, accountable by use of follow up activities, and aligned to school and district goals (Zavadsky, 2013).

School turnaround. The third theme, school turnaround, was considered a very important component of operations and support for Apple School District. Four years ago, Apple County was required to contract a lead turnaround partner to support school improvement efforts because they had the lowest achieving schools in the state and received School Improvement Grants 1003(g) (SIGs). School districts that had the lowest achieving schools would receive 1003(g) grants to contract outside partners experienced in school-wide reform and develop programs that addressed 11 components of the school improvement/school-wide reform (USDOE, 2002a). The participants' interviews suggest the strategies learned from the school turnaround process have an important part in their current work improving schools and contribute to their high achievement. There was a recurrence of this theme in the commentary provided by the superintendent, assistant superintendent, and the director of instruction:

Dr. Roberts: So many things we learned many things from the school turnaround program and through the school improvement process. We have been implementing these practices across the board and felt like they were good practices. It wasn't just implemented in the school that needed it. It was a good practice and we rolled it out to everybody, and that's been real positive for us.

Dr. Collins: The school turnaround has been a main component to our intervention system from the leadership capacity, looking at the development of school leaders, and truly building the capacity of our school leaders and leaders at the central office. The lead turnaround partner really helped us do that. It made us aware of the importance of the data and how to navigate potential issues. It helped us think ahead, on how to look at benchmarking differently, how to look at intermittent steps to gain achievement in a short amount of time within an academic year.

Mr. Williams: Our biggest training happened when we had schools that were struggling, our focus schools. The first years we were involved with the state and then we were invited to participate in the lead turnaround program. So our school leaders from those schools that were in improvement along with district leaders spent a lot of time with the lead turnaround partner, getting some absolutely wonderful, wonderful training. Really it's probably some of the best training that we've had and we were able to then bring that training back and those principals shared that information with the other principals. We had a retreat for our principals every summer where we deal with and talk about and bring in people to support turnaround kind of issues. We used our PD funds to take every principal

and assistant principal to work with our turnaround partner for several days of training to use in their schools.

School turnaround is not an element found within the framework for reform. However, the commentary from the description of the turnaround program strengthens the district's organizational structures, strategic planning, and district oversight, which are elements found within the framework. More importantly, the participation in this program transformed the district's role from supporting one low-performing school to a focus on the needs of all schools. Apple County School District applied the same strategies used in turning around low-achieving schools to increase the achievement of all schools. Reeves (2006) suggested long-term system-wide improvement will continue to be an illusion unless districts shift their focus away from individual leaders and schools. School level and single focus reforms fail because they do not acknowledge the importance of the larger system in supporting and creating the capacity for its lowest performing schools to improve (Zavadsky, 2013). Improvements of the lowest performing schools can and should be part of a more coordinated district strategy to support all schools.

Moore City School District

The second school district presented in this chapter is currently in the process of turning around low-performing schools. Moore City School District had schools identified as the lowest-achieving schools under the 2009 SIG program and currently identified priority schools as defined under the 2012 ESEA flexibility provisions. Four members of the district represented in the following interviews were the superintendent, assistant superintendents, director of human resources, and principal. The themes

presented in the following section also are aligned to the framework for reform

introduced in Chapter 2. The themes discovered in the findings from the interviews align

with the elements for turning around low-performing schools. The themes also answer

the research questions by providing examples of elements of school improvement,

strategies for school turnaround, and the roles of district leaders in supporting schools.

Teaching and Learning at Moore City School District

Moore City presented a clear focus on teaching and learning, with the greatest

emphasis on aligning curriculum and professional development. The district focuses

much of their efforts on unpacking state standards so the teacher would have a better

understanding of what is being taught. As with Apple County School District, the

findings in the first domain indicate notable benefits of curriculum alignment. This

provides an example of some of the similarities found between a school district that has

been successful in building and sustaining the capacity to improve its schools to another

school division that is in the process of turning around low-performing schools. Merriam

(2007) suggested having multiple cases in the study with greater variation across the

cases provides a more compelling interpretation.

Aligning curriculum. The approach Moore City School District uses to address

curriculum alignment was directed from the district through professional development

and monitoring of the curriculum. School districts with schools in improvement find it

necessary, at times, to control systems that are not working efficiently. District leaders

work together to determine the balance between district control and school autonomy

(Shannon & Bylsma, 2004). In this case, it was determined it was necessary to focus on

curriculum alignment after feedback from a state school improvement review revealed

weaknesses in the district curriculum. Dr. Walter Baldwin, the superintendent, who is in his second year at this district, provided commentary that conveys the importance of aligning curriculum and the district's approach:

> We have been to a series of training unpacking the standards and through
> unpacking the standards, you want to make sure that the teachers are writing the
> objectives with the behavior they criteria for success and create conditions or
> where they need to be. But just going to the training and having teachers
> understand how the write objectives is not enough. So you have to, what I say, put
> your eyes on it.
>
> So we have mandated to the schools that they have to do 20 walkthroughs
> per administrator. Principals have to do 40 walkthroughs a month. So at the end of
> year, we have plenty of data and they know the objective is the first thing they
> should see because that's part of unpacking the standards. Principals also have to
> make sure that they analyze teachers' lesson plans and the principals have those
> assignments.

Moore City recognized a need to align the curriculum, and additional support is provided to schools through content specialists to assist with the alignment of the written, taught, and tested curriculum. Dr. Laura Andrews, the assistant superintendent, who also is in her second year at this district, described the process for curriculum alignment and the role the teacher specialists have in the schools:

> First of all, specific changes were made. We made sure the curriculum was
> aligned because just from a historical point of view, it was not aligned. So that

was the first major change that was made and we looked at re-writing our curriculum to make sure it is aligned per the standard.

> We are fortunate this year. The reason I say we are fortunate is that we have reading coaches and math coaches at the elementary level, reading coaches and math coaches at the middle school level, and a math specialist at the high school level. They are meeting along with the assistant principal and the principal going through the curriculum guides to ensure that they are indeed aligned and that the assessments are aligned.

Aligning curriculum is a key element of a school district's system of support that turns around low-performing schools and is found within the framework for reform. Ensuring alignment between standards, curriculum, and assessments is the responsibility of the district. Therefore, the district serves as the central venue for coordinating curriculum approaches and decisions (Center on Education Policy, 2004).

Professional development. Expanding professional development was a recurring theme in the Moore City School District's approach to teaching and learning. The district leaders discovered the need for additional professional development based meetings and discussions with teachers earlier in the school year. Embracing this change was evident from the interviews of the superintendent, assistant superintendent, and principal. Dr. Baldwin's comments reflected high expectations for expanding professional development in the district:

> Your faculty meetings should no longer be an information session; you do your in-house professional development. We changed that too. The faculty meetings are one hour and should be more professional learning. We are involving our

teachers to provide that professional development. When principals send teachers off to a professional development, we want them to come back and share.

Dr. Andrews reaffirmed the importance professional development has on teaching and learning, emphasizing the need to align with the curriculum. In her comments, she described the changes that have occurred with professional development:

One of the key steps that we stress in our district is the written, taught and tested curriculum. So beginning last year, we began the year with professional development on the written, taught and tested curriculum and how we must have it aligned so that we can assure that what we are teaching is correct.

Professional development also was exemplified through the roles of the teacher specialists. Mr. Kevin Foley, the principal, described how he uses walkthroughs with his specialists to guide professional development. The commentary provided by Mr. Foley illustrated the expansion and transformation professional development has taken in the Moore City School District:

We do observations and walkthroughs constantly and with a small staff, we can do snapshots everyday...The reading specialist and the math specialist provide a coaching model to help make sure the teacher knows instruction—it's kind of like a conversation between the teacher and the specialists...Pretty much, if this doesn't work, then I will also have an example of maybe another way to do it. You can always go back and redo and change.

Professional development is a strategy a district can implement to turn around low-performing schools and is found within the framework for reform. New teachers and

teachers identified as needing extra assistance should receive additional professional

development training during the year (Jones & Wheeler, 2011).

District Leadership at Moore City School District

Moore City conveyed the importance district leadership has on school turnaround.

As with the other district, the interviews provided a variety of themes with the greatest

emphasis on school improvement plans. While there were many themes noted in the

interviews, the Moore City School District has taken a top-down approach to district

leadership and was undergoing a change. Collaboration and teacher leaders were two

themes emphasized throughout the interviews that evidenced the change.

Collaboration. Dr. Baldwin's comments reflected change that was occurring

through his expectations for increased collaboration by district leaders:

> That was a paradigm shift too. When I first got here, the central office team didn't
>
> talk with school level. The school level wasn't talking to central office. In the
>
> central office, they all up and enjoyed what I called the smoke stained windows.
>
> There wasn't a trust factor and we know we needed to communicate. So I told
>
> them, emails are good but face to face is even better. I do not want to see people
>
> sitting up here during the day. We all support services. I changed the name from
>
> office to services. We don't use central office- we now use central services
>
> because we are service leaders. We serve and support our schools.

The expectation of increased collaboration discussed by the superintendent was

evident in commentary from other district leaders. Mrs. Gloria Owens, the director of

human resources, provided comments that illustrated the structure that was established

for increasing collaboration and participation in school improvement plan meetings:

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I haven't been a part of any of the improvement teams, but I know those in the instruction department, like the Dr. Andrews our assistant Superintendent and Mr. Green and Mrs. Able in special education have another part in those. They are all at varying times and they sit in on those school improvement team meetings. The district leaders visit the schools all at varying times; sit in on school improvement team meetings. Dr. Andrews is I'd say the major liaison. She is the director in the department working with our lead turnaround partner. She meets with them individually as well as she meets with them as part of the school improvement team at each of the schools as well.

The structure described by the Mrs. Owens mirrors the expectations of the superintendent. Additionally, the mention of the lead turnaround partner suggests the expectations of collaboration and participation in school improvement planning come as a result of the lead turnaround partner's influence. Because Moore City School District has priority schools, they are required to contract a lead turnaround partner to support school improvement. Schools identified as priority schools are required to contract outside partners experienced in school-wide reform to develop programs that address the components of comprehensive school reform (USDOE, 2012a). While the expectation of increased collaboration is clear, commentary provided by the Mr. Foley suggests the Moore City School District still is working towards this goal:

> When we do my school improvement meetings--- we once a month and we look at our plan. The director of special education is supposed to be my person from district level. They're all [district leaders] invited. They know it's the same, Wednesday of every month. So they know when that is, our meeting day is.

Collaboration is an essential part of district oversight as well as continuous improvement and accountability. The literature all too frequently has described a "managed" or "transactional" relationship, largely designed to limit access and minimize professional exposure to "risk" (Barr & Bizar, 2001). Fullan (2001) stated there is a difference between "tinkering" with change and "reculturing," which involves changing norms, values, vision, and relationships.

Teacher leaders. The second theme, teacher leaders, also was undergoing a change. Moore City recognized the need to increase its teacher leaders and described specific ways they were addressing opportunities for teacher leaders. Dr. Baldwin described some of the opportunities the district was taking to foster teacher leadership:

Last year we implemented a teacher advisory council. So through central services, we invited two to three teachers from each building. They are the key communicators for their teachers and for the staffs in their schools, and they report in faculty meetings about what we discussed in the superintendents meetings. Secondly, they are part of the curriculum planning team in the summer. So they are creating pacing guides and curriculum, and they're also helping create the benchmark assessments.

Working towards fostering teacher leaders and providing opportunities for leadership development was a recurring theme. Mr. Foley reiterated those expectations in his commentary:

I think the Dr. Baldwin did a very good job. The district wants teachers to be more of a leader. And so, I'm trying to build leaders as far as teachers. Dr. Baldwin is very supportive and the district wants us to build more leaders within

our schools. I am the kind of person that I don't like to delegate. Now I've gotten better at delegating, but it's really hard for me because I want my fingers in everything. But I also want to be able to leave the building and know that everything is fine. I feel that way now and I think district leadership is very supportive of that.

Teacher leaders are an important element of instructional leadership, which is found within the framework for reform. Managing talented teachers and leaders involves much more than just recruiting, selecting, developing, and retaining staff. It means understanding how to obtain and distribute the right leaders and teachers, then lining up all parts of the system to help them meet their goals successfully (Zavadsky, 2013).

Operations and Support System at Moore City School District

Both districts implemented a variety of techniques to address operations and support, with the greatest emphasis on communication. The findings from Moore City School District in this domain indicate a different approach from the first district.

Communication. The district's commentary on communication provides insight on how the district leadership is working to strengthen communication between the schools and school board. Illustrating the importance of this theme, Dr. Baldwin discussed the process he used to strengthen his communication with the school board and the school staff:

Communication was a problem when I got here. Most schools who are in the improvement process complained to the school board. Because the majority of the time, I have seen the board was involved too much in daily operations. So what

we tried to do here, so it won't be a barrier, I had to have crucial conversations with the board about my role and their role.

So we created what we call a governor's handbook together defining protocols. It is right out the Professional Learning Communities playbook. But what I also found that I had to do wasn't for my school board. I had to reprogram leaders and teachers so they understand, because they did not know the roles of a superintendent and roles of the school board.

Mr. Foley's commentary affirms the theme by describing how the district has placed an emphasis on communication in the domain of operations and support:

We have monthly meetings with a comprehensive data review where Dr. Baldwin comes out to our school and we present everything such as data, what's working, and what's not working. It's like a little presentation and he just starts asking questions he wants answered and then we just go through them-- so he has a feel of what's going on in the building. But he stays in the schools a lot and he's in the trenches... And Dr. Andrews is wonderful. She comes through a lot and she's always available anytime.

Dr. Andrews acknowledged the importance of communication in the role it plays in operations and support. She described conversations she has had with teachers about longitudinal data systems and how the district leadership came to better understand the needs of the teachers:

We are looking at making sure that, all of our teachers understand the longitudinal data system (LDS) and so we're finding that it's new to some of us. Now that we're using it, we want to make sure that teachers understand it. So how do we do

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that? We do it by collaborating and talking with teachers. Through our collaborating and talking, we discovered that our special education teachers had no understanding of the system and so we are now in the midst of planning a three-day three-hour session with each school where we train our special education teachers on LDS. This is in addition to the free regional training provided by the trainer we contracted.

Communication is a key element of a school district's system of support that turn around low-performing schools. Moore City School District recognized this and placed a greater emphasis on communication. Districts need to ensure organizational coherence through organizational structure and policies and practices, effective two-way communication and cross-functional support for individual schools, and effectively balancing centralized and decentralized decision making (The Broad Prize for Urban Education, 2013).

Emergent Themes

Several themes emerged from the analysis of the domains of teaching and learning, district leadership, and operations and support. The following analysis tables are intended to illustrate comparisons between the Apple County School District that has been successful in building and sustaining the capacity to improve its schools, and Moore City School District that currently is turning around low-performing schools. Emerging themes were identified within each of the elements for turning around low-performing schools found within the framework to create common themes for each domain. The process began with identifying recurrent themes from individual interviews (*n*=1) and matching those themes to other participants within the districts interviewed (*n*=4). The

process was repeated for the Moore City School District and aligned to the Apple County School District themes (n=8). Once individual interviews were analyzed, emergent themes were matched to the four elements found within each domains of the framework (n=32). The tables intend to show the connections among leaders within a single school district and draw meaningful comparisons between school districts identifying contrasts, similarities, or patterns between the two cases. The tables present the emerging themes and address the three research questions, relating the key elements of a school district's system of support, the district's roles in supporting low-performing schools, and the strategies districts implement to turn around low-performing schools.

Emergent Themes from Teaching and Learning

District leaders from both studies conveyed an organizational value towards teaching and learning. The influence of the individual teacher on student achievement is a central component for school turnaround efforts. However, no single strategy will transform classroom instruction unless systemic supports are in place (Knudson et al., 2011). Each district implemented a variety of techniques to address turning around low-achieving schools, with the greatest emphasis on alignment of curriculum. Research findings have found that a common curriculum with clear, intelligible standards that are aligned with appropriate assessments is critical to school improvement (Fullan, 2007; Marzano, 2003). Therefore, the district serves as the central venue for coordinating curriculum approaches and decisions (Center on Education Policy, 2004). Similarly, each district had emphasized the importance professional development has on school turnaround. A district central office is better positioned than schools to coordinate and align the crucial reform elements within and across schools, such as helpful interim

assessments that are used to identify and provide professional development aligned to teacher and student needs (Zavadsky, 2013). Table 7 identifies the emergent themes of teaching and learning developed through the analysis of the interviews.

The 16 emerging themes found in the analysis of teaching and learning show many similarities between the Apple County School District, which has been successful in building and sustaining the capacity to improve its schools, and Moore City School District, which currently is turning around low-performing schools. Emergent themes such as aligning curriculum, interventions for students, professional development, and teacher leaders were the most commonly shared between the two districts. These themes also were most commonly articulated between district leaders in each individual organization. The number of common themes increased at the school leader level from 4 common themes in the superintendent interviews to 10 common themes in the principal interviews. School district administrators exercise essential leadership, in partnership with school leaders, to build capacity throughout public educational systems for teaching and learning improvements (Honig et al., 2010). While there are many shared themes between the districts, further analysis showed certain distinctions between the two divisions. Table 8 represents the themes most frequently occurring during the interviews.

Table 7

Impact Teaching and Learning Have on School Turnaround as Reported in Interviews

	Emerging Theme	
Participant	Apple County School District	Moore City School District
Superintendents	• Acceleration Plans • Adjusted Pacing Guides • Align Assessments • Aligning Curriculum • Formative Assessments • Professional Development	• Acceleration Plans • Align Assessments • Aligning Curriculum • Benchmark Assessments • Direct Principals • Formal Observations • Professional Development
Assistant Superintendents	• Acceleration Plans • Align Assessments • Aligning Curriculum • Benchmark Assessments • Formal Observations • Interventions for Students • Professional Development • Teacher Leaders	• Adjusted Pacing Guides • Aligning Curriculum • Direct Principals • Informal Observations • Interventions for Students • Professional Development • Teacher Leaders
School District Leaders (Director of Instruction) (Director of Human Resources)	• Acceleration Plans • Adjusted Pacing Guides • Align Assessments • Aligning Curriculum • Benchmark Assessments • Data Analysis • Informal Observations • Interventions for Students • Professional Development • Teacher Leaders	• Aligning Curriculum • Benchmark Assessments • Formal Observations • Formative Assessments • Informal Observations • Interventions for Students • Professional Development • Teacher Leaders
Principals	• Acceleration Plans • Adjusted Pacing Guides • Align Assessments • Aligning Curriculum • Benchmark Assessments • Data Analysis • Formal Observations • Formative Assessments • Informal Observations • Interventions for Students • Professional Development • Teacher Leaders	• Adjusted Pacing Guides • Align Assessments • Aligning Curriculum • Benchmark Assessments • Data Analysis • Formal Observations • Formative Assessments • Informal Observations • Interventions for Students • Teacher Leaders

Table 8

Occurrence of Emerging Themes in Teaching and Learning as Identified in Interviews

	District	
Emerging Themes	Apple County School District	Moore City School District
Acceleration Plans	5	1
Adjusted Pacing Guides	4	6
Aligned Assessments	8	6
Aligning Curriculum	18	14
Benchmark Assessments	3	4
Data Analysis	4	1
Direct Principals	0	4
Formal Observations	2	3
Formative Assessments	2	3
Informal Observations	3	8
Instructional Coaching	0	2
Interventions for Students	5	8
Professional Development	15	9
Teacher Leaders	13	3
Total Examples Found	82	72

Emerging themes were similar for both districts, with the exception of six key areas where the approaches differed from one another. The Apple County School District used acceleration plans to address the needs of struggling students. Teams of teachers would meet monthly to discuss the progress of struggling students and update the plans as needed. The plans included a variety of strategies including after school, in school interventions, and strategies for classroom teachers. Conversely, Moore City School District showed an increased reliance on before and after school programs to address the needs of struggling students. The Apple County School District used data in more aspects

of planning curriculum, teacher observations, and measuring effectiveness of instructional programs. Similarly, professional development wa mentioned in more aspects of teaching and learning in the Apple County School District. A striking difference found was in the Apple County School District's use of teacher leaders. Developing teacher leaders was mentioned frequently, from identifying effective teachers to provide professional development, identifying teacher mentors, using teacher leaders to plan and create curriculum for the district, and identifying teacher leaders to facilitate acceleration plan meetings. In Moore City, district leaders supported teachers seeking to get additional teaching or administrative degrees. Effective district leaders recognize they unilaterally cannot transform traditional schools into high-performing schools from the central office. Therefore, they work with principals to create a guiding coalition of key teacher leaders within each school to build enthusiasm for the process (DuFour, 2012). Teacher leaders also can take some of the same leadership tasks as the district, such as procuring and distributing resources, monitoring progress, and providing professional development (Firestone & Martinez, 2007).

Emergent Themes from District Leadership

District leaders from both studies conveyed the importance district leadership has on school turnaround. Research on turnaround points to leaders as the main catalysts for changing what happens in chronically low-performing schools (The Broad Prize for Urban Education, 2013; DuFour, 2012; Firestone & Martinez, 2007; Zavadsky, 2012). While school leadership is a crucial factor, principals and other school leaders are selected, supported, and directed by policy and practice driven by school district leadership (Zavadsky, 2012). Each district studied implemented a variety of techniques to

address turning around low-achieving schools, with the greatest emphasis on school improvement planning. The research illustrated specific strategies that school districts could use to create a coherent district-wide approach to turnaround (Knudson et al., 2011). Improvements of the lowest performing schools can and should be part of a more coordinated district strategy. To this end, the requirements for school improvement planning and implementation should include explicit acknowledgement of the district's role (Knudson et al., 2011). While school improvement planning demonstrated prominence in this analysis, other themes were found to be equally as important to district leadership. Table 9 identifies the emergent themes of district leadership developed through the analysis of the interviews.

Table 9

Impact District Leadership Has on School Turnaround as Reported in Interviews

	Emerging Theme	
Participant	Apple County School District	Moore City School District
Superintendents	• Collaboration • Report to School Board • School Improvement Plans • School Improvement Teams • Teacher Leaders	• Advisory Committees • Collaboration • Communication • Informal Observations • Report to School Board • School Improvement Plans
Assistant Superintendents	• Collaboration • Data Analysis • Informal Observations • Report to School Board • School Improvement Plans • School Improvement Teams • Teacher Leaders	• Communication • Data Analysis • Informal Observations • School Improvement Plans • School Improvement Teams • Teacher Leaders
School District Leaders (Director of Instruction) (Director of Human Resources)	• Collaboration • Communication • Data Analysis • Informal Observations • School Improvement Plans • School Improvement Teams • Teacher Leaders	• Collaboration • Data Analysis • School Improvement Plans • School Improvement Teams • Teacher Leaders
Principals	• Advisory Committees • Data Analysis • Review Subgroup Performance • School Improvement Plans • School Improvement Teams • Teacher Leaders	• Data Analysis • Informal Observations • Review Subgroup Performance • School Improvement Plans • School Improvement Teams • Teacher Leaders

The 10 emerging themes found in the analysis of district leadership show many similarities between the Apple County School District, which had been successful in building and sustaining the capacity to improve its schools, and the Moore City School District, which currently is turning around low-performing schools. Emergent themes such as collaboration, data analysis, school improvement plans, school improvement teams, and teacher leaders were the most commonly shared between the two districts. These themes also were most commonly articulated between district leaders in each individual organization. Data analysis was a recurring theme that had a prominent role in district leadership and as being associated with school improvement planning. An essential component of school district oversight is the effective use of data for supporting school turnaround. School districts need to have a cohesive, comprehensive, and user-friendly system for assessing and reporting student performance that ensures all administrators and teachers develop appropriate skills and tools for analyzing data to improve instruction (The Broad Prize for Urban Education, 2013). Further analysis showed certain commonalities in the themes between the two districts within the area of district leadership. Table 10 represents the themes most frequently occurring during the interviews.

Table 10

Occurrence of Emerging Themes in District Leadership as Identified in Interviews

	District	
Emerging Themes	Apple County School District	Moore City School District
Advisory Committees	1	1
Collaboration	5	3
Communication	2	2
Data Analysis	7	3
Informal Observations	2	3
Report to School Board	2	1
Review Subgroup Performance	2	2
School Improvement Plan	13	12
School Improvement Teams	3	4
Teacher Leaders	5	4
Total Examples Found	42	35

Emerging themes were similar for both districts, with the exception of two key

areas of collaboration and data analysis where the approaches differed from one another.

The Apple County School District used collaboration to address the needs of struggling

students. School district leaders took a supportive role with the school improvement

teams. District leaders described participating in school improvement planning meetings

at the schools to offer support to the schools. Conversely, Moore City School District's

leaders met with the principals to discuss the improvement plans and offered suggestions

when needed. Research suggests school district leaders should provide direct support and

opportunities to collaborate with school staff. To accomplish this, districts should provide

regularly scheduled collaboration time for school and district instructional leaders to

share best practices and engage in joint problem-solving (The Broad Prize for Urban

Education, 2013). Apple County School District used data in more aspects of strategic planning and continuous improvements with the use of a 90-day improvement plan compared to the 180-day plan used by Moore City School District. Strategic planning is a tool often used by districts to help build coherence with school improvement. Strategic planning can increase the likelihood that all components such as staffing, budgeting, and professional development are connected with the district vision (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004).

Emergent Themes from Operations and Support

District leaders from both studies conveyed an organizational value of the districts' operations and support. Turning around low-achieving schools requires alignment from a district that is focused on lending expertise and providing oversight, support, and resources (Zavadsky, 2012). A systemic approach in which the school district aligns its resources and strategies to confront common challenges and support effective solutions might best address the needs of struggling schools (Knudson et al., 2011). Both districts implemented a variety of techniques to address operations and support, with the greatest emphasis on communication, needs assessment, and professional development. Districts need to ensure organizational coherence through organizational structure and policies and practices, effective two-way communication and cross-functional support for individual schools, and effective balancing of centralized and decentralized decision making (The Broad Prize for Urban Education, 2013). There should be an intentional effort to communicate what is important to families and to the community. Communication about the importance of student achievement comes from both the school and the central office. It is very important for student learning outcomes

to be communicated consistently to parents, teachers, students, and the community (Jones

& Wheeler, 2011). Similarly, each district had emphasized the importance professional

development had on district operations and support as it did with teaching and learning.

Research studies have emphasized the importance of professional development to build

the capacity of educators, schools, and districts to meet challenging learning goals

(Shannon & Bylsma, 2004). The key to professional development for both leaders and

teachers is for it to be relevant, accessible, accountable by use of follow up activities, and

aligned to school and district goals (Zavadsky, 2013). Table 11 identifies the emergent

themes of operations and support developed through the analysis of the interviews.

Table 11

Impact Operations and Support Have on School Turnaround as Reported in Interviews

| | Emerging Theme | |
Participant	Apple County School District	Moore City School District
Superintendents	• Budget Planning • Data Analysis • Needs Assessment • Parent Involvement • School Improvement Plans • School Improvement Teams • Support Schools • Turnaround Program	• Communication • Data Analysis • Needs Assessment • Parent Forums • Parent Involvement • Professional Development • Report to School Board • Turnaround Program
Assistant Superintendents	• Budget Planning • Communication • Needs Assessment • Parent Involvement • Professional Development • School Improvement Plans • School Improvement Teams • Support Schools • Turnaround Program	• Advisory Committees • Communication • Needs Assessment • Parent Forums • Professional Development • Teacher Leaders • Turnaround Program
School District Leaders (Director of Instruction) (Director of Human Resources)	• Budget Planning • Communication • Data Analysis • Needs Assessment • Parent Involvement • Professional Development • Report to School Board • Support Schools • Turnaround Program	• Advisory Committees • Communication • Data Analysis • Monitor Schools • Parent Forums • Parent Involvement • Professional Development • Teacher Leaders
Principals	• Budget Planning • Communication • Data Analysis • Needs Assessment • Parent Forums • Parent Involvement • Professional Development • School Improvement Plans • School Improvement Teams • Support Schools	• Advisory Committees • Communication • Data Analysis • Needs Assessment • Professional Development

The 14 emerging themes found in the analysis of operations and support show some similarities between the Apple County School District, which has been successful in building and sustaining the capacity to improve its schools, and Moore City School District, which currently is turning around low-performing schools. Emergent themes such as communication, needs assessment, and professional development were the most commonly shared between the two districts. These themes also were most commonly articulated between district leaders in each individual organization. The number of common themes was fewer compared to the other domains of teaching and learning and district leadership. Needs assessment was a recurring theme associated with budget planning, allocating resources, and planning professional development. Improved districts provide, allocate, reallocate, and find resources to ensure quality instruction. Research from the Broad Foundation (The Broad Prize for Urban Education, 2013) identified a series of effective practices within fiscal and human resources that impact performance and improvement in student achievement. Districts need to implement a prudent financial planning process that allocates funds in alignment with district priorities included in the strategic plan, that regularly evaluates spending decisions as they relate to impact on student achievement, and that makes changes based on these evaluations. The analysis of operations and support showed themes identified had notable distinctions between the two divisions. Table 12 represents the themes most frequently occurring during the interviews.

Table 12

Occurrence of Emerging Themes in Operations and Support as Identified in Interviews

	District	
Emerging Themes	Apple County School District	Moore City School District
Advisory Committees	2	3
Budget Planning	7	0
Communication	6	10
Data Analysis	3	3
Monitor Schools	0	1
Needs Assessment	5	4
Parent Forums	1	3
Parent Involvement	4	2
Professional Development	6	7
Report to Board	1	2
School Improvement Plans	3	0
School Improvement Teams	3	0
Support Schools	4	0
Teacher Leaders	2	2
Turnaround Program	5	2
Total Examples Found	50	37

Emerging themes were similar for both districts, with the exception of four key areas where the approaches differed from one another. The first area of budget planning was a recurring theme in the Apple County School District and not emphasized in Moore City School District. Districts give schools some autonomy over staffing, schedules, and budgets within parameters that establish their roles and responsibilities (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004). Both districts identified communication as an important element. Moore City School District placed a greater emphasis on communication. Districts need to

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ensure organizational coherence through organizational structure and policies and practices, effective two-way communication and cross-functional support for individual schools, and effective balancing of centralized and decentralized decision making (The Broad Prize for Urban Education, 2013). The Apple County School District identified school improvement planning as a critical part of their operations and support. District leaders in the Apple County School District were described as actively engaging in improvement plan meetings, often offering support as needed. Supporting schools was another recurring theme under this domain for the Apple County School District. School level and single focus reforms fail because they do not acknowledge the importance of the larger system in supporting and creating the capacity for its lowest performing schools to improve (Zavadsky, 2013). The district leaders' commitment to strategies that engage district and school personnel in organizational learning should be focused on deep understanding of the particular learning challenges and conditions of each school. This is key to differentiating district support for improvement in a more adaptive as opposed to bureaucratic way (Anderson et al., 2012).

Findings of Improvement Plan Analysis

As noted in Chapter 3, the review of the improvement plans sought to validate the themes and confirm the findings found in the analysis. The review of school improvement plans provided the historical context of strategies used to improve student achievement as well as the role school district leaders had in supporting those strategies. Both districts use a state approved improvement planning tool that allows schools to select indicators for their school improvement plan and describe strategies that support the indicators. The improvement plans define indicators such as effective practice that are

specific and aligned with research. The indicators also need to be easily assessed, have timelines, have staff responsible for improvement strategies, and a method to track the implementation of any strategies related to the indicator.

The school improvement plans in Apple County School District focused on three primary indicators addressing the intervention of struggling students. Table 13 identifies the findings in the improvement plan and their alignment with the emergent themes identified earlier in the chapter.

Table 13

Findings in Apple County School District's Improvement Plan

Improvement Indicator	Strategy Described in Plan	Emerging Themes Supported in Analysis
The school uses an identification process for all students at risk of failing or in need of targeted interventions and identified teacher leaders as a primary component.	• An Acceleration Team consisting of the Grade Level Lead, Reading Specialist, Title I Reading and Math teachers, the PALS interventionist, a Special Education Teacher, and the administration will be created to analyze data in order to identify students for intervention in reading and math. • A joint meeting of the leadership and acceleration teams was held. Both teams were trained on how to break down benchmark data to identify skill deficits for remediation/intervention. • The Leadership Team and Acceleration Team will meet after benchmarks 1, 2, and 3 in reading and math to analyze data and identify students for intervention. District leadership members were also present at the meeting.	• Teacher Leaders • Data Analysis • Professional Development • Collaboration
The school uses a tiered, differentiated intervention process to assign research-based interventions aligned with the individual needs of identified students.	• A team of specialty teachers, called "The A Team" (acceleration team), will be formed to analyze student achievement data in reading and math, identify students in need of intervention, write acceleration plans along with the classroom teacher, and provide interventions. • A joint meeting of the Leadership Team and The A-Team will be held every three weeks to review student progress, adjust acceleration plans, and add or remove students from interventions based on progress. • The team also discussed the training of teacher's grades four and five on strategies for metacognition, planning, use of graphic organizers, and higher level thinking.	• Student Intervention • Teacher Leaders • Collaboration • Professional Development

Table 13 (Cont.)

Improvement Indicator	Strategy Described in Plan	Emerging Themes Supported in Analysis
The school uses a monitoring process for targeted intervention students to ensure fidelity and effectiveness.	• The acceleration team met to continue the discussion of reading data and identify students for intervention. The fourth and fifth grade groupings were revisited. • The acceleration team met to discuss referrals made to the team. Some students were referred for further discussion with the parents. • An electronic acceleration/intervention plan is being developed using a shared drive. There will be a workbook for each grade and each child involved in intervention will have a sheet. To improve communication with the regular classroom teacher, the workbooks will be shared, and the classroom teacher will add comments to the plan documenting what they do to help the child.	• Student Intervention • Teacher Leaders • Collaboration • Communication

The first indicator focused on identification of students at risk of failing. The strategies describe the formation of an acceleration team that identifies struggling students and the interventions used to support their learning. The second indicator focused on intervention for identified students. The strategies described in this indicator include providing professional development for teachers on strategies to address struggling learners in the classroom. The types of professional development were selected by the acceleration team and involved teachers on all grade levels. This indicator also described collaboration between the acceleration team and the teacher, including providing support in developing lesson plans to address struggling students. The third indicator in the plan focused on monitoring the intervention of students. The strategies address how the interventions for struggling students are communicated with staff and leadership. The strategies include meetings with school and district leadership to discuss

the referral from teachers regarding struggling students and how to best communicate the plans for these students. There was a process described where the classroom teachers and reading specialists document the support provided to students. That documentation is shared and discussed during the acceleration team meetings.

The school improvement plans in Moore City School District contained over 30 active indicators addressing school transformation. Priority schools that are identified as lowest achieving must select between four school-wide reform models, known as the turnaround model, restart model, school closure model, and transformation model that address the specific changes needed for schools and staff (USDOE, 2012b). The transformation model contains many steps that were taken by the lead turnaround partner. For the purpose of this analysis, the researcher has identified the most relevant indicators that align with the emerging themes found within the interviews of district leadership and principals. Table 14 identifies the findings in the improvement plan and their alignment with the emergent themes identified earlier in the chapter.

Table 14

Findings in Moore City School District's Improvement Plan

Improvement Indicator	Strategy Described in Plan	Emerging Themes Supported in Analysis
The district/school has engaged parents and community in the transformation process.	• Monthly Parents as Partners meeting agendas included items related to the transformation process. • Parents as Partners will be restructured in 2014-2015. Meetings will focus on strategies for parents to support their students at home and positively impact the transformation process. • 2015 sessions included: (a) Title I Presentation, (b) Director of Instruction presentation, (c) "12 Days of Reading" - Reading Specialist & Reading Intervention, (d) high school graduation requirements by school counselor; and (e) strategies for helping students with math at home by math specialist.	• Communication • Parent Involvement • Teacher Leaders
The district/school provides professional development that is appropriate for individual teachers with different experience and expertise.	• The school district will provide all staff with differentiated professional development that will meet the needs of individual staff. Professional development will no longer be one size fits all. A trained monitoring team will be in place and a monitoring tool will be used to provide evidence that this objective is fully met. • District level staff conducted division-wide professional development on Vertical Articulation, which was identified as a need from the State Academic Review. • District-wide in-service on Differentiation of Instruction that was presented in grade level groups. • Professional development was provided to all division faculty.	• Curriculum Alignment • Professional Development • Needs Assessment
The principal focuses on building leadership capacity, achieving learning goals, and improving instruction.	• The principal and the School Leadership Team dedicate themselves to building a school that learns and plans together. • Teaming will be used to improve student achievement and create the structure that allows collaborative solution, planning, and decision making across all teams. • The principal will have distributive leadership throughout the building.	• Teacher Leaders • Collaboration • Communication

The first indicator focused on engaging the parents and community. The strategies describe establishing monthly meetings to inform parents of the progress the school is making and to provide sessions for strategies parents can use at home with their children. The sessions were facilitated by teachers and members from the lead turnaround partner. District leaders also attended and facilitated sessions. The second indicator focused on professional development for teachers. The strategies described differentiated professional development that addresses teacher needs. Professional development was provided by lead teachers, district staff, and members of the lead turnaround partner. This indicator also described needs assessment in the form of a state academic review. Much of the professional development described in the plan was for all teachers as a group, indicating a "one size fits all" model. The third indicator in the plan focuses on building leadership capacity in the school. The strategies include creating a leadership team of school staff that would be involved with decision making and describes how the principal distributes responsibility to that team.

Summary of Key Elements

School turnaround has changed significantly over the last decade from a focus on isolated reform elements such as modifying reading programs, improving teachers, or redesigning individual schools to a more comprehensive approach of building the capacity of a school district's ability to create sustained reform. While it is rare for school districts to be doing the same thing for school turnaround, research has discovered common elements on how school districts have supported low-performing schools. School reform research suggests that multiple factors contribute to improvement: leadership and staffing, school climate, instructional improvement strategies, and external

support (Aladjem et al., 2010). District leaders from both school districts in this study identified curriculum alignment, improvement plans, and teacher leaders as important elements for turning around low-performing schools. These elements impacted all three domains of teaching and learning, district leadership, and operation and support systems.

Curriculum alignment had a particular significance in teaching and learning for both districts, noting multiple strategies to address curriculum. The strategies include what was taught and assessed, and both districts stress the importance of aligning curriculum with the state academic standards. Ensuring alignment between standards, curriculum, and assessments is the responsibility of the district. Therefore, the district serves as the central venue for coordinating curriculum approaches and decisions (Center on Education Policy, 2004).

School improvement plans also were emphasized throughout the interviews of district leaders as a means to improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools. Each district described the plans as an essential part of their strategic planning for turning around low- performing schools. Strategic planning is a tool often used by districts to help build coherence with school improvement. Strategic planning can increase the likelihood that all components such as staffing, budgeting, and professional development are connected with the district vision (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004). There were some noted differences between the two districts in their use of school improvement plans. Apple County School District required all schools to create an improvement plan, while Moore City School District only required improvement plans for schools that were identified as in improvement as defined by federal and state regulations. District leaders play a critical role by providing clear and consistent expectations for student performance and

providing intensive supports for underperforming staff and schools as well as a focus on continuous improvement for all schools. The focus on all students learning to high standards requires quality teaching and learning. Therefore, improved districts need to have high expectations and accountability for adults in the system because the adults have the main responsibility to improve student learning (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004). It is arguable that districts that continue using improvement plans for all schools better position themselves to maintain higher levels of achievement for all schools. As long as the districts outline clear goals, maintain focus, connect the essential reform elements, and balance autonomy and accountability, the conditions can be set for scalable and sustainable success (Zavadsky, 2013).

Teacher leaders can play an important role in turnaround efforts. Effective district leaders recognize they unilaterally cannot transform traditional schools into high-performing schools from the central office. Therefore, they work with principals to create a guiding coalition of key teacher leaders within each school to build enthusiasm for the process (DuFour, 2012). This was evident in both districts and was an important part of their efforts for turning around low-achieving schools. There was an overwhelming value in the Apple County School District for identifying and fostering teacher leaders. Teacher leaders were described as having important roles not only in the school, but often had designated roles in district level initiatives. Conversely, Moore City School District recognized the need for developing teacher leaders by creating more opportunities for instructional leadership. Instructional leadership plays an essential role in school turnaround. School districts develop instructional leaders through professional development, direct support, and opportunities to collaborate. To accomplish this,

districts should provide regularly scheduled collaboration time for school and district instructional leaders to share best practices and engage in joint problem-solving (The Broad Prize for Urban Education, 2013).

Summary of Strategies

Rather than a "one-size-fits-all" approach, districts must find ways to differentiate treatment to schools, based on their unique performance needs and related conditions. At the same time, they must create and implement integration strategies that bring coherence into systems of schools and into the improvement efforts of those schools, which imply common as well as differentiated expectations, relations, and inputs to schools (Anderson et al., 2012). District leaders from both school districts in this study identified data analysis, professional development, and collaboration as meaningful strategies for turning around low-performing schools. These strategies impacted all three domains of teaching and learning, district leadership, and operation and support systems.

Both districts studied viewed data analysis as a critical strategy needed for turning around low-performing schools. Data analysis was used for decisions on curriculum, monitoring teachers, and planning professional development. Districts use prevention as an intervention through their continuous monitoring of data to identify problems that are easy to mitigate within a regular school day and classroom, rather than waiting until more intensive interventions are needed (Zavadsky, 2013). Both districts described using data systems that collected and analyzed multiple types of data including test scores, attendance, student behavior, and teacher observation data. The districts also provided training to teachers and administrators on the use of data. The district provides effective instructional supports for all students by ensuring teachers routinely identify students in

need of remediation or enrichment, using reliable data from multiple sources, and by ensuring that the students receive appropriate intervention or assistance needed to make progress and stay in school (The Broad Prize for Urban Education, 2013).

Similarly, professional development was a common strategy between the two districts and widely used to address school turnaround. Moreover, research supports opportunities for teachers and other staff members to enhance their professional ability and instructional capacity. Districts should focus professional development on ensuring that teachers understand their grade level and content specific standards, how those standards are assessed, and what to do when students do not perform well (Fisher & Frey, 2007). While professional development was an important strategy to both districts, the approach to planning professional development differed. The district leaders from Moore City School District applied a top-down approach to planning professional development. Often, the type of professional development was in a large group setting and was chosen by the district leaders, lead turnaround partner, or state leaders. An abundance of professional development opportunities exist for educators and administrators at all educational levels. Despite the availability of professional development, many such workshops are unsuccessful (Balan et al., 2011). Conversely, Apple County School District's approach to professional development varied greatly and was decided at the school level by teams of teachers or the improvement team made up of teacher leaders. The types of professional development described in the interviews of Apple County School District included coaching, mentoring, and targeting specific needs of individual teachers. The key to professional development for both leaders and teachers is for it to be

relevant, accessible, accountable by use of follow up activities, and aligned to school and district goals (Zavadsky, 2013).

Collaboration was a key strategy used by district leaders to impact change and turn around low-performing schools. There are four broad categories that are seen as important to district effectiveness but not sufficient in isolation: effective leadership, quality teaching and learning, support for system-wide improvement, and clear and collaborative relationships (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004). In both districts, collaboration was described as a strategy used for teachers planning instruction and for intervention for students. Collaboration also was described in the planning of professional development and parent involvement. More importantly, collaboration was a key strategy used to enhance the relationship between district leaders and school staff. Moore City School District recognized the need for increased collaboration between the district leaders and school leaders. The superintendent observed district leaders spending more time in the central office and not enough time in schools. He directed his central office staff to spend more time in the schools and to engage with staff. Conversely, collaboration between the district leaders and the school staff in the Apple County School District was widely accepted and practiced by district leadership. Evidence from the interviews describe district leaders attending school planning meetings and being available as a resource for the schools. Essentially, the collaborative strategies exhibited by the Apple County School District increased effective communication between the school and district office. Districts need to ensure organizational coherence through organizational structure and policies and practices, effective two-way communication and cross-functional support for

individual schools, and effective balancing of centralized and decentralized decision making (The Broad Prize for Urban Education, 2013).

Summary of District Roles

The desire to improve the lowest performing schools often is driven by school level reforms, but only rarely is attention paid to the district's role in school improvement. Improvements of the lowest performing schools can and should be part of a more coordinated district strategy. To this end, the requirements for school improvement planning and implementation should include explicit acknowledgement of the district's role (Knudson et al., 2011). The challenges of meeting the requirements of the federal and state expectations and of closing the achievement gap for students require rethinking the roles, responsibilities, and relationships within school districts and among schools within a district (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004).

Interviews of superintendents, assistant superintendents, directors of instruction, directors of human resources, and principals, along with the analysis of the school improvement plans, reveal the importance district leaders have in influencing turning around low-performing schools. Commonalities among responses from both district interviews indicate specific roles essential for district leaders:

- District leaders should be **visible and accessible** to school staff,

- District leaders should assume a **supportive** role in school turnaround, and

- District leaders should **delegate** authority to schools and their staff.

Effective leaders understand the power of their presence and understand the importance of taking the time to meet with schools on a regular basis. A district leader's presence can increase motivation and provide support or direction when needed. School

district administrators exercise essential leadership, in partnership with school leaders, to build capacity throughout public educational systems for teaching and learning improvements (Honig et al., 2010). They do this by being visible in schools and accessible to school staff.

Leaders who are supportive foster a sense of trust and allow staff to seek out their own solutions in accomplishing their goals. Schools in turnaround often have identified districts as being key initiators and supporters of school reform (Aladjem et al., 2010). District leaders who are supportive will share the burden with their schools in improvement by actively participating in planning meetings and participating in their professional development. School district offices and the people who work in them simply are not part of the background noise in school turnaround. School district administrators exercise essential leadership, in partnership with school leaders, to build capacity throughout public educational systems for teaching and learning improvements (Honig et al., 2010).

Leaders take the time to learn about the strengths of staff and the potential they have for school turnaround. Effective delegating relies on the ability to select the proper staff for a specific task or role. District leaders do this by encouraging principals to distribute their leadership through school improvement planning and by identifying teacher leaders who have the potential to support turnaround. District leaders also foster teacher leaders by providing opportunities to lead in curriculum development and professional development. Effective district leaders recognize they unilaterally cannot transform traditional schools into high-performing schools from the central office.

Therefore, they work with principals to create a guiding coalition of key teacher leaders within each school to build enthusiasm for the process (DuFour, 2012).

Findings from Member Checking

To establish the trustworthiness of the findings, member checking was conducted to validate the accuracy. Participants were asked whether they agreed with the findings and if the summaries were representative of their views. Four of the eight participants responded, and three of those provided additional comments about the findings from the study. The feedback from the participants who responded was positive and in agreement with the findings from the study.

Dr. Roberts, the superintendent of Apple County School District, agreed with the findings and stressed the importance of the collaboration between district leaders and school staff. His district was successful in building and sustaining the capacity to improve its schools. Dr. Roberts stated "Our collaborative efforts allow each voice to be heard and the final decision on initiatives was agreed upon by both the school and the district office." He described the roles identified by the study as "on target for impacting school turnaround efforts."

Dr. Collins, the assistant superintendent of Apple County, provided feedback that confirms the importance for district leaders assuming a supportive role in school turnaround. She described what district leaders have to offer schools in their improvement efforts: "The three areas you identified in the district's role are, from my point of view, very specific and on target. As you stated, the district provides support, but more importantly we provided a prospective on ideas and theories that the school

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personnel may not have." Dr. Collins makes an important point for schools benefiting from the knowledge and perspective of district leaders.

Dr. Baldwin, the superintendent of Moore City School District, agreed with the findings and described the importance of delegating authority to school staff. His district was in the process of turning around low-performing schools. His feedback described how schools and district staff should work together to support curriculum alignment, improvement plans, and the development of teacher leaders. His feedback emphasizes the importance of buy-in for school improvement initiatives. "If schools are going to improve, it is important that there be buy-in for their efforts from all levels—teachers, building administrators, and district leaders."

Chapter 4 presented the results of the study. Key examples were provided, comparing two school district's systems of support, the district's role in supporting low-performing schools, and the strategies districts implement to turn around low-performing schools. The findings confirm the research on the strategies necessary for turning around low-performing schools and the role of the school district in influencing school improvement. Chapter 5 will provide the implications for school district leadership in their role in school improvement and recommendations, based on the findings, for district leadership practice in supporting school improvement and school turnaround.

CHAPTER 5. SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Presenting the study's implications for school district leadership in their role in school improvement, Chapter Five is divided into four sections. Section one provides a summary of the investigation, highlighting the study's guiding question and a discussion of the relevance of the findings. The next section specifies the implications for school district practice and emphasizes what could be done by district leaders supporting school turnaround. The remaining two sections discuss recommendations for further study and provide conclusions from this research.

Purpose and General Summary of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the efforts of school districts in developing and sustaining their capacity to improve student achievement in response to increased accountability. The study sought to confirm what the research says regarding the role of school districts in influencing school improvement. Recent research focused on the role of school districts in turning around low-performing schools and the impact of school districts on sustaining student achievement for all schools in their district (Aladjem et al., 2010; Jones & Wheeler, 2011; Shannon & Bylsma, 2004; Zavadsky, 2013). As federal and state governments continue to hold accountable districts with the lowest achieving schools, it is imperative districts examine both school-level and district practices and policies that contribute to increased student achievement. With this considered, the role of districts in supporting school turnaround are important to examine.

Chapter 2 shared the foundational research that allowed conclusions to be made about the role of school districts in influencing school improvement. The research cited several recognized frameworks that presented common elements, roles, and strategies necessary to turn around low-performing schools. The elements, themes, and effective practices identified by the studies in Chapter 2 were categorized into three domains: teaching and learning, district leadership, and operations and support systems. The focus on all students learning to high standards requires quality teaching and learning. Thus, improved districts need to have high expectations and accountability for all staff in the system because they have the main responsibility to improve student learning (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004). The district leaders' commitment to strategies that engage district and school personnel in organizational learning should be focused on deep understanding of the particular learning challenges and conditions of each school. This is key to differentiating district support for improvement in a more adaptive as opposed to bureaucratic way (Anderson et al., 2012). A district's operations and support include developing and implementing policies and strategies for turning around low-achieving schools. Districts revise those policies and strategies to ensure coherence among programs and practices linked to district goals. Districts applying a systemic approach create coherence by identifying system-wide goals and outcomes, by providing a clear framework as a guide, by clarifying non-negotiables such as curriculum standards to maintain coherence and quality, and by encouraging schools to use resources creatively to address student needs (Zavadsky, 2013). The research was instrumental in developing the framework used to examine the efforts of two school districts in supporting school turnaround and draw comparisons.

This study adds to the existing body of research by providing insights into the systems that support school turnaround, the roles of their central office in supporting school improvement, and the key strategies for turning around low-performing schools. Districts serve as the logical catalyst and hub for ensuring schools get what they need to turn around low-performing schools. This requires balance and clarity on the best division of labor between districts and schools (Zavadsky, 2013). Additionally, the study explored the key elements and strategies in curriculum alignment, school improvement plans, and the fostering of teacher leaders who support school turnaround. Rather than a "one-size-fits-all" approach, districts must find ways to differentiate treatments to schools based on their unique performance needs and related conditions. At the same time, they must create and implement integration strategies that bring coherence into systems of schools and into the improvement efforts of those schools, which imply common as well as differentiated expectations, relations, and inputs to schools (Anderson et al., 2012).

The findings outlined in Chapter 4 convey the importance of the role districts have for turning around low-performing schools. Participants in the study provided 318 examples illustrating specific elements and strategies used to support schools. The research employed open coding to examine broadly individual interviews for elements identified under the domains of teaching and learning, school division leadership, and operations and support. Meaningful comparisons were made between school districts to identify contrasts, similarities, or patterns between the two cases. The procedure provided the opportunity to examine the findings and determine emerging patterns and to incorporate pattern matching. After the interviews were analyzed and coded for meaning, connections were made among participants' perspectives through axial coding and

disaggregating data by themes. The coding of the interviews were classified into 39 axial codes (including duplication between districts): 14 for teaching and learning, 10 for district leadership, and 15 for district operations and support. The 39 axial codes were analyzed further through a collective coding process and divided into two categories of elements and strategies. While the research often addressed strategies and elements in similar contexts, the findings were categorized into elements and strategies to address what elements are in place and how strategies are utilized for school turnaround.

Three elements including curriculum alignment, improvement plans, and teacher leaders were found to be the most notable elements for turning around low-performing schools. These elements impacted all three domains of teaching and learning, district leadership, and operation and support systems. Curriculum should align with the state academic standards while addressing what is taught and assessed, and districts should ensure that alignment between standards, curriculum, and assessments is ongoing and sustained. Improvement plans are essential for turning around low-performing schools. The study revealed that improvement plans for all schools, regardless of their state or federal sanction, is essential for sustained achievement. Systemic reform requires close connection and alignment from the district level to the school level. Another important element in school turnaround is teacher leaders. Teacher leaders play an important role in turnaround efforts and are essential to the development of curriculum, professional development, and direct support needed to improve schools.

Three strategies including data analysis, professional development, and collaboration recurred most often and also were found to be the most notable strategies for turning around low-performing schools. Data analysis is an essential strategy needed

for turning around low-performing schools. Data analysis is used in making decisions on curriculum, monitoring teachers, and planning professional development. Districts focus professional development on teachers' needs while providing opportunities to create a professional development plan based on specific school needs. The study found that professional development should not be limited to the group as a whole, but should include coaching, mentoring, and targeting specific needs of individual teachers. Clear and effective collaboration is critical to the success in turning around low-performing schools. School district leaders take the time to establish meaningful relationships with schools that are collaborative and reflect the needs and strengths of the district.

Implications for the District's Role

School turnaround has changed significantly over the last decade from a focus on isolated reform elements such as modifying reading programs, improving teachers, or redesigning individual schools to a more comprehensive approach of building the capacity of a school district's ability to create sustained reform. Increasing achievement across schools necessitates considering how school districts support school improvement and sustain district capacity to improve student achievement. Based on what the researcher has learned about the role of the school district in the course of this study, the researcher offers the following recommendations for district leadership practice in supporting school improvement.

- *Being visible and accessible*. The findings in this study affirm the importance of district leaders taking the time to meet with schools on a regular basis. District leaders enhance their presence in schools beyond traditional walkthrough observations and principal meetings by attending school level

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meetings, being available for input when needed, and participating in school

staff's professional development. Being visible and accessible establishes trust

between the district and school by creating an environment where staff are

comfortable asking questions or sharing challenges they may be facing with

school turnaround efforts. School districts develop instructional leadership

through professional development, direct support, and opportunities to

collaborate. To accomplish this, districts should provide regularly scheduled

collaboration time for school and district instructional leaders to share best

practices and engage in joint problem-solving (The Broad Prize for Urban

Education, 2013). District leaders who spend more time in schools are more

effective with communication, provide opportunities to increase motivation,

and provide timely support or direction when needed. Both of the districts

studied recognized the importance of being visible and accessible. School

district administrators exercise essential leadership, in partnership with school

leaders, to build capacity throughout public educational systems for teaching

and learning improvements (Honig et al., 2010).

- *Taking a supportive role in school turnaround.* School district offices and the

  people who work in them are not simply part of the background noise in

  school turnaround. Leaders of Apple County School District who had

  successfully turned around low achieving schools described a shared

  responsibility for school improvement efforts. The principal in Apple County

  described the district leaders as working hand-in-hand in developing

  curriculum. Effective district leaders do not blame schools for their

challenges; they share the burden and work closely with schools to increase student achievement. District leaders need to engage in a collaborative process for turning around low-performing schools by working hand-in-hand on improvement efforts. This means not only approving school improvement plans, but taking an active role in the development and participation of the school improvement process. Leaders who are supportive foster a sense of trust and allow staff to seek out their own solutions in accomplishing their goals. Schools in turnaround often identified districts as being key initiators and supporters of school reform (Aladjem et al., 2010).

- *Delegating authority to schools and their staff.* District leaders encourage principals to distribute their leadership through school improvement planning and identify teacher leaders who have the potential to support turnaround. Managing talented teachers and leaders involves much more than simply recruiting, selecting, developing, and retaining staff. It means understanding how to obtain and distribute the right leaders and teachers, then lining up all parts of the system to help them meet their goals successfully (Zavadsky, 2013). Leaders take the time to learn about the strengths of staff and the potential they have for school turnaround. Effective delegating relies on the ability to select the proper staff for a specific task or role. Effective district leaders recognize they unilaterally cannot transform traditional schools into high-performing schools from the central office. Therefore, they work with principals to create a guiding coalition of key teacher leaders within each school to build enthusiasm for the process (DuFour, 2012).

The implications for the district's role fit well into the conceptual framework developed in Chapter 2 and strengthen the components of teaching and learning, district leadership, and operations and support. The focus on all students learning to high standards requires quality teaching and learning. The district provides effective curricular supports and ensures that teachers can teach the curriculum effectively at the appropriate level of depth in the time available (The Broad Prize for Urban Education, 2013). District leaders take the time to meet with school staff and engage in discussions on teaching and learning. They support teaching and learning by providing opportunities and additional time for teachers to work with the curriculum. District leaders also support teaching and learning by delegating the authority to principals and teacher leaders for the alignment and implementation of curriculum. District leadership plays a central role in school turnaround. While school leadership is a crucial factor, principals and other school leaders are selected, supported, and directed by policy and practice driven by school district leadership (Zavadsky, 2012). District leaders who are visible and accessible foster trust and strengthen accountability. They support improvement planning by taking an active role in the development and implementation of those plans. Districts foster instructional leadership by identifying effective teacher leaders and providing opportunities for those teachers to lead in improvement efforts. Lastly, a district's role in operations and support system is designed to support student achievement and district goals. District leaders are accessible to assist with identifying and acquiring resources needed for schools and their staff. Turning around low-achieving schools requires alignment from a district that is focused on lending expertise and providing oversight, support, and resources (Zavadsky, 2012). District leaders actively support professional

development by providing opportunities and time to hold professional development activities and participating themselves in school staff's professional development. Teacher leaders are an essential part of a district operation and support system. Teacher leaders also can take some of the same leadership tasks as the district, such as procuring and distributing resources, monitoring progress, and providing professional development (Firestone & Martinez, 2007). Teacher leaders play an important role in turnaround efforts.

Recommendations for Further Study

School turnaround has changed significantly over the last decade from a focus on isolated reform elements such as modifying reading programs, improving teachers, or redesigning individual schools to a more comprehensive approach of building the capacity of a school district's ability to create sustained reform. An increasing number of studies now are examining the role school districts have in turning around low-performing schools. This study confirms what the research says regarding the role of the school district in influencing school improvement. Strong leadership is essential to systemic, sustainable school improvement and student achievement. Superintendents and their leadership teams have a critical role in leading school turnaround for districts. The challenges of turning around low-performing schools are multifaceted and require district leaders to take on new roles and approaches to build the capacity of school staff to raise student achievement. Current research discovered common elements and strategies on how school districts have supported low-performing schools. It is important to note the variability of how these elements can be implemented in efforts for turning around low-achieving schools. Elements may differ from school to school based on where that school

or district is in the improvement process or how long districts have been working towards improving schools. Another variable to consider is the support systems states have in place to turn around low-achieving schools. Prescriptive state models for school improvement and work with lead turnaround partners may influence the elements and strategies districts may use in their turnaround efforts. Future studies should seek to explore how effective leadership practices impact school turnaround in a broader context and include a larger sample of urban and rural school districts.

The findings of the study represent a limited sample representing two districts and the leadership roles found within those particular districts. School districts across the country vary widely in their average student population and settings of urban and rural as well as the structure and roles within a central office. Though the sampled school districts represent a more rural setting, the researcher was limited in being able to identify similar districts that met the criteria for the study. The researcher acknowledges that there are other school districts that do meet these criteria across the country, and further research might examine the role of the school district in influencing school improvement in other settings including large urban and suburban districts. The research also noted differences between the districts with regards to years of experience and knowledge of the participants in the study. Expanding future studies would provide a larger sample more representative of the variations found in districts working to turnaround low-performing schools.

Conclusion

The dismal track record of school districts carrying out and sustaining school reform has led policymakers and reformers to conclude that while the district is part of

the reform problem, it should not be part of the solution (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003). For years school-wide reform efforts only focused on the schools, while disregarding the role of the school district in turning around low-achieving schools. The research in the literature presented, along with the findings of this study, suggest districts have an important role in school turnaround. Effective district leaders who spend more time in schools increase communication and provide timely support and direction when needed (The Broad Prize for Urban Education, 2013; Honig et al., 2010; Shannon & Bylsma, 2004; Zavadsky, 2012).

The study's results confirm that districts have an important role in influencing school improvement while supporting and turning around low-performing schools. District leaders should shift their focus from managing school improvement initiatives to leading school turnaround by being visible and accessible for school staff, taking a supportive role in school turnaround efforts, and delegating authority to schools and their staff when appropriate. The study's outcomes do not suggest theoretical concepts to school district leaders. Rather, the findings extend realistic and manageable practices that enhance the role of district leaders in supporting school turnaround and sustained achievement.

Appendix A. Informed Consent Form

I, _____, agree to participate in an interview that is designed to gather information on districts' roles in supporting school improvement efforts.

As a doctoral student in education policy, planning, and leadership at the College of William and Mary, the researcher is interested in analyzing the key elements of a school district's system of support and common roles of central office staff in turning around low achieving schools.

I understand that my participation will entail answering questions through a face-to-face or phone interview. Participation will take approximately one hour. After the feedback has been collected from each participant and should additional clarification and/or elaboration be needed, I will be available for follow-up communication, lasting no more than 30 minutes, to be arranged at my convenience. If at any time I am uncomfortable answering a question or sharing my perceptions or perspectives, I understand that I can refrain from comment without consequence.

I understand the researcher will protect the identities of participants through the use of pseudonyms in this and any future publications or presentations. I understand that participants may be quoted directly in the study's results, but their names will not be used in any part of the report. Any feedback collected will be used for data collection and analysis purposes only and will not become part of the presentation of the study's results. All data will be stored in a secure location during the study, and will be destroyed after the study's results have been shared through publication and/or presentation. Furthermore, I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary. Other individuals will not be made aware of my preference not to participate if I so choose; no consequences shall exist because of my refusal to participate. I understand I may withdraw from this study at any time, without consequence.

Should you have any questions about this study, you may contact the researcher's dissertation chair, Dr. Michael F. DiPaola at (757) 221-2344 or mfdipa@wm.edu. To report any dissatisfaction with the study, please contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Committee, Dr. Thomas Ward, at (757) 221-2358 or tjward@wm.edu.

My signature below signifies that I am at least 18 years of age, that I have received this consent form, and that I consent to participate in the study.

_____   _____
              Date   Signature of Participant

_____   _____
              Date   Signature of Researcher

THIS PROJECT WAS FOUND TO COMPLY WITH THE APPROPRIATE ETHICAL STANDARD AND WAS EXEMPTED FROM THE NEED FOR FORMAL REVIEW BY THE COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS COMMITTEE (PHONE 757-221-3966) ON 2014-03-21 AND EXPIRES ON 2015-03-21.

Appendix B. Final Protocol

Interview Protocol District/School Leader

Name _____   Date_____

School District _____   Position_____

Introduction
- Welcome
- Discuss the purpose of the study
- Provide and explain the informed consent form
- Provide the structure of the interview and the areas it will address
- Ask if there are any questions about the survey

Questions about Teaching and Learning
1. What steps does the district take to ensure alignment of the written, taught, and tested curriculum?

2. What specific changes were made to the curriculum, instruction, and/or assessment as a result of data analysis?

3. How do teachers use curriculum guides and other resources to plan instruction and assessments aligned with the state standards of learning?

4. How does your acceleration program address students who are meeting or exceeding the state standards of learning?

5. Some teachers, new and experienced, may use teaching approaches they believe work even when evidence suggests otherwise. If this occurred, how would more prescriptive approaches to instruction be implemented and monitored?

6. How does the district leadership team work with school leaders to cultivate a climate of effective teaming and collegial support in developing, implementing, and monitoring differentiated, research-based instruction?

7. How is student learning measured against the state standards of learning?

8. How does the district leadership team ensure that instruction and formative assessments are aligned with grade-level state standards of learning?
9. How are assessments aligned with the state standards of learning?
10. What sources of data does the district leadership team analyze and share with principals and teachers to assist in identifying students who are not achieving grade-level standards and those who are failing?

11. How are students who are struggling academically supported?

Questions about School District Leadership

12. How does the district support teacher leadership?

13. How are observation data shared with teachers and what types of conversations occur around the data?

14. How are school improvement teams organized at both the district and school levels?

15. How often does the district leadership team meet with school staff to discuss the school's progress?

16. What is the district leadership team's role in the school improvement process?

17. What observation strategies and tools would district leaders use to make sure that classroom instruction focused on the State Standards of Learning?

18. How do the district leadership team and superintendent monitor school improvement efforts? How is data analysis integrated into this process?

19. What subgroup trends did the district leadership team observe and how are these trends identified?

20. How are the relative strengths and weaknesses of the current reading and mathematics programs evaluated?

21. What is the district's role in reviewing school improvement plans?

22. How is information about school improvement shared with the superintendent and school board?

23. What data were used by the district and how does the use of data drive the development of the school improvement plan?

Questions about Operations and Support
24. How does the district leadership team review and synthesize leading and lagging indicators at the district, school, and classroom levels? How is this information used to allocate or reallocate resources?
25. How does the district leadership team ensure that resources are available to allow the school district's vision to be realized through strategic planning and subsequent actions?

26. What needs assessment activities are implemented by the school district to determine how resources are allocated to individual schools?

27. How does the district leadership team ensure that professional development is differentiated to support the specific needs of staff?

28. How does the district leadership approach professional development within the school(s) in improvement? Did staff participate in division activities or was a unique professional development plan developed for the school?

29. How does the school district train and support leaders who demonstrate the capacity to improve schools?

30. How did the district ensure that school board policies are not barriers to continuous school improvement?

31. What types of incentives are available for staff who implement the school improvement initiatives?

32. How does the work of district and school-level teams impact student achievement?

33. How do school district leaders build and maintain positive relationships with faculty, students, parents, and the community while initiating the school improvement process?

34. How does the district ensure that schools and community representatives are included as active partners in decision-making?

35. How do you help students and their parents become aware of and access the academic support system?

Appendix C. Content Validation Instrument

Content Validation -- **Domain 1: Teaching and Learning**
Please review these survey questions and provide feedback

1. What steps did the division take to ensure curriculum alignment?

   - Is the language clear? ☐ Yes ☐ No
   - Does this question belong in the **Teaching and Learning** Domain?
   - Select the area(s) that this question best fits
     ☐ Alignment of Curriculum   ☐ Assessment

     ☐ Rigorous and Engaging Instruction   ☐ Student Support Systems

   - If needed, please provide comments or suggestions on how to rephrase the question:

2. What specific changes were made to the curriculum, instruction, and/or assessment as a result of data analysis?

   - Is the language clear? ☐ Yes ☐ No
   - Does this question belong in the **Teaching and Learning** Domain?
   - Select the area(s) that this question best fits
     ☐ Alignment of Curriculum   ☐ Assessment
     ☐ Rigorous and Engaging Instruction   ☐ Student Support Systems
   - If needed, please provide comments or suggestions on how to rephrase the question:

3. How are teachers using curriculum guides and other resources to plan instruction and assessments aligned with the State Standards of Learning?

   - Is the language clear? ☐ Yes ☐ No
   - Does this question belong in the **Teaching and Learning** Domain?
   - Select the area(s) that this question best fits
     ☐ Alignment of Curriculum   ☐ Assessment
     ☐ Rigorous and Engaging Instruction   ☐ Student Support Systems
   - If needed, please provide comments or suggestions on how to rephrase the question:

4. How does your acceleration program address students meeting or exceeding the State Standards of Learning?

   - Is the language clear? ☐ Yes ☐ No

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- Does this question belong in the **Teaching and Learning** Domain?
- Select the area(s) that this question best fits
  ☐ Alignment of Curriculum ☐ Assessment
  ☐ Rigorous and Engaging Instruction ☐ Student Support Systems

- If needed, please provide comments or suggestions on how to rephrase the question:

5. Some teachers, including experienced ones, may use teaching approaches they believe work even when evidence suggests otherwise. If this occurred, how would more prescriptive approaches to instruction be implemented and monitored?

   - Is the language clear? ☐ Yes ☐ No
   - Does this question belong in the **Teaching and Learning** Domain?
   - Select the area(s) that this question best fits
     ☐ Alignment of Curriculum ☐ Assessment
     ☐ Rigorous and Engaging Instruction ☐ Student Support Systems

   - If needed, please provide comments or suggestions on how to rephrase the question:

6. How is the division leadership team working with school leaders to cultivate a climate of effective teaming and collegial support in developing, implementing, and monitoring differentiated, research-based instruction?

   - Is the language clear? ☐ Yes ☐ No
   - Does this question belong in the **Teaching and Learning** Domain?
   - Select the area(s) that this question best fits
     ☐ Alignment of Curriculum ☐ Assessment
     ☐ Rigorous and Engaging Instruction ☐ Student Support Systems

   - If needed, please provide comments or suggestions on how to rephrase the question:

7. What is the process used to measure student learning against the State Standards of Learning?

   - Is the language clear? ☐ Yes ☐ No
   - Does this question belong in the **Teaching and Learning** Domain?
   - Select the area(s) that this question best fits
     ☐ Alignment of Curriculum ☐ Assessment
     ☐ Rigorous and Engaging Instruction ☐ Student Support Systems

   - If needed, please provide comments or suggestions on how to rephrase the question:

8. How is the division leadership team ensuring that instruction and formative assessments are aligned with grade-level State Standards of Learning?

- Is the language clear? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- Does this question belong in the **Teaching and Learning** Domain?
- Select the area(s) that this question best fits
  ☐ Alignment of Curriculum   ☐ Assessment
  ☐ Rigorous and Engaging Instruction ☐ Student Support Systems

- If needed, please provide comments or suggestions on how to rephrase the question:

9. How are division benchmark tests and formative assessments aligned with the State Standards of Learning?

- Is the language clear? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- Does this question belong in the **Teaching and Learning** Domain?
- Select the area(s) that this question best fits
  ☐ Alignment of Curriculum   ☐ Assessment
  ☐ Rigorous and Engaging Instruction ☐ Student Support Systems

- If needed, please provide comments or suggestions on how to rephrase the question:

10. What sources of data does the division leadership team analyze and share with faculty to identify students who are not achieving grade-level standards and those who are failing?

- Is the language clear? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- Does this question belong in the **Teaching and Learning** Domain?
- Select the area(s) that this question best fits
  ☐ Alignment of Curriculum   ☐ Assessment
  ☐ Rigorous and Engaging Instruction ☐ Student Support Systems

- If needed, please provide comments or suggestions on how to rephrase the question:

11. How are students who are struggling academically supported?

- Is the language clear? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- Does this question belong in the **Teaching and Learning** Domain?

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- Select the area(s) that this question best fits
  - ☐ Alignment of Curriculum　　　☐ Assessment
  - ☐ Rigorous and Engaging Instruction　　☐ Student Support Systems

- If needed, please provide comments or suggestions on how to rephrase the question:

Content Validation -- **Domain 2: School Division Leadership**
Please review these survey questions and provide feedback
12. How is the division supporting teacher leadership?

- Is the language clear?　☐ Yes　☐ No
- Does this question belong in the **District Leadership** Domain?
- Select the area(s) that this question best fits
  - ☐ Instructional Leadership　　☐ Strategic Planning
  - ☐ District Oversight　　☐ Continuous Improvement and Accountability

- If needed, please provide comments or suggestions on how to rephrase the question:

13. How are observation data shared with teachers and what types of conversations occur around the data?

- Is the language clear?　☐ Yes　☐ No
- Does this question belong in the **District Leadership** Domain?
- Select the area(s) that this question best fits
  - ☐ Instructional Leadership　　☐ Strategic Planning
  - ☐ District Oversight　　☐ Continuous Improvement and Accountability

- If needed, please provide comments or suggestions on how to rephrase the question:

14. How are school improvement teams organized at both the division and school levels?

- Is the language clear?　☐ Yes　☐ No
- Does this question belong in the **District Leadership** Domain?
- Select the area(s) that this question best fits
  - ☐ Instructional Leadership　　☐ Strategic Planning
  - ☐ District Oversight　　☐ Continuous Improvement and Accountability

- If needed, please provide comments or suggestions on how to rephrase the question:

15. How often does the division leadership team meet with school staff to discuss the school's progress?

- Is the language clear? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- Does this question belong in the **District Leadership** Domain?
- Select the area(s) that this question best fits
  ☐ Instructional Leadership ☐ Strategic Planning
  ☐ District Oversight ☐ Continuous Improvement and Accountability

- If needed, please provide comments or suggestions on how to rephrase the question:

16. How does the school division define its' role in the school improvement process?

- Is the language clear? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- Does this question belong in the **District Leadership** Domain?
- Select the area(s) that this question best fits
  ☐ Instructional Leadership ☐ Strategic Planning
  ☐ District Oversight ☐ Continuous Improvement and Accountability

- If needed, please provide comments or suggestions on how to rephrase the question:

17. What observation strategies and tools were used to make sure that classroom instruction focused on the State Standards of Learning?

- Is the language clear? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- Does this question belong in the **District Leadership** Domain?
- Select the area(s) that this question best fits
  ☐ Instructional Leadership ☐ Strategic Planning
  ☐ District Oversight ☐ Continuous Improvement and Accountability

- If needed, please provide comments or suggestions on how to rephrase the question:

18. What is the process used by the division leadership team and superintendent to monitor school improvement efforts? How is data analysis integrated into this process?

- Is the language clear? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- Does this question belong in the **District Leadership** Domain?
- Select the area(s) that this question best fits

☐ Instructional Leadership   ☐ Strategic Planning
☐ District Oversight   ☐ Continuous Improvement and Accountability

- If needed, please provide comments or suggestions on how to rephrase the question:

19. What subgroup trends did the division leadership team observe and how are these trends identified?
    - Is the language clear?   ☐ Yes   ☐ No
    - Does this question belong in the **District Leadership** Domain?
    - Select the area(s) that this question best fits
      ☐ Instructional Leadership   ☐ Strategic Planning
      ☐ District Oversight   ☐ Continuous Improvement and Accountability

    - If needed, please provide comments or suggestions on how to rephrase the question:

20. What is the process you have in place to evaluate the relative strengths and weaknesses of the current reading and mathematics programs?

    - Is the language clear?   ☐ Yes   ☐ No
    - Does this question belong in the **District Leadership** Domain?
    - Select the area(s) that this question best fits
      ☐ Instructional Leadership   ☐ Strategic Planning
      ☐ District Oversight   ☐ Continuous Improvement and Accountability

    - If needed, please provide comments or suggestions on how to rephrase the question:

21. What is the divisions' role in reviewing school improvement plans?

    - Is the language clear?   ☐ Yes   ☐ No
    - Does this question belong in the **District Leadership** Domain?
    - Select the area(s) that this question best fits
      ☐ Instructional Leadership   ☐ Strategic Planning
      ☐ District Oversight   ☐ Continuous Improvement and Accountability

    - If needed, please provide comments or suggestions on how to rephrase the question:

22. What types of regular reports about school improvement were provided to the superintendent and school board?

    - Is the language clear?   ☐ Yes   ☐ No

- Does this question belong in the **District Leadership** Domain?
- Select the area(s) that this question best fits
  - ☐ Instructional Leadership   ☐ Strategic Planning
  - ☐ District Oversight   ☐ Continuous Improvement and Accountability
- If needed, please provide comments or suggestions on how to rephrase the question:

23. What data were used and how did the use of data drive the development of the school improvement plan? How were teachers trained in the use of the data?

- Is the language clear? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- Does this question belong in the **District Leadership** Domain?
- Select the area(s) that this question best fits
  - ☐ Instructional Leadership   ☐ Strategic Planning
  - ☐ District Oversight   ☐ Continuous Improvement and Accountability

- If needed, please provide comments or suggestions on how to rephrase the question:

Content Validation -- **Domain 3: Operations and Support System**
Please review these survey questions and provide feedback

24. How is the division leadership team reviewing and synthesizing leading and lagging indicators at the division, school, and classroom levels? How is this information used to allocate or reallocate resources?

- Is the language clear? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- Does this question belong in the **Operations and Support System** Domain?
- Select the area(s) that this question best fits
  - ☐ Effective Resource Allocation   ☐ Organizational Structures
  - ☐ Professional Development   ☐ Connections with Families and Community

- If needed, please provide comments or suggestions on how to rephrase the question:

25. How does the division leadership team ensure that resources are available to allow the school division vision to be realized through strategic planning and subsequent actions?
- Is the language clear? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- Does this question belong in the **Operations and Support System** Domain?
- Select the area(s) that this question best fits
  - ☐ Effective Resource Allocation   ☐ Organizational Structures

☐ Professional Development   ☐ Connections with Families and
                                       Community

- If needed, please provide comments or suggestions on how to rephrase the
  question:

26. What needs assessment activities are implemented by the school division to
    determine how resources are allocated to individual schools?

    - Is the language clear?   ☐ Yes   ☐ No
    - Does this question belong in the **Operations and Support System** Domain?
    - Select the area(s) that this question best fits
      ☐ Effective Resource Allocation   ☐ Organizational Structures
      ☐ Professional Development   ☐ Connections with Families and
                                            Community
    - If needed, please provide comments or suggestions on how to rephrase the
      question:

27. How does the division leadership team ensure that professional development is
    differentiated to support the specific needs of staff?
    - Is the language clear?   ☐ Yes   ☐ No
    - Does this question belong in the **Operations and Support System** Domain?
    - Select the area(s) that this question best fits
      ☐ Effective Resource Allocation   ☐ Organizational Structures
      ☐ Professional Development   ☐ Connections with Families and
                                            Community

    - If needed, please provide comments or suggestions on how to rephrase the
      question:

28. How did the division leadership approach professional development within the
    school(s) in improvement? Did staff participate in division activities or was a
    unique professional development plan developed for the school?
    - Is the language clear?   ☐ Yes   ☐ No
    - Does this question belong in the **Operations and Support System** Domain?
    - Select the area(s) that this question best fits
      ☐ Effective Resource Allocation   ☐ Organizational Structures
      ☐ Professional Development   ☐ Connections with Families and
                                            Community

    - If needed, please provide comments or suggestions on how to rephrase the
      question:

29. How does the school division train and support leaders who demonstrate the
    capacity to improve schools?

- Is the language clear? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- Does this question belong in the **Operations and Support System** Domain?
- Select the area(s) that this question best fits
  ☐ Effective Resource Allocation ☐ Organizational Structures
  ☐ Professional Development ☐ Connections with Families and Community

- If needed, please provide comments or suggestions on how to rephrase the question:

30. How did the division ensure that school board policies were not barriers to continuous school improvement?

- Is the language clear? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- Does this question belong in the **Operations and Support System** Domain?
- Select the area(s) that this question best fits
  ☐ Effective Resource Allocation ☐ Organizational Structures
  ☐ Professional Development ☐ Connections with Families and Community

- If needed, please provide comments or suggestions on how to rephrase the question:

31. What is the incentive for the school improvement initiative: external influence, internal influence, or a combination?

- Is the language clear? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- Does this question belong in the **Operations and Support System** Domain?
- Select the area(s) that this question best fits
  ☐ Effective Resource Allocation ☐ Organizational Structures
  ☐ Professional Development ☐ Connections with Families and Community

- If needed, please provide comments or suggestions on how to rephrase the question:

32. How does the work of division and school-level teams impact student achievement?

- Is the language clear? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- Does this question belong in the **Operations and Support System** Domain?
- Select the area(s) that this question best fits
  ☐ Effective Resource Allocation ☐ Organizational Structures

☐ Professional Development   ☐ Connections with Families and
                                    Community

- If needed, please provide comments or suggestions on how to rephrase the question:

33. How did school division leaders maintain and build positive relationships with faculty, students, parents, and the community while initiating the school improvement process?

- Is the language clear?   ☐ Yes   ☐ No
- Does this question belong in the **Operations and Support System** Domain?
- Select the area(s) that this question best fits
  ☐ Effective Resource Allocation   ☐ Organizational Structures
  ☐ Professional Development   ☐ Connections with Families and
                                      Community
- If needed, please provide comments or suggestions on how to rephrase the question:

34. How does the division ensure that schools and community representatives are included as active partners in decision-making?

- Is the language clear?   ☐ Yes   ☐ No
- Does this question belong in the **Operations and Support System** Domain?
- Select the area(s) that this question best fits
  ☐ Effective Resource Allocation   ☐ Organizational Structures
  ☐ Professional Development   ☐ Connections with Families and
                                      Community

- If needed, please provide comments or suggestions on how to rephrase the question:

35. How do you help students and their parents become aware of and access the academic support system?

- Is the language clear? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- Does this question belong in the **Operations and Support System** Domain?
- Select the area(s) that this question best fits

☐ Effective Resource Allocation   ☐ Organizational Structures
☐ Professional Development   ☐ Connections with Families and
                                      Community

- If needed, please provide comments or suggestions on how to rephrase the question:

Thank you for your time and insightful comments. Please forward the completed forms to cjkelly@mail.wm.edu or call me at 757-897-9987 and I will be happy to make arrangements to pick them up.
Christopher Kelly

Appendix D. Amended Survey

Interview Protocol District/School Leader

Name _____   Date_____

School District _____   Position_____

Introduction
- Welcome
- Discuss the purpose of the study
- Provide and explain the informed consent form
- Provide the structure of the interview and the areas it will address
- Ask if there are any questions about the survey

Questions about Teaching and Learning
1. What steps does the district take to ensure alignment of the written, taught, and tested curriculum?

2. What specific changes were made to the curriculum, instruction, and/or assessment as a result of data analysis?

3. How do teachers use curriculum guides and other resources to plan instruction and assessments aligned with the State Standards of Learning?

4. How does your acceleration program address students who are meeting or exceeding the State Standards of Learning?

5. Some teachers, new and experienced, may use teaching approaches they believe work even when evidence suggests otherwise. If this occurred, how would more prescriptive approaches to instruction be implemented and monitored?

6. How does the district leadership team work with school leaders to cultivate a climate of effective teaming and collegial support in developing, implementing, and monitoring differentiated, research-based instruction?

7. How is student learning measured against the State Standards of Learning?

8. How does the district leadership team ensure that instruction and formative assessments are aligned with grade-level State Standards of Learning?

9. How are assessments aligned with the State Standards of Learning?

10. What sources of data does the district leadership team analyze and share with faculty principals and teachers to assist in identifying students who are not achieving grade-level standards and those who are failing?

11. How are students who are struggling academically supported?

Questions about School District Leadership

12. How does the district support teacher leadership?

13. How are observation data shared with teachers and what types of conversations occur around the data?

14. How are school improvement teams organized at both the district and school levels?

15. How often does the district leadership team meet with school staff to discuss the school's progress?

16. What is the district leadership team's role in the school improvement process?

17. What observation strategies and tools would district leaders use to make sure that classroom instruction focused on the State Standards of Learning?

18. How do the district leadership team and superintendent monitor school improvement efforts? How is data analysis integrated into this process?

19. What subgroup trends did the district leadership team observe and how are these trends identified?

20. How are the relative strengths and weaknesses of the current reading and mathematics programs evaluated?

21. What is the district's role in reviewing school improvement plans?

22. How is information about school improvement shared with the superintendent and school board?

23. What data are used by the district and how does the use of data drive the development of the school improvement plan?

Questions about Operations and Support

24. How does the district leadership team review and synthesize leading and lagging indicators at the district, school, and classroom levels? How is this information used to allocate or reallocate resources?

25. How does the district leadership team ensure that resources are available to allow the school district's vision to be realized through strategic planning and subsequent actions?

26. What needs assessment activities are implemented by the school district to determine how resources are allocated to individual schools?

27. How does the district leadership team ensure that professional development is differentiated to support the specific needs of staff?

28. How does the district leadership approach professional development within the school(s) in improvement? Did staff participate in division activities or was a unique professional development plan developed for the school?

29. How does the school district train and support leaders who demonstrate the capacity to improve schools?

30. How did the district ensure that school board policies are not barriers to continuous school improvement?

31. What types of incentives are available for staff who implement the school improvement initiatives?

32. How does the work of district and school-level teams impact student achievement?

33. How do school district leaders build and maintain positive relationships with faculty, students, parents, and the community while initiating the school improvement process?

34. How does the district ensure that schools and community representatives are included as active partners in decision-making?

35. How do you help students and their parents become aware of and access the academic support system?

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