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Without a Map: An Examination of District Leadership During the COVID-19 Crisis

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**Without a Map:
An Examination of District Leadership During the COVID-19 Crisis**

By

Megan E. Welter

B.A. Saint Mary's College, 1991

M.Ed. University of Minnesota, 1998

A DISSERTATION

in Partial fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in Public Policy

University of Southern Maine

May 2021

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Date: April 15, 2021

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Without a Map:**An Examination of District Leadership During the COVID-19 Crisis**

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An Abstract of the Dissertation Presented

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree Doctor of Philosophy

In Public Policy

April 15, 2021

Achieving coherence and coordination in a complex system like a school district is complicated by the nested layers of the organization. This structure allows for teachers in classrooms and schools in a district to operate autonomously, as their organizational layers insulate those in the center from external demands and mandates. The COVID-19 pandemic represented an external demand that led district leaders to implement a series of situational reforms that affected nearly every aspect of the educational organization.

This qualitative study examines how the experiences and decision-making processes of district, school, and teacher leaders from a single district in Maine during the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to the district's coordination and coherence throughout the crisis. Key findings demonstrate that while district leaders acted to establish a decision-making

process that centralized decisions, aligned policies, and allocated resources to meet the evolving demands of delivering education during a pandemic, there were factors that acted to facilitate or inhibit the effectiveness of these actions. The most consequential factor related to district coherence was the presence of relational trust throughout the system, as it enhanced communication and collaboration, which contributed to broad diffusions of knowledge across the system. When relational trust was high, members also tolerated uncertainty and adopted changes more readily. The changing conditions and novelty of decisions confronting educational leaders also led to increased networking within the district and across districts in the region. This collaboration led to greater homogeneity and decreased school-based autonomy.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In March 2020, only four months after the first cases of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) were first reported in Wuhan, China, schools throughout Maine, and the rest of the United States, began closing their doors to “support [the] response efforts to delay and mitigate the outbreak” (Office of Governor Janet T. Mills, 2020). Though infection rates throughout the world and in other parts of the country were high, at the time of the school closures in Maine on March 15, 2020, there were seven cases in the state. The Governor’s declaration of a Civil State of Emergency ended classroom instruction in all public schools “as soon as reasonably practicable” (Office of Governor Janet T. Mills, 2020) and prohibited gatherings of more than ten people in public places. This order closed the state, and school and district leaders worked to first attend to the basic needs of students in their communities, as well as to those of their staff members, before turning their attention to providing an equitable learning experience for students.

Statement of the Problem

There is little question that highly-coordinated and coherent central offices and schools can lead to improved student outcomes (Fullen & Quinn, 2016; Chrispeels, et al., 2008; Johnson, et al., 2015; Rorrer et al., 2008), but there have been few research studies exploring how district and school leaders act together to coordinate and establish coherence. Rorrer (2008) characterized the district as an institutional actor, defining the district as “an organized collective ... bound by a web of interrelated and interdependent roles, responsibilities, and relationships” (p. 308). In districts, particularly smaller districts, central office leaders act as both individuals and as components within this organized collective institutional actor. The hierarchical, nested organizational structure

of a school district poses a challenge to implementing and sustaining change in a coordinated and coherent manner. In addition, the district exists in the context of broader external entities, including federal and state policy domains, that impose reforms on local districts.

Though not an external policy mandate, the COVID-19 pandemic was an external force—a crisis—that caused significant disruption to all aspects of education and required each district to act as an organized collective to provide instructional leadership and reorient the district to direct resources—human, social, and physical—to provide education during the pandemic. Coordinating resources and ensuring that information flowed between central offices and schools led districts to assume a more centralized approach, characterized by district-wide responses, as opposed to encouraging greater school autonomy (Netolicky, 2020; Hubbard et al., 2020). Because few school and district leaders had encountered a disruption to education requiring school closures—indeed the magnitude of the disruption to schooling caused by the COVID-19 pandemic was considered “unprecedented” and “cataclysmic” (Supovitz & D’Auria, 2020)—leaders sought guidance outside of their local districts (Netolicky, 2020), including from other leaders from around the state and from the Maine Department of Education.

Because the nested nature of districts’ organizational structures posed a challenge to effectively conveying complex information through each of the layers of the organization, the existence or absence of relational trust throughout the organization affected these efforts to achieve a coherent and coordinated district response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Organizational Challenges to Coordination and Coherence

Researchers have sought to understand why some reform initiatives—whether they were introduced internally, within the district, or by external entities like the federal or state government—last, whereas others do not. Elmore (1996) described the nested nature of educational institutions, at the federal, state, and local levels, as a primary obstacle to scaling educational reform. Individual classrooms within a school, schools within a district, localized districts within a state, and states in the country comprise the nested structure of educational institutions. Efforts to reform schooling to improve educational outcomes can originate at any of these levels or from within any of these domains and, depending on one's place in the educational institution, a reform may be perceived as externally driven and controlled.

Prior to the extraordinary events of March, 2020 when the Governor's declaration of a Civil State of Emergency directed all local education agencies (LEAs) in the state to close school buildings to in-person schooling, superintendents and local school boards had historically exercised primary educational decision-making authority, as granted to them by the Maine constitution. As the pandemic's effects were felt throughout the country, in many states greater decision-making authority shifted to states as governors and state legislatures made decisions to close and reopen schools. However, because Maine, like other states in the northeast of the United States, has a history of local control, whereby school boards located in the community are responsible for governing and managing public schools in that community (Great Schools Partnership, 2016), subsequent decisions about reopening schools were made at the district level. During the pandemic, district leaders throughout Maine were forced to shift their orientation from

one focused largely on local concerns, to one characterized by greater connections to other districts and external policy domains, particularly the Maine Department of Education, to develop plans for directing and leading schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout the spring and the summer of 2020, in particular, district leaders sought guidance related to reopening plans from state officials, including the Maine Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), and the Maine Department of Education (MDOE). In addition, districts looked to these agencies for assistance with questions related to the administration and accounting of the funds received through the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, passed in March of 2020.

While districts in Maine had the authority to decide when and how to reopen schools, a month following the initial closure, pressure to reopen from external entities—including the federal government—began to mount. In mid-April, 2020, the White House released *Opening Up America Again* guidelines, which identified the necessary conditions for states to relax some of the measures adopted to mitigate the spread of the virus. Though the plan stipulated that state and local officials could modify the criteria based on the local circumstances, the plan reflected the early pressure on states and districts to reopen schools and the economy. The pressure that external entities, including the federal, state, and local communities, applied to reopen schools affected district decision-making, particularly in light of pressure from teachers' unions, which also exerted pressure on districts (Sawchuk, 2020).

The tension between local control and centralized authority also exists, though on a smaller scale, in the relationship between central offices and schools. Districts

throughout the country, large and small, grapple with the challenge of balancing central office-driven initiatives, which often are dictated by federal and state mandates, with building-driven, autonomous initiatives (Johnson et al., 2015). Like those who advocate for local control, proponents of building-level personnel-driven initiatives argue that the personnel that are closer and more directly involved with the school community are better situated to understand and respond to the needs (Murphy, 1989). In addition, research has shown that building-level, teacher-led reform work leads to increased professionalism and organizational learning (Dufour & Eaker, 2008).

While there is evidence that building-level reforms carried out by school leaders and teachers can lead to improvements in student achievement (Stein et al., 2016), research points to the need for centralized leadership at the district level to be able to carry out and sustain gains in its schools and districts (Honig, 2013, Johnson, et al., 2015). During the COVID-19 pandemic, Hubbard, Mackey, and Supovitz (2020) found that districts' responses tended to be more centralized or top-down when there were existing centralized practices and infrastructure, including established cross-district leadership teams and centralized technology support. Though such centralization ensured consistency, Hubbard and her colleagues found that coordinating across the district led to delays in communication and overly broad guidance. Those districts that were oriented to allow greater autonomy at the school level encouraged schools and leaders to manage many of the decisions, limiting centralized tasks to food delivery and technology distribution. However, in cases where schools exercised greater autonomy, districts confronted equity issues across the system.

The central office or district leadership-driven reforms are necessary to realize the district's mission and vision while also ensuring equity across schools (Tujilo, 2012). At the same time, district and school leaders recognize that schools within the same district have different needs arising from different student populations and staff members' experience and skills, including those of the principal (Honig, 2009). If centralized leadership is necessary to carry out the vision for the district and to coordinate resource movement that ensures equity and achievement for students, and if the assets and needs of each school in the district require different goals and resources that suggest greater school autonomy, then more must be known about how district and school leaders balance the tension between centralized and autonomous (school-based) decision making and resource allocation necessary to meet continuous school improvement goals.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological case study was to examine leaders' experiences of managing the evolving and sometimes contradictory guidance from external entities, like the federal and state policy domains, and lead their district and schools throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Using a grounded theory approach, I explored the actions that district leaders took to coordinate resources and communicate decisions and guidance, and those factors that impacted the effectiveness of their actions. The results from the phenomenological case study of the actions that leaders took to achieve coordination and coherence in their district to implement and sustain the changes necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic will provide understanding of how these actions contributed to stakeholders' perceptions of the changes, as well as those of the organization leaders.

Research Questions

Overarching question: How do district leaders achieve coordination and coherence in complicated systems comprising many schools, each with its own culture, in order to implement and sustain change necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic?

- How do district leaders determine how centralized controls are exercised and how much autonomy each school maintains?
- How do district and school leaders generate will and build capacity for systemwide change?
- How do stakeholders' understanding of the reforms affect the implementation of the change?

Significance of the Study

The COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020, led to abrupt school closures around the world and forced nearly 51 million students in the United States to be educated remotely. District and school leaders were quick to respond, targeting resources to staff and students to enable emergency remote learning to take place. As districts planned for the fall and the return to school, myriad changes to practices, routines, and policies needed to be made and adopted. While school reform is typically undertaken with intention to make systemic improvements, the changes adopted by districts during the pandemic were immediate responses to the crisis that evolved into longer-term situational reforms.

Through the review of the literature, I will assert that during the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders and districts, as institutional actors, were instrumental in implementing and carrying out changes and that the change processes and roles that leaders played were

consistent with reform implementation research, as they required generating will and building capacity to make the changes. In addition, leaders throughout districts acted to mediate the effects of external influences and bridge school systems' nested layers to establish policy coherence and reallocate resources.

Finally, while marked research has explored the role of district and school leaders in implementing reform and in balancing which sets of decisions and resources are managed centrally and which are handled by schools more autonomously, most of the research has focused on large school districts situated in urban settings (Honig, 2009; Johnson, et al., 2015). While many of the findings of these studies are relevant to schools in urban, suburban, and rural districts, the application and relevance of other findings, particularly those pertaining to the reorientation of central office administrators to support building level leaders (Honig, 2009; Honig, 2012; Johnson, et al., 2015), to schools in small, rural districts is less evident. This is of particular interest, given the size, organization, and distribution of school districts in Maine. Of the 281 districts in Maine in 2019, no one district serves more than 10,000 students and only two have student enrollments greater than 5,000 students (Maine Department of Education, 2019). To understand how district leaders achieve coordination and coherence in complicated systems, it is important to examine how the size of the district central office and the roles played by district and school leaders compare with those described in the research on leaders in large districts. Although some factors, such as communication, is simpler in a small district, the leaders in a small district must navigate a system that comprises many of the same complexities of larger districts, as it is also composed of nested layers arranged hierarchically.

This study will contribute to the understanding of leaders' actions and experiences during the pandemic, and of the factors at play that affected the effectiveness of leaders leading complex systems in an extraordinary period of time.

Definition of Key Terms

1. Central Office: Describes the location of district leadership as well as the district-level policy domain.
2. Coherence: Fullan & Quinn (2016) defined coherence as “what is in the minds and actions of people individually and especially collectively” (p. 2); coherence refers to a high degree of alignment within a system, allowing focused work toward common goals.
3. COVID-19 Pandemic: COVID-19 is the disease caused by a new coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2. The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic in March, 2020 (State of Maine COVID-19 Response: Office of the Governor, 2020).
4. District Leaders: Includes superintendent and central office administrators who have oversight of multiple schools and district decisions.
5. Emergency Remote Learning: Teaching and learning experiences that take place as a result of a crisis-driven shift to distance or online instruction of coursework that was not intentionally designed for online delivery (Hodges et al., 2020).
6. Externally-Driven Mandates: Regulations or policies issued at the federal or state-level policy domain. “Mandates are used when policy makers seek to achieve a uniform effect across a multitude of entities” (Firestone, 1989, p. 152).

7. Local Control: School boards located in the community are responsible for governing and managing public schools in that community (Great Schools Partnership).
8. Policy Domain: The level at which a mandate is issued or received, including federal, state, district, and school.
9. Relational Trust: An organization property arising from “interpersonal social exchanges in school communities” (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, p. 12).
10. Scaling-Up Reform: Expanding reform to additional classrooms, schools, and districts and sustaining change in multilevel systems as seen in changes in classroom instructional practices (Coburn, 2003).
11. School Leaders: Includes building-level administrators, including the principal, members of the school’s leadership team, and other members of the staff who act as leaders, in formal or informal positions.
12. Situational Reform: Changes that were implemented and sustained during the pandemic to allow teaching and learning to take place.
13. Stakeholders: Those who have a concern in and are directly affected by the school reform.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

This review of literature supports four assertions, which are the basis for the significance of the study:

1. District leaders play an important role in introducing, implementing, and sustaining reforms in the district's schools.
2. Coordinating and establishing coherence between the district and buildings is necessary for successfully implemented reforms, as is maintaining a shared purpose and collective vision.
3. It is important to examine how leaders in smaller districts manage reforms to understand how these responses compare with those of leaders in larger districts.
4. Maine's recent experiences with externally-driven mandates may affect how leaders implement subsequent reforms.

These assumptions are explored in this review of the literature, which is divided into eight sections and examines research related to the role that district leaders play in achieving coordination and coherence to introduce, implement, and sustain reform. The first section will focus on the disparate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students and communities, highlighting schools' initial responses. While the literature review examines research related to reform, it is important to contextualize the reforms that will be examined in this research as those that have been put into place in response to the crisis of the pandemic. To that end, the second section explores the ways in which school reform generally differs from situational reforms, like those implemented during the pandemic. The third section examines the history of school reform in the United States and the role of each policy domain, including federal, state, and local entities. The

purpose of this section is to outline the evolving role played at each policy domain level and how the shift of authority from one domain to another affects the other domains.

To understand the roles played by the district and its leaders, the fourth and fifth sections of the review of literature explore how relational trust and social networks facilitate reform implementation and diffusion throughout a complex system. The subsequent section examines the four roles of district leaders: providing instructional leadership, reorienting the organization to reassign resources and change the culture, establishing policy coherence between the reform work and other policies and procedures, and maintaining an equity focus to implement and sustain reforms. This section is followed by an examination of how complex systems, like school districts, achieve coherence. In the eighth and final area of review, I considered how the existing body of literature is applied to Maine, where the districts are significantly smaller than those studied in the literature. In addition to the size of the districts, I will explore whether the recent history of repealed mandates affects stakeholders' willingness to engage in subsequent reform efforts, particularly those mandated at the state or federal domains.

COVID-19—Spring, 2020: Attending to Basic Needs and Addressing Inequitable Impact

This sudden closure of schools in Maine on March 15, 2020, coupled with the disruption caused by other closures throughout the state, forced districts to transform all of their operations in order to continue to provide education and other services. Districts recognized that, with the closure of schools and businesses, many students would face food insecurity. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.), 10.9% of Maine's

population lived in poverty in 2019; and of the more than 178,000 students in Maine, 42.3% qualified for free or reduced-priced meals in schools (Maine Department of Education, n.d.). Food insecurity poses risks to children's physical health, and meals provided by schools are an important measure to address food insecurity and lead to improved academic performance (VanLancker & Parolin, 2020). School districts throughout the country were able to continue to provide meals for students within days of school closures and throughout the pandemic. The first federal emergency coronavirus legislation relaxed rules for the meals that schools provide to students, allowing schools to set up meal delivery and pick-up locations (Ujifusa, 2020).

In addition to addressing food insecurity, districts also marshalled resources to address other issues, including locating students and removing barriers to accessing education by providing students with devices and hotspots. Prior to the pandemic, 16.8% of students in Maine were considered chronically absent from school in the 2018-2019 school year (Maine Department of Education, n.d.). Students already experiencing educational disruption caused by health challenges, unstable employment, high rates of mobility, homelessness, or housing insecurity were more likely to be negatively affected by the pandemic and were more likely to have higher rates of disengagement from school (García & Weiss, 2020). Respondents to a national survey conducted by the EdWeek Research Center reported that one in five students was not participating in school in the spring during emergency remote learning. In high-poverty schools, which are characterized by more than 75% of students qualifying for free and reduced price meals (FRAM), nearly 30% of students were not engaged in remote learning. In low-poverty schools where fewer than 25% of students qualified for free or reduced meals, only 12%

of students were reported as absent or not engaging in emergency remote learning (Kurtz, 2020). Finding students was complicated by inequities in students' internet access, which made it difficult to determine whether or not students were receiving messages consistently. Based on 2019 data in Maine, while more than 89% of households reported having a household computer, only 82.1% reported having a broadband connection (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).

COVID-19 and Situational Reforms

When introducing reform initiatives, school district leaders first identify the problem—typically related to the educational core of curriculum and instruction—and identify how the reform will address it. This process of generating will (Rorrer, et al., 2008; Firestone, 1989) involves conveying the need for the change and establishing a vision and goals to support the reform. Institutions, and the leaders in those institutions, then mobilize resources to build capacity to carry out the reform. Building capacity and generating will for the reform are ongoing processes that are iterative and require organizational and individual attention and focus. The impetus for a reform initiative to be adopted and incorporated into the organization is the problem it seeks to address.

Because the pandemic was global and affected nearly every aspect of people's lives, there was little need to convince people—to generate the will—that significant changes to practice would have to be made. As districts pivoted to emergency remote learning in response to a global pandemic, and then as they made plans to return to in-person learning in the fall, there seemed to be no end to the problems that needed to be addressed. Policy makers and district leaders were forced to focus on capacity building rather than generating will because there was a common understanding of the problems

that faced educational institutions during this time: How to continue the act of educating students while keeping everyone in the organization safe. Firestone (1989) asserted that building capacity involved three actions: Mobilizing personnel; developing functions related to change, including promoting a shared vision and putting resources into place to realize the vision; and connecting the district and schools to target supports and to increase participation and buy-in throughout the district. The United States (U.S.) Congress passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act on March 27, 2020, only weeks after schools throughout the country closed to in-person instruction. This legislation injected more than \$2 trillion into the U.S. economy and was used by school districts to obtain the resources needed to provide schooling in a remote context and to prepare for students to return for in-person learning in the fall (U.S. Department of the Treasury, n.d.). These financial resources were used by districts to put into place resources necessary to transform their districts from an in-person instruction model to an emergency remote learning structure.

The reforms that were identified and adopted throughout the spring, summer, and fall were unlike other reforms in that the solutions that were adopted, including providing remote learning for those who could not return for in-person instruction, reducing class sizes, and changing the schedule for in-person learning to allow for social distancing, addressed a crisis and thus were situational and not expected to be sustained once the crisis of the pandemic passed. The problem of defining how schools should operate during a pandemic required solutions or situational reforms that were novel, differed by state and region, and were sometimes based on what schools in other countries put into place weeks or months ahead of the United States.

Many of the practices related to educational reform, including introducing, implementing, and sustaining the reform, could be applied to the situational reforms precipitated by the pandemic. Like other reforms, when introducing and implementing the situational reforms, leaders need to generate will and build capacity to make the changes. To effectively generate will and build capacity in this critical time, district leaders also needed to attend far more closely to relational trust or social trust in school communities. Relational trust involves the “distinctive qualities of interpersonal social exchanges in school communities, and how these cumulate in an organizational property” (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, p. 12). The presence of high relational trust throughout an organization enhanced the introduction, implementation, and perpetuation of the changes.

The Role of Federal, State, and Local Governments: A History

Even in the earliest years of the United States, the country’s leaders and early educators saw the benefit of and need for an educated electorate. While an educated electorate was valued, the history of American schools reflects the changing beliefs about the role that schools should play in society (Ravitch, 2009; Payne, 2010). The changing role of public education in American society reflected the economic, cultural and political contexts of the time. In the United States’ first century, publicly-funded education, including the Common School movement (Cohen & Mehta, 2017; Togneri & Anderson, 2003) reflected the values of having an informed electorate to maintain the ideals of a strong democracy; education was a public good with the benefits accruing to everyone in society (Labaree, 1997). While these values were shared throughout the country, decisions about education—including who and what was taught—were the domain of the immediate community and the local school board.

The Industrial Revolution and the Progressive Era at the turn of the twentieth century led to the adoption of education policy that reflected different roles for education: Vocational and technical education that prepared students for the workplace (Ravitz, 2009; Pijanowski, 2019). While education was still considered a public good that benefited the broader society, social efficiency, which was characterized by educational stratification that grouped students into their roles in society (Ravitz, 2009; Labaree, 1997; Elmore, 1996) became a goal of education. Public schools continued to sort students, preparing them for work or liberal arts education, throughout the twentieth century, a process that served to reinforce existing inequities. These inequities were compounded by the local nature of schools; students attended schools in their communities, and the quality of the educational opportunities varied widely, depending on the community. Recognizing that locally funded schools were leading to underfunding and inequalities, states began to play a more active role in funding schools. According to Pijanowski (2019), “by the start of World War I, over a quarter of the state legislatures enacted some form of equalization program to complement deficient local funding” (p. 2). The educational system’s reliance on local and state funds meant that economic downturns could have devastating effects on education not only at local levels, but across states, as well. This was seen during the depression in 1933 when local school boards defaulted on salaries and schools were forced to close (Smith, 1982, as cited in Pijanowski, 2019).

Though some federal funds were introduced into schools between 1930 and the middle of the twentieth century, during these decades local communities grew increasingly dependent on state funds. According to The Tax Foundation (1954) (as cited

in Pijanowski, 2019), the average state share of the educational expenditures in the United States jumped from 17% in 1930, to 40% 20 years later.

In 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was signed into law, marking the beginning of the contemporary era of state and federal policy-making (Shelly, 2011). Prior to the adoption of ESEA, public education was the domain of state and local governments. This Civil Rights Act was intended to provide federal funding to low-income schools to address inequalities in school systems and improve economic outcomes for students, schools, and the communities (Kantor, 1991; Brady et al., 2014). ESEA represented the first significant federal involvement and oversight of public education, as the funding were tied to accountability measures with which school districts needed to comply. The goal of ESEA was to close the achievement gaps between high and low-income students. However, this goal was not realized (Payne, 2008; Shelly, 2011; Pijanowski, 2019).

The next wave of reforms in the contemporary era were reforms that reflected a politically conservative context. *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, published in 1983, identified American schools as failing and identified measures to address this failure (Brady et al., 2014; Payne, 2010). After the release of, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, Maine followed a number of other states in enacting legislation to address concerns about public education. According to Tugend (1984), the Education Reform Act (1984) was the most significant reform in Maine in more than 20 years and set out standardized course-completion requirements for graduation, mandatory kindergarten, teacher stipends, and standardized testing. Each of the initiatives in this groundbreaking law was intended to improve the quality of teaching

and learning. Six years later, a review of the improvements following the passage of this act led to the publication of “Maine’s Common Core of Learning,” which outlined the vision for the knowledge, skills and attitudes students should have upon graduating from high school.

The enactment of Goals 2000: Educate America Act in 1993, which called on states to adopt standards and standardized testing, marked the beginning of a steady increase in the number of federal mandates (Shelly, 2011). Maine responded to the mandate for the adoption of standards and standardized testing by passing the System of Learning Results Established in 1995, and adopting the Maine Learning Results in 1996 (Maine Department of Education, 1996). This law established long-range educational goals and standards for schools. It also mandated the assessment of student performance of these standards. The adoption of shared standards was considered highly controversial because, to many, it represented the State appropriating a power that was considered a local one—specifically, the power to determine what should be taught. At the heart of this controversy is the tension between local control and State oversight. While the Maine Constitution requires the State to monitor the results of student learning in communities, schools and districts have the authority to set curriculum and criteria for what students must do to attain a diploma, (Maine Department of Education, 1997). Thus, when this bill was introduced, its opponents argued that these common standards and performance indicators represented an erosion of powers once held entirely by local districts.

The Maine Learning Results described what students graduating from Maine high schools should know and be able to do. Subsequently, the accountability requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002) led states,

including Maine, to enact other laws and policies directing schools to assess students' achievement of the Learning Results through state and locally-developed assessment systems. When the Maine Learning Results were adopted in 1996, the Comprehensive Assessment System was to be made up of two measures of student proficiency of the Learning Results: the Maine Education Assessment (MEA), and additional assessments that were locally developed and constituted the Local Assessment System (LAS). "These locally developed assessments were to be valid and reliable and ultimately provide an accurate representation of students' achievement of the Learning Results" (Fairman & Harris, 2005, p. 1). School Administrative Units (SAUs) began working on the Local Assessment Systems (LAS) in 2003, but abandoned the efforts after the Governor declared a moratorium on the LAS in 2006.

Though the LAS was nullified in 2006, the federal accountability mandates of the No Child Left Behind Act remained in place. Standards coupled with these accountability requirements provided the basis for the adoption of proficiency-based learning practices (Certo et al., 2008). In 2012, Maine enacted a law that required school districts to implement proficiency-based diploma requirements. This law required local districts to use the Maine Learning Results as the basis for establishing local standards that defined proficiency. Consequently, local districts adopted different targets and had varying definitions of what it meant to be proficient (Johnson & Stump, 2018). Shifting the mandate for defining proficiency from the state level to the local district level undermined the goal of improving equity between districts and ensuring that students were meeting similar proficiencies that were aligned to state benchmark assessments.

After six years of district implementation, the law requiring schools and districts to certify that a student achieved proficiency in the Learning Results was repealed.

The history of school reform in the United States and in Maine is relevant because the federal and state mandates that have been introduced, revised, and replaced over the last 40 years have resulted in schools and districts in a constant state of reform (Elmore, 1996) without building capacity within educational organizations to know what is needed to carry out the reform (Forman et al., 2017; Honig & Hatch, 2004). The rapid series of educational reforms has contributed to a decreased sense of collective efficacy, as these reforms have not led to improved student achievement, nor have they improved equity in schools (James, 2016; Forman et al., 2017; Saphier, 2019).

As the federal and state involvement and oversight increases in areas that had previously been the domain of districts and schools—including standards, curriculum alignment, teacher preparation and effectiveness, professional development, and monitoring school performance and improvement—the role of the school district as an independent decision-making entity is less defined (Heller, 2018; Shelly, 2011; Payne, 2010). This complex history of the relationship between local districts and federal and state departments of education informed how these policy domains interacted throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act included education-related provisions to support child nutrition programs, childcare and K-12 institutions, as well as \$13 billion for the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSERF). The ESSERF funds were distributed to states, which then allocated the funds to districts based on their Title 1 allocation and could be used for educational purposes that were authorized under current federal programs

(Anguiano et al., 2020). These funds were used to address a range of educational needs arising from disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, including purchasing technology to support distance learning, facilities improvements, and COVID-related mitigation resources—including personal protective equipment (PPE), professional development, and resources to address the needs of students with disabilities and English learners. While these funds have some restrictions and reporting and accounting requirements, local education agencies had a great deal of discretion in deciding how to spend these funds.

The federal government provided funding to districts and relaxed some mandates. At the end of March, the U.S. Department of Education waived the assessment requirement in the Every Student Succeeds Act (Gewertz, 2020). While the U.S. Department of Education waived the testing requirement, it emphasized that during the period of school closures, learning must continue. It rejected requests to support Congressional waivers to the free and appropriate public education (FAPE) and least restrictive environment (LRE) requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Maintaining these requirements meant that school districts needed to continue to work to meet students' individual education programs (IEP), despite the challenges posed by emergency remote learning.

As districts developed new procedures for emergency remote learning and began planning to return to school in the fall, the Maine Department of Education (MDOE) took an active role in providing supports to school administrative units and educators in the field. While the MDOE provided guidance and support in the form of weekly webinars

hosted by content area specialists and resources to support emergency remote learning on the MDOE website, superintendents throughout the state sought more guidance and direction on a number of issues—including how attendance should be taken, how grading and reporting should occur, and how graduations should take place, given the 50-person limit placed on gatherings—that had typically been the purview of the school administrative unit (SAU). The MDOE responded to these requests by increasing its presence at regional meetings of superintendents and by convening the leaders of educational organizations throughout the state, representing the perspectives of stakeholders throughout the field. These regular meetings allowed the MDOE to hear and respond to questions and concerns raised by educators.

As districts began planning for the reopening of schools, they again sought guidance and clear directions from the MDOE about health and safety requirements, defining what distance learning should entail, how to manage the requirements of IDEA, and how to manage sports and arts programs. Throughout the spring and summer, the Commissioner of Education and other members from the MDOE continued to meet with superintendents and educational leaders to provide updates from other departments, including the Maine Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), and to develop guidelines for returning to school. In July, the MDOE, working with Maine CDC, released the *Framework for Returning to Classroom Instruction*. This framework included a “series of health and safety precautions that all schools were required to follow to protect the safety and well-being of staff, students, and their families if they decide to return to in-classroom instruction” (Office of Governor Janet T. Mills, 2020). The other parts of the framework included

guidance related to supporting staff and students' social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health; academic programs and student learning considerations; and common expectations for hybrid and remote learning models. The framework also included the COVID-19 School Health Advisory System, which established a three-tier classification system based on a county's relative risk of COVID-19 transmission. While parts of the framework were presented as guidance, the framework's health and safety considerations included six requirements that superintendents had to certify were being followed to accept federal COVID-relief funds. By issuing the rest of the framework, including the COVID-19 Health Advisory System, as guidance, the MDOE sought to honor the local control of SAUs, while still providing clear guidelines that district leaders could use to plan for the return to in-person instruction.

Over the last 60 years the role that federal and state governmental organizations had played in mandating educational reforms aimed at improving student outcomes has expanded. This expansion established a precedent for and expectation of federal and state involvement and direction. Over the 2020-2021 school year, during the COVID-19 pandemic, federal and state governmental organizations continued to be involved in local education policy. Throughout the year, local leaders were forced to respond to frequently changing and sometimes contradictory guidance from federal and state governmental organizations when instituting local policy and procedure.

Leading From Crisis to Recalibration: The Role of Relational Trust

The sudden closure of school buildings required districts to pivot their operations, resources, and approach to provide emergency remote learning. While putting into place policies and procedures during emergency remote learning, district and school leaders

were also beginning to make plans for the return to school in the fall. When staff and students returned to in-person instruction in the fall, many changes had been planned for and implemented, recalibrating the schooling experience. These were significant and complicated changes to practices, routines, and structures that leaders needed to diffuse throughout the system—across buildings and into each classroom. And many of the practices, routines, and structures would need to be changed as the context of the COVID-19 pandemic—including the rates of infection in the community, growing understanding of the virus, and shifting political and societal inputs—also changed. Relational trust between stakeholders, including district leaders, principals, teachers, school board members, parents, and members of the community was an important element in the successful implementation and sustainability of these situational reforms.

Relational Trust

According to Rousseau and her colleagues (1998) trust is the willingness to be vulnerable to the actions of another person or institution based on “positive expectations” regarding the intentions, drivers, and behavior of the other (Mayer et al., 1995; Pirson & Malhotra, 2007). “Trust is based on the expectation that one will find what is expected rather than what is feared” (Deutsch, 1973, as cited in McAllister, 1995). Trust is a vital element in an organization for it to function effectively and coherently. In schools, trust among teachers and in the principal is related to improved collaboration, collective efficacy, and student achievement (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000; Tschannen-Moran, 2001; Bryk & Schneider, 2003). Trust in the district and those leading it is especially important during crises when there is much uncertainty (Frederiksen, 2014; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). “Trust functions as a ‘lubricant’

greasing the way for efficient operations when people have confidence in other people's words and deeds" (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000, p. 549). In a complex organization like a school district, social relationships and social exchanges between members of the school community are an integral part of the operations and these exchanges are more productive when they occur in a high-trust context

Drawing on theories of social capital, Bryk & Schneider (2002) assert that individuals who are part of the school community make up a complex network of members who play different roles in the organization. While the scope of this research, based on a longitudinal study of 400 Chicago elementary schools, is limited to the school-level, the framework and findings can be applied to the district and district leaders, particularly those serving small districts. According to the researchers, the roles that people play—teacher, student, principal, and parent—affect the social exchanges, as each member is aware of their role set and the obligations associated with it. Relational trust is established when members have confidence that others will fulfill obligations and expectations in their shared work of educating students (Robinson, 2010). Because schools and districts are arranged hierarchically, the social exchanges between people in different role sets are asymmetrical, with a participant from one role set having more power than the other in the organization. Despite the asymmetry, the members in the organization depend on each other to function effectively in their role and these mutual dependences create risk and vulnerability (Mayer et al., 1995; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000; Pirson & Malhotra, 2007). "Consequently, deliberate action taken by any party to reduce this sense of vulnerability in others—to make them feel safe and secure—builds trust across the community" (Bryk & Schneider, 2003, p. 41). As the sense of risk and

vulnerability is reduced, members of the school community are more willing to engage in the new task or reform though they may not feel comfortable or confident (Rousseau, 1998; McAllister, 1995; Mayer et al., 1995; Handford & Leithwood, 2013).

The day-to-day interpersonal social exchanges between people with different role obligations lead participants to interpret or discern the intentions of the other and whether or not they are fulfilling these role obligations. This assessment is shaped by each individual's set of motives, including moral-ethical values, social status and esteem, and material self-interests. Each member's reputation and history also affect how their intentions and actions are discerned (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Frederiksen, 2014; Handford & Leithwood, 2013; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). When a member's actions are consistent with the expectations of their role, relational trust in the individual and the larger organization is enhanced (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Handford & Leithwood, 2013). Researchers have identified myriad factors that contribute to trustworthiness including respect, and personal regard for others (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), competence (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Pirson & Mahotra, 2007; Handford & Leithwood, 2013; Hoppes & Holley, 2013; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015), benevolence (Mayer et al., 1995; Pirson & Mahotra, 2007; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015), openness or transparency, and consistency (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015; Handford & Leithwood, 2013; Hoppes & Holley, 2013). Relational trust is observed in an organization when these factors are discerned. Conversely, the perceived absence or deficiency of any of these factors can undermine the sense of trust in the individual and organization.

While deliberate action can be taken by any member of a school community to reduce the sense of vulnerability in others, the hierarchical nature of school districts means that there is a power asymmetry between members and, as such, those members with greater power in the system can impact relational trust throughout the organization differently. In their research, Tschannen-Moran & Gareis (2015) and Handford & Leithwood (2013) examined the effects of teachers' trust in school leaders on student achievement and school climate. Researchers found that trust in leaders, specifically their principals, increased the likelihood that a person would take a professional risk because the sense of vulnerability is diminished (Handford & Leithwood, 2013; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Rousseau et al., 1998). Tschannen-Moran & Gareis (2015) found that trustworthy leadership contributed positively to student achievement and to the school climate. They also concluded principals that were perceived as trustworthy were seen as both approachable and engaged deeply as an instructional leader, and these qualities contributed to a collegial culture. This collegial culture reflected other leadership characteristics associated with perceptions of trustworthiness, including competence, commitment, integrity, and personal regard for others. Tschannen-Moran & Gareis (2015) connected the effect that teachers' trust in the principal had on the sense of trust between other members of the school:

Where teachers felt that they could put their faith in the principal and that their principal was someone to whom they could turn for assistance with instructional matters, teachers perceived their colleagues to be more committed to students and that they were competent, cooperative, and supportive. (p. 82)

In such a school climate, interpersonal trust is strengthened as individuals throughout the organization perceive that others care for them and are fulfilling their role obligations. Consequently, the members experience strong social affiliation throughout the school community, strengthening their social network that allow for greater coordination and coherence throughout the school.

Researchers have identified a number of characteristics associated with a leader's perceived trustworthiness. Handford and Leithwood (2013) examined a number of these characteristics—including consistency and reliability, competence, openness, respect, and integrity—and found that a leader's perceived competence acted as a dominant influence on teachers' attribution of leader trustworthiness. They found respect to be a salient characteristic in teachers' discernment of a leader's trustworthiness. This section examines these two characteristics more closely because competence was found to be so dominant in teachers' perception of a leader's trustworthiness, and because respect involves a leader's recognition of the vital role that each member of the organization plays in the functioning of the organization.

Competence in Core Role Responsibilities

Researchers distinguish between technical or functional competencies and interpersonal competencies (Pirson & Malhotra, 2007; Handford & Leithwood, 2013; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). Functional competencies are work-related skills that involve managing the day-to-day operations of the school and district in a skilled and dependable manner (Handford & Leithwood, 2013; Pirson & Malhotra, 2007). In addition to functional competence, a leader also needs to demonstrate interpersonal competence. Tschannen-Moran (2004, as cited in Handford & Leithwood, 2013), defined

this competence as, “engaging in problem solving, fostering conflict resolution (rather than avoidance), handling difficult situations, being flexible.” These skills reflect the leader’s style and emotional intelligence. In their analysis, Pirson & Malhotra (2007) found that these interpersonal skills and the capacity to communicate a strategic vision were of greater importance to those with more frequent interactions with the organization and its leaders. Those in the organization—in the school or in the district—have more frequent social exchanges with the leaders and, as a result, are better able to evaluate a leader’s skill in these areas. Pirson & Malhotra also found that as the intensity increased, those high-intensity stakeholders experienced heightened vulnerability and, to discern that the leader or organization was trustworthy, expected consistency in the behavior of the leader or organization.

In their analysis of teachers’ trust in school leaders, Handford & Leithwood (2013) examined those trust-building characteristics and specific leadership practices associated with these characteristics that teachers identified as most salient when discerning a principal’s trustworthiness. Of the attributes associated with principal trustworthiness, they found that perceptions of a principal's competence were most influential on all teachers’ discernments of principal trustworthiness. Handford & Leithwood explored the specific leadership practices associated with competence and found that functional, work-related skills which included being visible in the building, engaging in classroom observations, and providing specific feedback about instruction were mentioned most frequently in the interviews with teachers and reflected teachers’ perceptions of the leader’s competence. While these functional, work-related skills

include some technical skills or management of school operations, they also involve those skills that require interpersonal competence.

When a leader's competence is in question, stakeholders who depend on the leader experience an increased sense of vulnerability and risk, and, as a result, stakeholders' trust in the leader is lost (Tschannen-Moran, 2001; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Handford & Leithwood, 2013). "Competence is vital since people are unlikely to listen to or depend upon someone whose abilities they don't respect. Generally, employees need to believe that the leader has the skills and abilities to carry out what he or she says they will do" (Lines et al., 2005, as cited in Handford & Leithwood, 2013). While there are other characteristics that are associated with leader trustworthiness, competence is fundamental to trust; without a sense that the leader will competently carry out the functional tasks necessary to lead the building or district, trust cannot be established and the benefits of organizational trust cannot be realized (Rousseau et al., 1995; Handford & Leithwood, 2013; Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Respect

Relational trust is conditioned on the social respect that occurs through day-to-day social exchanges, interactions, and communications between all members of the community. "Maintaining a modicum of respect in these exchanges is a base condition for sustaining civil social interactions within a community. Such respect needs to be reciprocated by parties in each role set" (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, p. 23). Respectful exchanges allow for affective-based trust, which is trust that is grounded in the emotional bonds between individuals, to be established (McAllister, 1995). When social respect occurs consistently and is an established norm in a learning community, the social

exchanges necessary for relational trust persist throughout the community of interdependent stakeholders. Conversely, when social respect is not maintained, exchanges decline, thus adversely affecting the existence and cultivation of a community of learners and the discernment of relational trust (Tschannen-Moran, 2001; Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

According to Bryk & Schneider (2002), members of a school community demonstrate social respect when they acknowledge the indispensable role that each member of the organization plays in the education of students. Members of a school and district exhibit respect for other members by genuinely listening to concerns and observations raised and incorporate this feedback into decisions and practices. Social respect is found across all role relationships, including teachers and students, parents and teachers, parents and administrators, teachers and administrators, building leaders and central office leaders, and the superintendent and school board members.

In their examination of teachers' perceptions of the trustworthiness of a leader, Handford & Leithwood (2013) found that teachers in high-trust schools reported respect as a central factor in their discernment of a principal's trustworthiness when the principal acknowledged their work and skill and provided specific feedback that indicated they were aware of the teacher's work. Social respect reduces risk and promotes increased collaboration and social exchanges that lead to a sense of connectedness throughout the organization across the network of members (Handford & Leithwood, 2013; Tschannen-Moran, 2001; Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

The Power of Social Networks to Diffuse Reform

When people are members of a high-trust organization, they are more likely to engage in collaborative work with colleagues that leads to a greater sense of belonging. As the number of social exchanges increases, members of the school or district form informal social structures or networks that strengthen the transfer of information, as well as organizational norms (Daly et al., 2009). Social network analysis involves systematically mapping the patterns of interpersonal interactions and communication to identify the ways in which people in an organization are connected. Coburn and Russell (2008) found that the structure of social networks—the strength and arrangement of the ties linking members—is associated with the effectiveness of reform implementation. According to this research, tie strength is related to the strength of the connection between the members of the network. Strong ties in a network accommodate the transfer of complex knowledge, whereas weak ties more effectively facilitate the transfer of technical advice. In a complex organization like a school district, a single member of the organization can serve in multiple roles, including, for example, being simultaneously a classroom teacher, grade level leader, and member of a district curriculum committee. This single member of the organization is linked to or spans layers, interacting with other members throughout the organization. Strong social networks have been found to strengthen communities, develop leadership skills of members, and contribute to improved student achievement (Daly et al., 2009). In addition, strong social networks are instrumental in shifting the focus from the individual to the organization and the goals of the organization.

In their study of social networks, Daly and his colleagues (2009) found that in school districts, principals were the primary channel through which reform initially is conveyed and diffused. Additionally, they found that though principals received the same information relative to the reform, their interpretations and approaches when conveying it to their teachers and staff varied, affecting how the reform was implemented. While they found that in addition to principals' varying interpretations of the reform, grade level leaders also interpreted and communicated the reform in diverse ways. Despite these variations, when the social network was strong, members were able to co-create a shared understanding of the reform, facilitating its implementation.

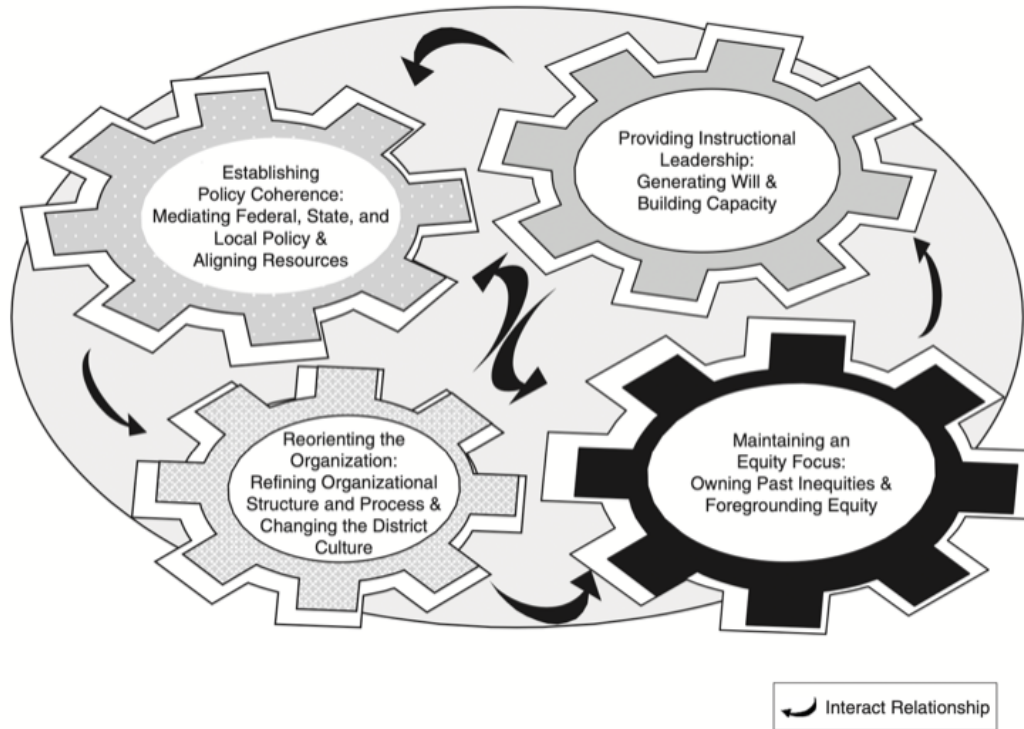
This research is significant because when reform is introduced into a system with strong, established professional and social networks, the reform is both understood more accurately and implemented more effectively.

School Reform: A Framework to Understand the Role of District Leaders

Rorrer et al. (2008) provided a narrative synthesis of previous findings of the role that districts play in school reform and improvement efforts. Using a narrative synthesis as the methodology, the authors used a six-stage iterative process to set the criteria for examining the research, select the studies, draw out the data and evaluate the study quality, synthesize the data, and report the results of the review. They reviewed 82 published sources, including 52 peer reviewed/refereed articles, four books, 16 policy or research center reports, and ten other sources. Of these, 63 were empirically based, 12 were conceptual, three were syntheses of research, and four were identified as "other" (Rorrer, et al., 2008). As a result of this narrative synthesis, the authors identified four essential roles for districts in educational reform: providing instructional leadership,

reorienting the organization, establishing policy coherence, and maintaining an equity focus. “Together, these roles envelop aspects of district leadership, management, values and norms, operations, and governance” (p. 314).

Rorrer et al. (2008) concluded that districts functioned as institutional actors, which they defined as those that “influence the institution from within by influencing the development and implementation of solutions to identified problems” (Cahn, 1995, as cited in Rorrer, et al., 2008). In their research, Rorrer et al. (2008) referred to a district as an organized collective, which included superintendents, school boards, mid-level administrators, and principals that worked together as a network connecting the district to schools to improve equity and student achievement. In their qualitative study of educators’ and leaders’ perception of three reform efforts, Johnson & Chrispeels (2010) found that by coordinating the linkages between district administrators and the schools in the district, particularly the relational and ideological linkages, district leaders were able to ensure coherent instructional focus, organizational learning, greater accountability for the reform, and enhanced commitment to the reforms. This finding is significant because it is consistent with Rorrer et al.’s (2008) conceptualization of the district as an institutional actor, which can act as a collective that can organize, coordinate, and direct educational resources within the system (See Figure 1).

Figure 1*Districts as Institutional Actors in Improving Achievement and Advancing Equity*

Note. This figure reflects the four roles that districts, as institutional actors, play to implement reform. Adapted from “Districts as Institutional Actors in Educational Reform,” by A. K. Rorrer, L. Skrla, and J. J. Scheurich, 2008, *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 44(3), p. 335. (<https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X08318962>). Copyright 2008 by SAGE publications.

Maintaining an Equity Focus

James Spillane (1998) characterized districts as “non-monolithic” because while an external entity, like the state, can mandate policy that requires school reform, the

reform mandate is first interpreted by the district and, ultimately, by those in the schools. “Reformers propose that educators teach in ways that cannot be precisely specified by external agencies. Thus, local educators have to play a major role in working out what reformers’ proposals mean for their schools” (Spillane, 1998, p. 34). Though district leaders can interpret and advocate for the reform, it is incumbent on the district leaders to generate the will and build capacity for the change to be understood and adopted.

By appealing to a common set of ideals and beliefs, district and school leaders begin to generate will and establish a shared sense of purpose. One of those shared beliefs is that schools should educate all students and, by maintaining a focus on equity, school leaders are able to seed the context and need for reform by owning existing and past inequity that exists culturally and systemically (Rorrer et al., 2008). Schools nested within the same school district can serve significantly different students and communities. The different student populations contribute to the need for district leaders to provide differentiated direction and support to schools to improve teaching and learning to increase equity. Because systemic inequities in schools often reflect social, culture, and economic inequities in the broader community, district and school leaders must acknowledge them and foreground issues of equity when planning and implementing reforms (Rorrer et al., 2008; Pijanowski, 2019; Trujillo, 2013). During the COVID-19 pandemic, students and their peers within the same districts and schools were affected very differently. Students from low-income families were less likely to have access to devices or internet, and students in schools with more than 75% of students eligible for free or reduced meals were three times more likely to be truant than their peers in schools with fewer than 25% of students eligible for free or reduced meals

(Herold, 2020). During the pandemic, students with the greatest needs—those in high poverty schools—were more likely to be truant or to disengage from school. Though 99% of school leaders reported taking measures to address equity during the pandemic (Kurtz, 2020), the achievement gap is expected to grow. Schools anticipate the need to allocate significant resources to address learning loss, particularly for those students who were most adversely affected throughout the pandemic. In addition to addressing academic needs, schools will also need to provide nonacademic services and supports (Hoffman & Miller, 2020).

An equity focus involves acknowledging historical inequities as well as addressing and correcting systemic structures that perpetuate and exacerbate inequities. By owning past inequities and maintaining an equity focus, district and school leaders have an important filter through which they can evaluate reforms, adopting those that will serve all the students in the district. The need to maintain an equity focus when students return to in-person learning full time is of greater importance, as districts need to reorient the organization to address these inequities and foreground equity (Rorrer, 2008; Hoffman & Miller, 2020).

Providing Instructional Leadership

Ronald Edmond (1979) reviewed research on effective schools and identified seven correlates that were present in effective schools; providing instructional leadership was one of the seven correlates. While there is ample research noting the need for principals to be effective instructional leaders (Blasé & Blasé, 2000; Honig, 2012; Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010; Togneri & Anderson, 2003; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Edmond, 1979), there are relatively fewer studies examining how instructional leadership

is measured in district leaders such as superintendents (Honig, 2013; Forman et al., 2017).

Throughout the history of American education, the responsibilities of the superintendent have evolved. With the rapid growth of school systems in large, urban areas at the turn of the twentieth century, the role of the school district superintendent shifted from instructional leader and teacher to a manager of the larger bureaucracy (Cuban, 1984; Heller, 2018; Cross, 2015; James, 2016; Jennings, 2012). As the pressure to reform schools to improve student achievement and ensure equitable access to education has mounted, providing instructional leadership has been a greater emphasis, requiring the people in these roles to continue to manage the bureaucracy of the organization while also providing instructional leadership (Rorrer et al., 2008; Honig, 2013). “With the mounting interest in using effective schools research, the older model of a school chief knowledgeable about both curriculum and instruction and visible in the schools beyond the symbolic tour is reasserting itself” (Cuban, 1984, p. 146). Though district leaders act as instructional leaders, they continue to bear the responsibility of managing and overseeing the operational aspects of a school district, particularly in smaller districts where district central offices are smaller. In addition to responsibility for providing instructional leadership and management of operations, district leaders are also expected to be able to introduce, implement, and sustain educational reform.

Introducing, implementing, and sustaining reforms, particularly those reforms of a complex organization like a school district, involve what Corcoran, Fuhrman, & Belcher (2001) identified as broad strategic decisions:

- Deciding what to do, which is the problem of design and adoption;

- Determining how to get it done, which involves coordinating support and focusing resources; and
- Scaling up or replicating those successful reforms to other settings.

Rorrer et al. (2008) observed two important elements of providing instructional leadership that district leaders adopt when introducing and implementing a reform: generating will and building capacity. Generating will aligns with Corcoran et al.'s (2001) first step: deciding what to do. To generate will, a district leader must identify the problem and communicate why this problem is urgent enough to require coordinated and intentional changes. The COVID-19 pandemic was an undeniable and pressing problem—a crisis—that required immediate action. In the crisis, convincing people to believe that the many changes were necessary was not as pressing as making sure people understood what the changes were and how to implement them. As a result, communicating what the change involved and building capacity to implement the change needed to occur sometimes in the absence of generating will.

Once the need for change is identified, the district leader must identify the proposed solution and communicate to stakeholders what this solution entails. To generate will to adopt the proposed reform, the district leader must appeal to a common set of values, beliefs, and ideologies (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010; Forman et al., 2017; Elmore et al., 2014). The leader must also attend to the personal relationships in the organization by being personally engaged, encouraging multiple perspectives, and maintain a focus on instruction (Reeves, 2006; Forman et al., 2017). Each of these behaviors engenders a commitment to continue to improve and to work toward shared goals (Rorrer, et al., 2008).

In their study of scaling-up school reforms, Coburn (2003) expanded the definition of scale from the number of schools enacting the reform to include the depth of change within the school district necessary to internalize and sustain the reform. To successfully take a reform to scale, Coburn (2003) identified four interrelated dimensions: depth, sustainability, spread, and shift in reform ownership. These dimensions also apply to crisis response and situational reforms, but are complicated by the rate of changes. These interrelated dimensions expand upon Rorrer et al.'s (2008) conceptualization of the four roles the district plays in instituting reforms, providing greater emphasis on the sustainability of a reform and the shift in the sense of who owns the reform—from an externally-mandated initiative, to one that stakeholders perceive as an internally-driven one.

To shift ownership of the reform from externally-directed, to one for which the responsibility is held by stakeholders at the school level, district leaders must attend to the “attitudes, motivation, and beliefs that underlie an implementor’s response to a policy’s goals or strategies” (McLaughlin, 1987, p. 172). Generating will is a part of both the design and adoption of the reform, as well as the coordination of supports and resources to carry out the reform. Generating will involves conveying the need for the reform and addressing stakeholders’ beliefs and assumptions. Coburn (2003) considered the interrelated dimension of depth to include teachers’ beliefs about how students learn and what constitutes effective instruction. Rorrer et al. (2008) described the need for district leaders to attend to teachers’ and principals’ attitudes, beliefs, and motivations as necessary for generating will. Providing instructional leadership, particularly when implementing a reform, requires district leaders to generate the collective will by

articulating the vision and convincing stakeholders of the need for the change—to sell the vision and help those who must carry out the reform understand how the reform fits within the broader goals of the organization (Firestone, 1989). In addition to believing in the importance of the change, those enacting the reform must experience a sense of urgency, or what Honig (2003) called a “warrant for change” (p. 315).

Generating will is one element of instructional leadership that reflects what Johnson and Chrispeels (2010) referred to as relational and ideological linkages. Relational linkages were characterized by trusting professional relationships within and across levels of a district. The ideological linkage reflects the shared values, vision, and goals of the district. Reforms that will result in improved outcomes for students will require changes to the core of education, which include the structures, classroom practices, and the nature of how teachers and students interact (Elmore, 1996; Coburn, 2003; Honig, 2003; Johnson et al., 2008). To generate the will for such changes, leaders of the district and school must relate to stakeholders both ideologically and relationally—appealing to minds and hearts (Daly et al., 2015).

Both the relational and ideological linkages are critical to generating will and building a commitment to the decision to make the reform. Corcoran et al. (2001) found that the three districts in their study were unable to implement and sustain the identified reform efforts, in part, because they were not able to generate the will or commitment to the reform. But the authors also identified issues related to how the reforms were carried out. The authors noted that for a reform to be successfully implemented, resources supporting the reform must be coordinated.

Rorrer et al. (2008) identified this as the building capacity element of instructional leadership; the capacity to enact the collective will of the district. It is “the district’s ability and capability to enact its will” (p. 316). If generating will allows stakeholders to understand what the reform is and why it is needed, capacity building defines how the reform can be carried out. To build capacity a district leader must marshal resources, including human, social, and physical, in an intentional and coordinated manner (Elmore et al., 2014). Forman et al. (2017) noted the pivotal role that capacity plays in any reform effort: “The success of any instructional intervention, improvement initiative, or policy is better understood as a challenge of teacher learning and organizational capacity building rather than a challenge of faithful implementation” (p. 10). If generating will allows stakeholders to understand what the reform is and why it is needed, capacity building defines how the reform can be carried out. Cohen & Mehta (2017) found that successful reforms “either offered the educational tools, materials, and practical guidance educators needed to put the reform into practice, or they helped educators to capitalize on existing tools, materials, and guidance” (p. 646). Capacity involves the resources necessary for the reform to be implemented.

These resources include, but are not limited to, personnel, knowledge, skills, and materials. Spillane & Thompson (1997) identified three variances in building capacity: human capital, social capital, and physical capital, each of which must be attended to when implementing and sustaining reforms. Physical capital is the material resources, labor, and time necessary to carry out the reform. Human capital entails the knowledge, disposition and commitment or will to adopt the change. Finally, social capital includes the knowledge of local reformers and professional networks. Using social-network

theory, Daly et al. (2015) identified the effectiveness of social networks and prosocial ties as leading to increased productivity, improved organizational functioning, and information transfer. This sharing of knowledge and experience through professional networks builds trust and collaboration between stakeholders.

In sum, to provide instructional leadership, district leaders must generate will for the reform and build capacity to make changes. Generating will and building capacity are necessary for stakeholders to be willing to examine and change underlying pedagogical principles and beliefs and assumptions about teaching and learning.

Reorienting the Organization and Establishing Policy Coherence

Two other roles that that districts play in reform efforts, according to Rorrer et al.'s (2008) narrative synthesis of previous research, are to reorient the organization—which involves refining organizational structures and processes and changing the district culture—and to establish policy coherence. Policy coherence requires district leaders to manage and mediate externally-driven mandates from federal and state entities, as well as from local actors. District leaders are frequently under tremendous pressure to reform quickly and, as a result, will often field additional and competing calls for new reforms, even while managing existing reforms. Reorienting the organization and establishing policy coherence require the aligning of organizational structures, redefining roles, coordinating resources, and maintaining a focus on the instructional core. This alignment is necessary for the implementation and sustainability of any reform (Cobb et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2015; Forman et al., 2017; Honig, 2009; Coburn, 2003).

In their study of three large urban districts' process of adopting and implementing a reform, Corcoran et al. (2001) described the tension that arose between central office

and school-level leaders as the reform process was underway. This study reflected the structural challenges that exist for districts and schools in decision-making, implementing reforms, and monitoring and accountability. In each of the three districts, the roles in the reform decision were not defined. While central office leaders wanted building-level leaders and stakeholders to make decisions about the school improvement strategy and professional development, they also wanted to ensure that the decisions made were evidence-based best practices. Corcoran et al., (2001) found that the decentralization of decision-making, coupled with weak district guidance in the adoption and implementation of the reforms undermined the use of evidence-based decision making. The researchers found that school-based stakeholders, including teachers and school leaders, were instead more apt to make choices based on other drivers, including ease of use, ability to continue with current practices, and other teachers' recommendations; they were not driven to adopt a reform based on research findings and data.

As reforms are introduced and implemented, school-based stakeholders make choices in how the reforms will be implemented based on their beliefs about teaching and learning, as well as their interpretation of what the reform entails. Larry Cuban (1998) observed the dynamic interplay between the reform and those implementing it. Reforms “are adopted and, as they are implemented, undergo changes that transform them in ways that few of the designers of the original reform could predict, or even claim ownership” (p. 455). To achieve coordination and coherence in a complex organization characterized by classrooms nested in departments and grades within multiple schools in the district, district leaders must attend to the shared goals and vision by maintaining contact and communication with the stakeholders throughout the system, particularly with the

building-level leaders (Saphier & Durkin, 2011; Reeves, 2006). District leaders must be aware of serious barriers to change that exist within complex educational organizations.

Jerald (2005) identified predictable sets of internal obstacles that can be found across organizations and include technical, cultural, and political challenges. Technical challenges reflect a lack of understanding how to implement the change. Cultural challenges are seen when a reform conflicts with teachers' or stakeholders' beliefs and ideology. In addition to these predictable internal barriers, external barriers, including insufficient support, and insufficient control over resources, are also significant impediments to successful implementation of reform. District leaders working to address these barriers must do so both through generating will and building capacity, but also by removing other barriers (Jerald, 2005). Reorienting the organization and establishing policy coherence require district leaders redistribute and align resources—human, social, and physical—to support the reform work. In addition, researchers argue that to truly reorient the organization, the day-to-day tasks of those in district offices must be restructured to focus on instructional leadership and direct support of school leaders (Honig, 2009; Honig, 2013; Jerald, 2005; Rorrer et al., 2008).

Reorienting the organization requires that leaders not only avoid other competing priorities, but that they also change their behaviors and practices to support instructional leadership. As instructional leaders, superintendents and central office administrators provide support to principals by helping them learn to strengthen their instructional leadership skills. Honig (2012) studied three large urban districts that were in the process of transforming the work practices of central office to focus on teaching and learning, examining the practices of central office leaders, called Instructional Leadership

Directors (ILDs) to strengthen principals' instructional leadership. The ILDs were considered part of the central office, as they reported directly to the superintendent. Honig found that the restructuring of the responsibilities of the central office staff to assume ILD roles that required them to engage in intensive job-embedded supports for principals had the effect of focusing the work of central office on teaching and learning. This direct modeling of instructional leadership also had the effect of building principals' skills and behaviors that Blasé and Blasé (2000) associated with effective instructional leaders. Specifically, when ILDs partnered with principals in classroom observations and modeled giving feedback to teachers in classroom observations, the ILD and principal demonstrated collaboration, modeling effective instructional practices and providing feedback.

In small districts, central office administrators, including superintendents, assistant superintendents, and curriculum directors, are more likely to engage in more intensive supports for principals. According to Hentschke and his colleagues (2009), superintendents focus on system coherence of the interconnected aspects of the academic program, including standards, curriculum, and assessments. In these districts, leaders assume increased hands-on involvement, characterized by increased personal involvement in a variety of instructional leadership roles. In addition, central office leaders also engage in more bridging activities that increase the flow of information and knowledge between schools and central office to facilitate implementation. Bridging can also include connecting the district to other, external organizations to introduce new ideas and achieve organizational goals (Honig, 2009).

Achieving Coherence in Complex Educational Organizations

Within Rorrer et al.'s (2008) broad definition of a district, there is a need to understand the relationship between the school-level leadership and district-level leadership, which is usually represented by the principal-superintendent relationship. Johnson and Chrispeels (2010) observed the tension between centralized bureaucratic controls, which are the domain of district and central offices, and the professional discretion afforded to teachers in each school. This tension is also reflected throughout the broader educational organizations at the federal, state, and district contexts. Elmore (1996) described the "nested" nature of educational institutions—at all levels—as a primary obstacle to scaling educational reform. In addition, the author observed that the core of education—the interaction between students' role in learning and teachers' understanding of the nature of knowledge, as well as the structures of education—is rarely disturbed by educational reforms. Instead, reform efforts target aspects of educational structures that do not have significant impacts on sustained improvements in educational outcomes. Elmore posited that educational reforms that come closest to the core are those that will encounter the greatest resistance and, as a result, encounter additional challenges to implementation and sustainability. A teacher's willingness to accept or to buy into making a change in their instructional practice depends on whether the change is consistent with their beliefs (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010; Elmore, 1996; Elmore et al., 2014).

Weick (1976) explored how systems are coupled loosely or tightly, and Rorrer et al. (2008) adapted this work in their framework to describe the complexity of the relationships between the district and schools. The authors observed that while there

could be tight coupling in one part of the system, there could be a loose coupling in another part of the system. The authors refer to this as *variable coupling* and assert that in school districts, “variability in coupling between roles permits districts to be more responsive to their political, social, and economical contexts” (p. 337). Such an allowance in the relationship between the district office and schools reflects the different needs that exist between schools within the same district. And while the loose coupling allows for greater autonomy and responsiveness at the school level based on the needs of the students, it also ensures significant variance between classrooms in schools, and between schools in the same district in how reforms will be interpreted and implemented (Spillane, 1998).

Recognizing the potential for inequity between schools in the same district, Johnson and her colleagues (2015) examined how five large urban districts managed the relationship between their central offices and their schools and how consistently they centralized or decentralized decision-making. They found that existing practices favored school-level decision making, but “what mattered most was achieving coherence . . . One key to achieving coherence was establishing mutually supportive relationships and trust between the central office and the schools” (p. 21). The relationship between central office and schools is especially important when the district is implementing reform. It is also critical in times of crisis and upheaval. Bryk and Schneider (2002) assert that the presence of relational trust in the organization is the “connective tissue” that binds together members of the organization and facilitates the implementation of reforms.

The Relational Trust Framework (Bryk & Schneider, 2002) coupled with the theory of districts as institutional actors (Rorrer et al., 2008), provides a meaningful basis

to explore how leaders in a district employ leadership practices—including providing instructional leadership, generating will, establishing and maintaining trust, and building capacity—when implementing a reform. The framework also provides a means to examine the organizational processes, including the work undertaken by district and school leaders to reorient the district and to establish policy coherence. A district leader’s performance in each of these roles is closely related to the successful implementation and “scaling-up” (including sustaining) of a reform.

District Leadership in Maine

Most research examining the relationship between central offices and schools has been conducted in large, urban districts (Johnson et al., 2015; Honig, 2003; Honig, 2009; Spillane, 1998). Districts were defined as large if they served more than 10,000 students. While there are benefits of scale in large districts, the size of the district, specifically the number of schools and staff, complicates the goal of achieving coherence and any semblance of homogeneity in the implementation of reform.

Maine has no district that could be classified as large, using this criterion. In 2019, Maine schools served a total of 183,120 students in 610 schools. Maine has 281 districts. Of those 281 districts, 64 have student enrollments greater than 1,000, 30 have student enrollments greater than 2,000, and only two have student enrollments greater than 5,000 (Maine Department of Education, 2019). In the smaller districts in Maine, district leaders carry out the four interdependent roles—providing instructional leadership, establishing policy coherence, reorienting the district, and maintaining an equity focus—despite having different organizational structures, fewer resources, and fewer central office staff, relative to those available to district leaders in large districts.

Overall Summary and Appropriateness of Literature Review

Through a review of the relevant literature, four assertions are made, and these are the basis for the significance of the study. First, district leaders play an important role in introducing, implementing, and sustaining reforms in the district's schools. Second, coordinating and establishing coherence between the district and buildings is necessary for successfully implemented reforms, as is maintaining a shared purpose and collective vision. Third, the existing literature examining the role of district leaders in the reform process is drawn largely from large, urban districts. It is important to understand whether district leaders in Maine manage reforms in smaller districts in a manner similar to their counterparts in large districts. Fourth, Maine's recent experiences with externally-driven mandates, particularly in the context of the state's local-control history, may provide additional barriers that district leaders have to overcome when implementing a reform. Examining how leaders in Maine manage the four roles of district leaders in reform can provide valuable insights and inform our understanding of reforms in Maine.

Chapter 3: Methodology

District leaders play a vital role in introducing, implementing, and sustaining reforms and changes in the district's schools, particularly those changes that are mandated by an external policy domain and are not initiated by the district. The abrupt closure of schools in Maine and throughout the country to stem the transmission of COVID-19, followed by the shift to emergency remote learning, and eventual return to school, have been historic and unprecedented in American education. In this time, school and district leaders' roles and responsibilities changed as each member of the organization solved problems, directed resources, and managed changing, often contradictory guidance from multiple external entities, including federal, state, and local policy domains. The evolving understanding of the virus, as well as surging rates of infections, represented another external force that affected educational policy, operations, and leadership. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic the balance of power between the different policy domains was also affected as each local educational agency (LEA) maintained local control of educational decisions while also looking to state and federal entities for direction and guidance.

Though the scale of closures was historic and unprecedented, the nature of the impact on the districts resembles that of other externally-mandated initiatives in that the district leaders were forced to implement changes that affected all stakeholders and impacted how instruction was delivered. In implementing extended school closures and return to school plans, district and school leaders worked together to provide instructional leadership, establish policy coherence, reorient the organization, and maintain a focus on equitably meeting the needs of all learners (Rorrer et al., 2008). As district and school

leaders developed plans and procedures addressing the operation of schools, the tension between centralization and localization of decision making was seen at the district level where district leaders worked to introduce and implement sweeping changes, while building-level leaders also worked to respond to the needs of their school communities, including staff, students, and families. Often, the needs of each school community varied within the same district. As school leaders responded to the demands of their communities, district leaders worked to provide policies and guidance that attempted to address the diversity within the district.

Implementing changes on such a scale, and in a matter of days and weeks, required district leaders to examine myriad aspects of the district. The policies and practices that emerged reflect the non-monolithic nature of school districts and have led to within-district variations in policy implementation. This variation results from a number of factors, including each district's approach to decision making and the way that decision-making responsibilities were shared with building-level leaders, and the manner in which district and school leaders collaborated to generate will and build capacity (Rorrer et al., 2008; Johnson et al., 2015). In addition, the implementation of policy changes reflected differences in a district's organizational arrangement (Spillane, 1998), the coherence of messaging, and existing institutional structures and practices (Coburn et al., 2016; James et al., 2016; Johnson et al., 2015; Elmore et al., 2014). Examining the variations between the schools within the same district allows for a more nuanced understanding of how policies are interpreted in order to be carried out within the same school district (Spillane, 1998).

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to describe and analyze how school and district leaders collaborated to coordinate their responses to the many challenges that arose during the COVID-19 pandemic amid the need to implement and sustain coherent system-wide changes. I used a constant comparative method to analyze the data and compare portions—drawn from interviews, observations, and documents—to identify similarities and differences in order to discern patterns and themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). My study explored how district and school leaders balanced centralizing or decentralizing decision-making authority during the pandemic, a context that required flexibility and responsiveness as the context changed frequently. In addition, I examined the actions leaders took to achieve coherence across the layers of the school district. Finally, when considering how leaders balanced centralization and decentralization, and the actions taken to achieve coherence throughout a complex system, I sought to understand how the relatively small size of the district affected these processes and actions.

The following research questions were addressed in this study:

How do district leaders achieve coordination and coherence in complicated systems comprising many schools, each with its own culture, in order to implement and sustain change?

- How do district leaders determine how centralized controls are exercised and how much autonomy each school maintains?
- How do district and school leaders generate will and build capacity for systemwide change?

- How do stakeholders' understanding of the reforms affect the implementation of the change?

Methodological Overview

I am interested in understanding how district leaders interpreted their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic as they worked to coordinate and establish coherence in complicated educational systems. To answer these questions, I used a qualitative methodology from the interpretivism paradigm because the focus is on participants' understanding of—and the meaning they made within the context of—their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Rossman & Rollis, 2017). Because I am interested in understanding leaders' experiences of managing and coordinating the changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic to establish and maintain coherence throughout their school systems, I used a single-case study methodological design. Yin (2014) asserts that case study research is appropriate when the focus of the study is on a contemporary situation or issue that the researcher does not control and research questions require description to answer “how” or “why.” A single-case study design was appropriate because it meets Yin's (2014) rationale for the common case. Yin described the objective of the common case—a rationale for using a single-case study design—as “to capture the circumstances and conditions of an everyday situation” (p. 52). While the COVID-19 pandemic is not an “everyday situation,” it has been a commonly experienced event and, as such, a single-case study can yield insights about experiences and actions.

Though there are limitations to a qualitative study of this nature, understanding the lived experiences of those most directly affected by structural reforms—including abrupt shift to remote learning following the closure of schools in the spring of 2020 and

the return to school in the fall under significant health and safety mitigation strategies—is both valid and necessary to understand the nuances of how district leaders manage complex systems to coordinate the change in a coherent manner.

Qualitative understanding of cases, according to Robert Stake (2006), “requires experiencing the activity of the case as it occurs in its context and in its particular situation. The situation is expected to shape the activity, as well as the experiencing and the interpretation of the activity” (p. 2). In this study, the “activity of the case” (district leaders’ decisions and actions to carry out the district-wide changes throughout the pandemic) focused on a single district. As district leaders managed and coordinated these changes, the implementation throughout the district was affected by the local conditions and realities of the schools within the district. Understanding this within-district variance was an important feature of this study, as it reflected the differences between school communities in the same district, which may have contributed to the pressure to allow greater autonomy between schools.

According to Merriam & Tisdell (2016), “interpretive research, which is the most common type of qualitative research, assumes that reality is socially constructed; that is, there is no single, observable reality. Rather, there are multiple realities, or interpretations, of a single event” (p. 9). The research questions were answered through the use of three rounds of semi-structured interviews conducted with four different leaders and a group of teacher leaders from a single district: the Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, principals from two different schools in the district, and a group of teacher leaders drawn from the entire district.

Yin (2014) recommends four strategies to guide qualitative analysis. These strategies are working the data from the “ground up”; developing a case description; examining plausible rival explanations; and relying on theoretical propositions. While there are existing frameworks for the study of an educational leader’s role in implementing and sustaining school reforms, the shift to emergency remote learning and other transformations in public education resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic were not entirely consistent with these existing theoretical frameworks. District leaders, principals, and teachers navigated one novel experience after another, from the earliest days of the shift to emergency remote learning, to the return to school in the fall, to navigating the rising COVID-19 numbers in the winter. These experiences suggest the use of a “ground up” analytical strategy because common patterns and relationships emerged throughout the analysis of the data through the constant comparative method (Yin, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Selection and Sampling Strategies

I chose a single-case study design because it allowed me to focus on a single case and conduct three in-depth, semi-structured interviews each with four individual leaders and a group of teacher leaders. By conducting three rounds of interviews, spaced across the summer, fall, and winter of 2020 and 2021, I was able to capture the experiences and perceptions of participants over time. The single case also allowed for describing and analyzing the similarities and differences between different members of the same district to understand how district leaders manage complex systems to coordinate change in a coherent manner.

This study used purposive sampling using criterion-based selection. Purposive or “purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96). In addition, the district selected for this study is information-rich, in that the schools within the district differ and, therefore, will provide insights about the central question related to the actions of district leaders in implementing this reform (Patton, 2015 as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The purpose of this study is to understand how leaders in a district navigated the changing context of the pandemic to implement and sustain changes in their district. To better understand how leaders diffuse information about new policies and practices across many schools, I used the following criteria to identify sample district: superintendents with three years of tenure in the same district and serving as superintendent during the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years; districts of more than 1000 students; and central office leadership structure that includes a curriculum director or assistant superintendent responsible for curriculum. To gather this information, an informal poll was sent out through the state’s organization of curriculum directors who shared it with curriculum directors and assistant superintendents of the districts around the state.

Based on the responses to this informal poll, four districts were identified that met the study criteria, and two superintendents expressed a willingness to participate. School Administrative Unit Q (SAUQ) was identified for this study. Over the course of the study, I conducted three in-depth interviews of four individual participants and a focus group of teachers. Those at different layers of the district organization were represented in the observations and interviews. Of the fifteen interviews, twelve of them were with

administrators, while three were with teachers. The decision to have a greater representation of the administrators' perspective was an intentional one because it allowed me to answer my research questions most effectively. By interviewing teachers in the focus group, I was able to capture teachers' understanding and interpretation of those decisions made by administrators at different levels of the district and those made at the state and national level. In addition, I observed School Board meetings and reviewed documents, which were crucial pieces of evidence that were used to generate rich, detailed descriptions of participants' experience.

School Administrative Unit Q (SAUQ) is a school district in Maine that serves a number of towns under a single School Board and central office (see Table 1). The towns in this school administrative unit have different histories, industries, and economic needs. The median household income (in 2019 dollars) in the different towns in SAUQ ranged between just above the state's median household income to more than \$10,000 below the state's median household income (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). While the middle and high schools served students from all of the towns, elementary schools were distributed throughout the SAU, and the student population in each of the schools reflected that community's demographics, including income. As such, the numbers of students who qualified for free or reduced meals ranged from 28% in one school, to more than 58% in another school in SAUQ. The leaders from two of the elementary schools in the district participated in the study.

Table 1*Demographic Information of SAUQ*

District	Enrollment	Students Qualifying for Free/Reduced Meals	Students with Disabilities
SAUQ	<2000 / <800 PK-5	44%	22%
Pine Tree Elementary	<200 PK-5	28%	15%
River Bend Elementary	<200 K-5	37%	28%

Note. Adapted from <https://www.maine.gov/doe/dashboard>. Copyright 2020 by Maine

Department of Education: ESSA Dashboard.

SAUQ is led by Superintendent Michael Jacoby, a pseudonym adopted to maintain the confidentiality of the participant. Mr. Jacoby is a native of the area, who has been in his position for seven years. Prior to becoming superintendent of SAUQ, Mr. Jacoby was a teacher, principal, and a central office administrator in a district in the region. SAUQ's assistant superintendent, Theresa Sampson, also grew up in the area. She attended schools and taught in SAUQ before moving into leadership positions in the system four years ago. The principals in the study have been in their positions for years and had established relationships with the teachers and staff in each of their buildings when they were called on to navigate the changing landscape of schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic. Principal Thomas Bennett has been in his position at Pine Tree Elementary School for six years. Prior to becoming principal, he was a teacher and teacher leader in the district. Rebecca Ahern, the principal of River Bend Elementary School, has been in the position for eight years. She has worked in SAUQ for more than twenty years.

The focus group participants represented schools throughout SAUQ. This group of teachers was an established group that provided district leadership related to curriculum, instruction, and assessment. All eight of the teachers in the focus group were female and served in formal and informal leadership roles in their schools and in the district's educational association. According to the business manager for SAUQ, 60% of the staff in SAUQ live in the district and 80% live in the region (Emergency School Board Meeting, March, 2020). Of the twelve participants in this study, eight indicated that they lived in the district and five talked of their experience as parents of students who attend schools in the district. This allowed these participants to reflect on their experiences as teachers or administrators and as parents in SAUQ. All participants in the study were White.

Theoretical Framework

Rorrer et al.'s (2008) conceptualization of the district as an institutional actor that provides instructional leadership, establishes policy coherence, and reorients the organization while maintaining an equity focus provided an initial frame for the examination of the actions and processes adopted by leaders as they shepherded the district through externally-driven changes. It was especially applicable in the context of the nation-wide shift to emergency remote learning in March of 2020 and the continuing work to open schools and provide instruction to students during the 2020-2021 school year because this crisis required leaders to move between the different tasks to implement these changes. Maintaining an equity focus, as described by Rorrer et al. (2008), requires foregrounding equity and "owning past inequity, including highlighting inequities in system and culture" (p. 328). While an equity focus can be the driver of reform, in a crisis

like the COVID-19 pandemic, when data points to inequities in education, equity becomes the lens through which decisions about policies, resources, and instruction were made.

School districts are complex and nested organizations, which makes the implementation of any new policies and procedures complicated. Spillane (1998) characterized districts as “non-monolithic,” conceding that districts are made up of schools that serve different populations and are led by different leaders, each with different beliefs that affect how policies are interpreted and implemented. Johnson and Chrispeels (2010) identified five types of connections or linkages between the policy domains—federal, state, district, and school. These included resource, structural, communication, relational, and ideological linkages, and, together, they illustrate the complex connections throughout the district and broader educational system. It is important to examine these linkages between a central office and its schools to identify which linkages yielded greater coordination and coherence.

Johnson and Chrispeels (2010) found that when implementing changes, leaders needed to attend to relational and ideological linkages throughout the system to increase stakeholders’ commitment and to ensure coherent instructional focus and organizational learning. They defined the relational linkages as “trusting professional relationships within and across levels of the system” (p. 743), and ideological linkages as those “reflecting the shared values, vision, and goals and what constitutes good instructional practices” (Lasky, 2004, cited in Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010, p. 743). I explored the role of trust in leaders and in the organization as a factor that promoted or hindered how changes were adopted by members of the district. Using Bryk and Schneider’s (2002)

theory of relational trust as a social resource for school improvement, I examined how trust was related to members' commitment to the organization and the changes.

This study adapted elements of both Rorrer et al.'s (2008) and Johnson and Chrispeels' (2010) frameworks. To understand how district and building leaders built capacity for the initial change to emergency remote learning, the planning for returning to school, and the opening of schools, I considered how they marshalled resources and attended to policy coherence—themes found in both frameworks. Interview questions were crafted with these frameworks in mind and the concepts found in the frameworks informed the initial themes that arose in the first cycle of coding. These themes were explored in subsequent interviews.

Data Collection

The research questions were answered through the use of three in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with the four different administrators, interviewed individually. In addition, three in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a group of teacher leaders. These interviews were conducted in three stages, July-August, 2020; November, 2020; and January-February, 2021. Conducting interviews in rounds, at those times, allowed me to learn about participants' experiences and understandings of the initial phases of implementation and the sustainability of the changes as time passed. Through these interpretive research interviews, patterns and themes emerged and were constructed through inductive analyses.

In-depth interviewing allows the researcher "to understand the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman, 2006, p. 9). It is also appropriate because participants' experiences cannot simply be observed, and the

depth of detail cannot be gathered through a survey. Merriam & Tisdell (2016) describe the semi-structured interview as being guided by the need for specific information that is to be gathered from each respondent, allowing the questions to be used in a flexible manner, not dictated by wording or order.

Following Seidman's (2006) three-interview series model, I focused the first interviews on establishing the context of the leaders' experience and invited participants to share information about their backgrounds and their path to assuming a leadership role. These interviews, conducted in July and August of 2020, also provided an opportunity for the participants to recall their experience of the beginning of the pandemic, through the subsequent school closures, and the preparations for the opening of school. The second round of interviews, held in November of 2020, focused on participants' recollection and experience of the first two months of the year. This round also incorporated themes, including relational trust, that arose in the first set of interviews and included questions based on those themes. The final interviews, in winter of 2021, were designed to allow participants to reflect on their experiences as leaders and the role that the district played in implementing and directing the organization throughout the pandemic. All interviews with administrators lasted 60-90 minutes, and each of the interviews with the group of teacher leaders lasted 90-100 minutes. A protocol was used to guide these semi structured interviews, and additional questions were posed to clarify the participant's answers and to examine emerging themes.

Because the research focused on participants representing four different role responsibilities—superintendent, assistant superintendent, principals, and teacher leaders—four different interviewing protocols were used. The focus of the interviews was

on participants' perception of the central office-school relationships, their experience of how decisions were made during the implementation of the changes, the supports received by members of the other stakeholder groups, and how these relationships and supports changed their perception of the reform. To understand participants' perception of the reform, they were also asked about how they believe the decisions and actions during the initial implementation affected the central office-school relationship, their understanding of the changes, and the progress toward implementing the shift to distance learning.

In addition to interviews, some documents were also collected and analyzed. The documents included the district's Continuity of Learning Plan and their Return to School Plan, which was approved by the district's Board. Other documents included correspondence from district leaders to school personnel and members of the public, and the results of surveys administered to staff and families. In addition, I observed School Board meetings that were live-streamed, as well as recordings of prior School Board meetings. These meetings spanned March of 2020 through February of 2021. These observations and documents allowed greater triangulation between data points.

Data Analysis

I generated interview questions based on the theoretical frameworks, focusing on the roles that leaders assumed throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and on how the district's orientation toward centralization affected the adoption and implementation of changes. In light of the social distancing requirements in place due to COVID-19, all interviews were conducted through video conferencing using the Zoom application. All confidential files were saved using cloud storage provided by the University of Southern

Maine (USM). The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. I used the computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) program Nvivo in the coding and analysis of the data.

Interviews and data were initially analyzed through Rorrer et al.'s (2008) conceptualization of districts as institutional actors and the linkages Johnson and Chrispeels' (2010) identified to explain how central office relates to schools to carry out reforms. In my first-cycle coding, I coded data using some *a priori* codes based on these theoretical conceptualizations and additional codes reflecting emerging themes that arose from the interviews, observations, and review of documents. The semi-structured form of the interviews allowed for other themes to emerge, including those related to the importance of the perception of trustworthiness of the leader and the district as an organization. In the second-cycle coding, codes were reorganized and grouped into categories that included some of those *a priori* codes, including school autonomy vs. centrally-directed decision making and providing instructional leadership. Additional categories included uniqueness of COVID, coordination and coherence, and relational trust.

Throughout the period of the research, I followed Miles and Huberman's (1994) recommendation of "interweaving data collection and analysis" (p. 50). I used analytic strategies including analytic memo writing during interviews and when observing school board meetings to identify and clarify codes and identify initial interpretations.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness "refers to the authenticity and credibility of the data and the dependability of the analysis and interpretation of the data" (Beaudry & Miller, 2016, p.

50). I provided thick descriptions that included “a description of the setting and participants of the study, as well as a detailed description of the findings with adequate evidence presented in the form of quotes from participant interviews...and documents” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 257). As a part of sound qualitative research practice, the analysis of the data was iterative and resulted in the data being transformed into categories, which were used to identify themes. The descriptions of experiences were echoed by other participants and found in documents and other observations, providing a means for comparing and cross-checking data. Triangulation of multiple sources of data in this way is another strategy to increase the internal validity of this study (Merriman & Tisdell, 2016).

By focusing on a single district for the case study, I was able to engage with participants for a substantial amount of time over a period of months. By spending such substantial time with the participants in each interview, as well as observing the board meetings and reviewing documents, I experienced a saturation of data and emerging findings (Merriman & Tisdell, 2016). Member checking for accuracy and interpretive validity was conducted with each of the administrators. I shared my interpretations with participants, including excerpts that were used in the findings, to verify that these interpretations accurately captured their experiences.

Risk, Protection, Confidentiality

Participants provided informed consent prior to the study after reviewing the protocols that clarified the study. I maintained the confidentiality and anonymity of participants as much as possible throughout the study by using pseudonyms for participants, the schools, and the district. The single case study increases risk that a

participant's report could be identified by other participants in the study. To mitigate for this, I represented the findings in a manner that reduced identifiability of participants. When using the CAQDAS program, respondent data was labeled using the pseudonym or naming convention that ensures that the respondent could not be identified in the event of a data breach. Zoom recordings were used to generate a transcript of the interview and are stored on a secure cloud setting at the University of Southern Maine (USM).

Although risk to the participants during the interview process was minimal and not greater than one encounters in daily living, particularly as the design of the study involves video conferencing interviews, it was important to recognize that the size of the state and the criteria used to select districts could make the district and leaders more identifiable. Care was taken to ensure that descriptive features of the district and schools did not include identifiable descriptors. In addition, statements made by participants were summarized to reduce the possibility that a participant's comment could be attributed to them. Although there was no direct benefit to the participants in the study, the findings from the study may be of benefit to district and building leaders.

Role of the Researcher

As a teacher and school administrator in public schools for more than 25 years, my experiences have shaped my view of education and what I believe should be the role of an educational leader. And while my experiences have informed the questions that I have raised in this study, I have been careful to design the study around a "questioning stance with regard to [my] work and life context" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 18).

As a curriculum director who is a part of a small central office administrative team, I have been deeply involved in the decision-making processes leading up to the

closure of school, and in subsequent decisions since then. I am also an involved member of a number of professional organizations around the state, which provides frequent communication with other district leaders. My daily work and my frequent interactions with colleagues continue to inform my understanding of how decisions in my district are being made. This positionality is both an asset as well as a potential deficit as I am aware that my experiences can affect the questions I ask in interviews, as well as how I interpret data. To address this, I sought multiple sources of data to triangulate and develop convergent evidence (Yin, 2014).

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

In this study, I sought to understand how district leaders' actions and decisions led to coordination and coherence when implementing and sustaining a change initiated by an external policy domain or by a factor outside the district leader's control. The pandemic, which began as an obscure news item from China in January of 2020 and exploded in an exponential way leading to the closure of most Maine schools on March 16, 2020, provided a unique opportunity to examine a commonly experienced, externally-driven mandate that has resulted in the transformation of schooling in Maine and across the United States. Some of the limitations inherent in such a phenomenon is that it shifts the focus of the study from implementation and sustaining of a reform to a focus on the stages of implementation. In addition, it is not clear how long this change will be in place or if the newly acquired instructional approaches will or should persist after the risks of the pandemic are reduced.

The use of a purposive convenience sample of a Maine school district limits the generalizability of the outcomes. The single case reflects the experiences of leaders in a

smaller district. Because each community's beliefs about the necessity of mitigation strategies to reduce the impact of the virus differed by region of the state and localities, communities and their School Boards exerted differing degrees of pressure on the district. Differing levels of involvement and pressure from communities and school boards are factors that could yield different experiences and approaches by leaders to achieve coordination and coherence.

This study was delimited by the decisions that I made initially to limit participating districts (see Table 2).

Table 2

Rationale for Participating District Criteria

Delimitation	Rationale
Superintendent with three years of tenure in the same district and serving as the superintendent during the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years.	District superintendents needed to be in the position for two years prior to the 2019-2020 school year to allow for this leader to have had time to effect the central office-school relationship. It was likely the impact of this school closing would continue into the 2020-2021 school year and continuity of leadership would be important for the purpose of the second interview.
Districts with more than 1000 students	This enrollment number increases the likelihood that there will be more than one school at a grade level span, which is important when examining how decision-making authority the perception of the implementation varied across the district.
Central office leadership structure that includes a curriculum director or assistant superintendent responsible for curriculum.	Curriculum, instruction, and assessment will be strategic priorities that will be examined.

In addition, because the study prioritized understanding the district's orientation toward centralization and decentralization by examining the experiences of two principals from

the same level—the elementary level—this study did not explore the experiences of leaders from other grade level spans.

A single event resulting in state and nation-wide school closures and continuing disruption to education is another delimiting factor, as an event of this nature has not occurred in modern history of public schooling in the United States. Finally, this study was undertaken in Maine, with a particular focus on Maine’s history of locally controlled schools, limiting the applicability to other states.

Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this research was to describe and analyze how school and district leaders in one school district collaborated to coordinate their responses to the myriad challenges that arose during the COVID-19 pandemic to implement and sustain system-wide changes. This study examined the experiences, decisions, and actions of district and school leaders in the days leading up to the shift to emergency remote learning in the spring of 2020, and the subsequent planning and implementation of changes required to allow a school system to operate during a pandemic during the 2020-2021 school year. As outlined in the previous chapters, implementing and sustaining a single change in a school system is complex, and the COVID-19 pandemic required districts and schools to adopt numerous changes in operations, leadership, and instruction. The findings of this research are organized to explore the actions that the district undertook to achieve coordination and coherence and the factors that supported or hindered establishing coherence. My findings center on two sets of actions employed by leaders: centralizing decisions and the decision-making process, and reorienting the district's focus. Reorienting the district's focus involved centering the focus on health, safety and wellness measures; aligning policies and practices; and allocating resources, including human resources, to build capacity to meet the goals. Factors that supported or hindered the district's actions included relational trust throughout the organization, communication between stakeholders, and the bridging and buffering work of leaders to connect the layered organizational structure of the institution, including external entities.

I applied a grounded theory methodology (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2016; Yin, 2014) to a case study of SAUQ, a district in Maine, because the nature of the

impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on schools was unprecedented and the inductive nature of a grounded approach allowed me to understand the meaning and significance of the data. The first section of this chapter describes the chaotic days and weeks immediately preceding and during the shift to emergency remote learning. The second section explores how SAUQ's centralized orientation to decision making evolved throughout the pandemic. In the third section, I examine how district leaders implemented decisions by reorienting and directing resources to achieve coherence and alignment within the system. The role that relational trust plays in instructional leadership and the implementation and acceptance of reforms is explored in the fourth section. The final section of this chapter summarizes the results of this study.

Emergency Remote Learning: Spring of 2020

Understanding the days and weeks immediately preceding and following the shift to emergency remote learning is important because it led district SAUQ to adopt a more centralized orientation and because the initial confusion factored into teachers' sense of relational trust in subsequent decisions and communications.

"This is going to be a bad one." - Evolving Understanding

In the weeks leading up to the shift from in-person classroom instruction to emergency remote learning, school district leaders relied on their district leadership teams, established regional networks, and the Maine Department of Education (MDOE) for guidance and to gain insights and to determine what to do. Although rates of infection were relatively low in Maine and other northeastern states, district and building administrators in SAUQ, like everyone else in March of 2020, worked to anticipate how COVID-19 could affect them and to plan accordingly. The pace of developments and the

changing directions in the first weeks of March presaged what would become the “new normal” for school district leaders in the coming year. Participants from throughout SAUQ recalled their dawning understanding that, while there were no infections in Maine, they would nonetheless be affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Mr. Jacoby, SAUQ’s superintendent, remembered:

It was kind of early February. I started watching and learning on the news about what was going on over in China, and I was looking at the CDC, and the stuff coming out of the CDC and so on and so forth. And I said, then, ‘This one is going to be a bad one.’

By the end of the first week of March, leaders from the Department of Education (DOE) were advising district leaders to review and update their pandemic plans, which prior to this crisis were rarely referenced components of districts’ emergency preparedness plans. This guidance was initially suggested to administrators in late February when few had conceived of the possibility that a virus that had not yet been detected in the state could have such a direct impact on their schools. Another district leader recalled hearing that district leaders should review their pandemic plans:

I remember the superintendent came in here and was like, ‘Can you believe it? They expect us all to have pandemic plans?!’ And I’m like, ‘That’s crazy. How are we supposed to know?’ It seems so silly now—the conversations we were having. But I was like, ‘What are we supposed to do?’ And the superintendent said, ‘You know, we’re all going to be in the same boat. None of us have a pandemic plan.’ And then like the week later, the DOE was like, ‘You gotta make a pandemic

plan.’

As central office leaders worked to make sense of the guidance from the DOE and began to plan, there was little agreement about the scale of the expected impact on schools, which made planning and messaging about what to expect especially challenging. In a March 5, 2020 email to principals, the Assistant Superintendent updated them about the current guidance from the DOE and Maine’s Center for Disease Control (CDC):

I have spent some time thinking about how best to continue education should our schools need to shut down for a time as a result of an outbreak. Currently risk is still extremely low. There is not an expectation from the MDOE that our school be equipped to deliver *online* education at this time nor do we have the financial support to make that a reality in a short amount of time if need be. In particular, I do not feel that continuing via online connectedness is in the best interest of our younger learners.

Based on the latest DOE recommendations in partnership with the CDC, they recommend that [lesson] plans be considered for up to 14 days in the “unlikely event” (which was their words) that a school needs to close. At this point, I am not considering having teachers spend time developing home plans for all content areas in all classes to sustain education. Instead, I am exploring the idea of book lists.

On March 6, the very next day, reflecting the quickly-evolving understanding and response, the DOE's guidance was much stronger: district leaders were told to begin to develop district continuity of learning plans, which did not need to include online learning because few districts were able to provide one-to-one devices for their students throughout the system.

The central office leaders of SAUQ determined that they would require their teachers to put together up to two weeks of emergency lesson plans, which they announced to the principals on Wednesday, March 11, the same day the World Health Organization classified Covid-19 as a global pandemic. At that time, the Superintendent announced that the following Monday, March 16 would be an early release day to provide time for teachers to be able to plan.

“It was craziness.” - The Speed of Change

The first two weeks of March of 2020, were characterized by teachers and school leaders as “surreal,” “crazy” and “frantic.” Though some district leaders across the state tried to anticipate and plan for a closure of some kind, few predicted how quickly the pressure to shut down schools would build. In the first week of March, prior to the first wave of school closures around the country (Map Coronavirus School Closures in 2019-2020, 2020), Superintendent Jacoby collaborated and coordinated with a regional and statewide network of Superintendents. Such collaboration allowed district leaders to share plans and experiences. In addition to providing personal, logistical, and political support, other school districts within the network also acted as external forces that, at times, affected decisions and the timing of decisions.

Superintendents coordinated with one another in decisions and announcements related to closing schools, which were initially considered for later in March. However, as individual superintendents encountered growing pressure to close from their communities during the week ending on March 13, the timeline was moved up as one superintendent after another announced that they would be closing schools to in-person instruction. Superintendents around the state joined a video conference call with the Commissioner of Education on Saturday, March 14. In a report to the School Board, Superintendent Jacoby reported that at that meeting, the Commissioner advised that the decision to close schools would be a local one that the DOE would support. In addition, the DOE planned to provide waivers for the school attendance, waiving the 175-day requirement. On Sunday, March 15, Governor Mills declared a Civil State of Emergency effectively ending classroom instruction in public schools through April 17. Mr. Jacoby remembered the decision to hold the last in-person school day on March 13, but noted that this was earlier than he would have liked.

I had plans to close, but...we were going to stay open for at least another day so I can make sure all the kids have their devices and packets and whatever else they need. So that's how that went. And it was the darndest thing I ever saw in my life. I mean, it was, it was kind of like people going into panic mode at that point.

The decision to close schools, which was made on the weekend, meant that what teachers understood to be the case on Thursday changed within two days. While the Assistant Superintendent sent out information on Sunday, March 15, detailing the purpose and intended outcomes for the teacher workday on Monday, as well as specifics

about how to share their resources so they could be accessible to students through a centralized district website, not all teachers and staff members were aware of the changes to the plan and expressed confusion that there were different expectations at different levels. One teacher recalled the days leading to the shift to emergency remote learning:

I don't really recall having a lot of notice other than the last I heard, as we might do an early release on Monday to prepare for the possibility because it started sort of happening in other parts of the world, in the state. But I just remember it being a total whirlwind. I do think everybody came together.

Another teacher remembered, "I don't recall hearing that we were going to go remote before it was the actual decision in my school. So, it was just all of a sudden, 'OK, you're going remote.'"

The changes in the plan for closing was articulated by one of the principals who recalled:

It was so fast that it's hard to even remember exactly, but we had parent teacher conferences—I think it was that Thursday night—and then that Friday ended up being our last day with kids in person. So, at that time, at first we had originally planned on an early release day on the Monday so that teachers could prepare things because we thought there was a possibility that we might have to go home for a week or so. And then, when it became pretty clear it was gonna be longer than a week or so, that got changed to a full day—so full day on Monday. And then once we got to the point where it was just about Monday, I think it was sometime over the weekend we found out we actually wouldn't be going back.

Confusion and frustration characterized these days because not all teachers around the system understood how the Governor's Executive Order issued over the weekend, which declared a Civil State of Emergency, affected their planning because it ended classroom instruction in public schools through April 17. Initially, teachers had been asked to compile two weeks of lessons and activities, but when the Governor's Executive Order went into effect on Sunday, March 15, any decision to return to school would depend on the Governor's subsequent orders. Not all teachers understood that this meant that emergency remote learning would continue beyond two weeks and that simply planning for two weeks of lessons would not suffice. As a result, many teachers were frustrated by the changing directions about how much should be compiled and in what form. Assistant Superintendent Sampson acknowledged the impact of the changing directions.

The initial guidance was to plan for two weeks' worth of work. That was what initially went out to teachers. We have been updating teachers as much as we can to say this could be a multi week [closure]...They know at this point that we don't know and they are planning for the unknown. So, we are sending home what we can.

Teachers' frustration was also related to the directions they received about how to prepare these materials. According to the teachers in SAUQ, the elementary teachers were directed to assemble packets of work and to have them copied and prepared to be picked up. The middle school teachers were directed to create both digital materials and paper packets for those students without internet access. At the high school, teachers

were asked to compile two weeks of paper copies for each of their students. According to one teacher, this was a source of frustration because this was a lot of work, particularly at the secondary level where teachers taught multiple courses and a total of six class sections. Fewer than half of the packets were picked up, and the teachers were subsequently asked to provide the materials digitally. One teacher described the days leading to the shift to emergency remote learning, “It was craziness. We had like two days to get all these packets ready for kids that we wanted to send home, and so it was very crazy.”

At a School Board meeting on March 16, the Assistant Superintendent reported that information for families and students about instruction was available on the district website and that the goal was to “send enough home to give them things to do without overwhelming them” (School Board Meeting, March, 2020).

“This is what we’re doing now.” - The First Days: Logistics & Priorities

As districts shifted quickly from in-person learning in a traditional school setting, where meals were served and a host of services were also delivered, to emergency remote learning, district leaders were forced to reorient the organization, redefining nearly every function of the organization—instructionally and operationally.

While for teachers the focus of the first days after the shift to emergency remote learning was on getting materials compiled and distributed to students, SAUQ central office leaders met with the School Board on the first day of the closure to share their plan and to answer questions related to the long-term plans. In his report to the Board, Superintendent Jacoby observed that it had been:

Extremely challenging to keep up with this situation. The guidance and

information that we put out—the minute we put it out there, the situation changes and now we have to rethink and sort of back up and replan again (School Board Meeting, March, 2020).

During the same meeting, Assistant Superintendent Theresa Sampson shared the lessons and learning activities resources website that had been established for families to access during emergency remote learning. She also shared a proposed schedule that families could use to establish routines at home. Assistant Superintendent Sampson also acknowledged that the purpose of these lessons and these instructional resources was to “maintain students’ education” and that SAUQ was not “providing all new instruction.” And while teachers were not expected to deliver instruction online, the school department provided each student access to adaptive online learning programs in reading and math as a means to differentiate and personalize student learning during emergency remote learning. District leaders acknowledged that one barrier to delivering new instruction to students in the first days of emergency remote learning was students’ access to the internet. Information about accessing free internet through the local cable company was shared in their initial letters to families and again referred to during subsequent School Board meetings. These actions addressed what one member of the district administrative team called, “instructional insecurity.”

In addition to addressing instructional insecurity, school leaders as well as state and federal agencies recognized that addressing food insecurity had to be a priority, since schools, the source of two meals for school-aged children, would be closing. SAUQ, like other districts throughout Maine and the country, worked to adapt the organization’s

existing resources to provide meals to all children under the age of 18. SAUQ's prioritization of food service reflected the organization's commitment to address food insecurity. Drawing on their experience administering the summer food service, they established pick-up locations at the three largest schools and set up a system of food deliveries for any families who were unable to go to the pick-up locations. One member of the district's administrative team commented to the School Board, "Any student that needs and wants a meal has access to that. That's the underlying principle. We have staff available. We have busing available and we are going to utilize them." Operational staff, including food service personnel, worked with the initial health and safety guidance provided through the CDC to institute new procedures for working together while following distancing, masking and other mitigation strategies when preparing meals on such a large scale.

Another organizational challenge districts had to address in the first days of building closures was whether or not all members of the staff would continue to be employed, given the shift to emergency remote learning and the closure of buildings. SAUQ administrative leaders addressed this early, identifying such a concern as "salary insecurity" and noting that more than 400 staff members throughout the district wondered if they would maintain their jobs and paychecks. SAUQ's business manager explained to the School Board,

We just want to be very clear that the intent and our underlying principle is that all of our staff will be paid. That's how we're operating. That's been how the federal government has addressed this. That's been how the state government has addressed this. That's how we have been addressing that.

Local decisions related to the business side of school systems, including sick time and providing paid family medical leave, were eased as the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Securities Act was moving through Congress (U.S. Department of the Treasury, n.d.). Though it was not signed into law until March 27, the provisions that were outlined in the House version of the bill provided direction for local and state level leaders. In an email to hourly employees, SAUQ leaders reassured employees and encouraged them to follow established health and safety guidance, saying, “There are no financial reasons nor should there be any pressure to be at work when you can’t or shouldn’t.”

In a meeting with the School Board immediately following the shift to emergency remote learning, Superintendent Jacoby anticipated the work to reorient the district, stating,

This is what we’re doing now. This is what we are doing now...we are going to be involved in this from here on out and we are going to explore whatever we can do to support the community in whatever way we can; and we will be open for new ideas; and we will adapt.

This statement reflected Superintendent Jacoby’s understanding that the work of the district and the roles that leaders played had and would continue to change as the district reoriented its organizational structures and processes to meet the challenges of providing education—and other services—during the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Actions to Establish a More Coherent and Coordinated District

Achieving coherence in a complex system like a school district is complicated and the frequent changes in guidance from federal, state, and local entities throughout the

pandemic added to the complexity. SAUQ acted to achieve some measure of coherence and coordination during the COVID-19 pandemic when they centralized decisions and the decision-making process and reoriented the district's focus. When reorienting the district, leaders articulated a clear, unifying message, "Stay safe. Stay open." and allocated resources and adjusted policies and practices to meet this mission.

District Centralization of Decisions and the Decision-Making Process

Johnson et al. (2015) described the relationship between school leadership and central office management, stating:

A basic tension exists between the priorities of administrators in central office and those in the schools....Principals and local school communities push for greater freedom to set their own priorities and allocate resources in response to their school's identified needs, while district administrators, who bear responsibility for maintaining equity across schools and ensuring that the public's money is well spent, are reluctant to relinquish their formal authority to make key decisions (p. 6).

The question about what decisions should be more autonomous, or made at the school level, and what decisions should be more centralized, or made at the central office level, continued throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Ultimately, the scale of the changes required by the COVID-19 pandemic, both in the spring of 2020 and throughout the 2020-2021 school year, drove the district toward a more centralized orientation.

"We don't all need the same thing at the same time." - Balancing Demands Between Consistency and Independence. SAUQ's organizational structure is like that of many other districts in Maine. The district spans multiple towns, each with its own

history, traditions, industry, and economic health. The elementary schools are located throughout the district in different towns and, as a result, the students attending each elementary school reflect their community and its needs and priorities. After the fifth grade, all of the students feed into one middle school and then one high school. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, SAUQ centralized decisions related to academic programming, including curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The district also required each school to identify annual goals and objectives for school improvement that were aligned with the district goals. Though academic programming was the same across grade levels in the district, the district recognized each school's differences and allowed schools to set school-specific goals and objectives aligned with district goals. During the pandemic, SAUQ continued to direct academic programming decisions.

The assistant superintendent described what the district required and what each school was able to determine in the first days of emergency remote learning:

We required every teacher to put together a high-tech and a low-tech plan...The building choices were scheduling, how often to—how to schedule those meetings because it needed to look different for high school than it did at the middle school, of course, and certainly at the elementary school, where you have one teacher and specials versus teachers that rotate.

District leaders in SAUQ recognized the differences that exist across the different elementary schools, and between the three grade-level groups, and worked to balance the needs of all when making decisions. An elementary principal summarized the challenge of balancing consistency between schools with different demographics:

Our schools are different . . . One of our schools only has about 80 kids and another one has 320 and a vice principal . . . We also have a higher rate of special ed in my building. So, you know, some of those things create some differences across the buildings.

Another administrator observed:

I think there are some places where we're not going to be quite on the same page and that's really due to the nature of our individual communities and individual schools and our needs so you can't always be exactly the same.

Because the schools are different, school leaders have long been accustomed to having some autonomy in decision making and setting priorities for their schools. District leaders recognized these differences and worked to honor these differences while also maintaining a focus on common goals. One district leader described this balance:

We decided each building has different needs. So, let's allow each building to pick a goal and select the objective or objectives that best meets the needs of their building. That way, we're all working toward—we have the same framework, but it doesn't mean we're all working on the same thing at the same time, because we don't all need the same thing at the same time.

Superintendent Jacoby described the organizational structure of the administrative team as being composed of the central office leadership team, which includes the superintendent, assistant superintendent, business manager, the technology director, the special education director, and the special projects manager, and the full administrative team, which also includes the building principals and assistant principals. Prior to the

COVID-19 pandemic, the full administrative team met once a month. According to Assistant Superintendent Sampson, these monthly administrative team meetings were divided between logistical and instructional leadership, ensuring that their time together was not entirely consumed by logistical, managerial topics. The instructional leadership meeting time included learning walks in schools, which is the practice of visiting classrooms for short observations, and meetings with principals to review their schools' goals and objectives.

Once the district shifted into emergency remote learning in the spring, the full administrative team and the smaller central office team each met weekly to discuss issues as they arose. One central office leader explained that the regular meetings of the smaller central office team “allow us to really be on the same page with what we want to accomplish in the full admin team [meetings].” These weekly meetings continued through the summer and throughout the 2020-2021 school year, though Assistant Superintendent Sampson acknowledged that they had shifted away from the prior logistical and instructional meetings model because they were now meeting to share information, answer questions, and address issues. In the fall, she reflected that the purpose of their meetings was to address problems or “put out fires,” but she lamented that the focus of their work shifted away from instructional leadership:

[We're] doing a good job putting out fires, but we're not leading. And there is a huge part of me...That just really struck me because we're doing a great job right now. We are doing a great job surviving. And that's sort of our goal for the year. But we're not leading. We're not focusing on our long-term goals.

Leaders expressed their awareness of the need to think beyond the present crisis and to consider bigger, long-term issues. While leaders felt the need to address these areas, they were aware that administrators and teachers were experiencing high levels of stress and lacked capacity to engage in this kind of work. A central office leader reflected:

I have to think about the mental health of our administrators. I saw more tears this summer than I ever have. And I know when they're stressed out, and they're very stressed out. So I don't think that we can pull in that leading piece until they're ready. Otherwise, I think it's, again, just going to be that one. One more thing. I don't want to be the straw that broke the camel's back.

While the district leaders' focus shifted from broader improvement efforts to managing the decisions and situational changes necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, SAUQ's organizational structure and institutional history of centrally-driven decisions resulted in a centralized orientation as a means to align and direct decisions and resources.

“Instructionally, we've tried to be on the same page.” - District Orientation Toward Centralization. The distributed nature of a school district, characterized by a district central office separate from numerous different schools in the organization, results in a number of organizational leadership challenges, including the locus of decision-making and other bureaucratic controls (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010; Murphy, 1989). Supovitz (as cited in Johnson et al., 2015) identified the tension that exists between establishing a unifying vision for the district and allowing for some level of

flexibility and autonomy of the schools in the system. The tension between centralization and autonomy was complicated by other stakeholders, including instructional support staff who provided and oversaw special education services across all buildings, and district operations, including food service and transportation. These groups figured into determinations of the extent to which decisions could be made at the building level, and what needed to be overseen and directed from central office.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, SAUQ centralized decision making, placing value in and expecting consistency across the schools in the district. However, when decisions needed to be made, the process was generally collaborative and reciprocal in nature because the decisions, though made by central office, were not directed to the rest of the organization in a top-down manner. Instead, they were the result of collaboration and input from all levels of the organization. Assistant Superintendent Sampson described this collaboration:

We're not making decisions in such a top-down way that it's like, 'This is what you guys are doing.' We're trying to get input on everything because we always say we're all we are collectively the expert. There's no single one of us that knows the full picture. We really need everybody's input. And so when we make decisions, we try to make the best decision based on that collective input. And oftentimes we try to do it in a way that there's consensus.

In a subsequent interview, she elaborated on the importance of a clear decision-making process:

It makes it all the more important to have a process in place so that people know how that decision is going to be made and it's very helpful if you made that

process up front. There are times in our admin meetings where I will say, 'You're making a determination, but [the superintendent] is going to make the final decision.' if I think it might be something that we might not all agree on.

And while collaboration and consensus characterized the decision-making process, the resulting decisions governed all units in the system, providing consistency across schools. Academic programming related to the entire system was also centralized, with consistent adoption of programs and adherence to the same standards and performance indicators at each grade level. Assistant Superintendent Sampson explained this:

Instructionally, we've tried to be on the same page. I have worked with all of the teachers and every single grade level to develop 'I can...' statements for all of their subject areas. So we have that commonality and we have rubrics that match up with every single one of those 'I can...' statements. So, that's consistent.

Such consistency in academic programs and expectations allowed Ms. Sampson to work with teams of teachers and administrators to examine which targets would be prioritized in the 2020-2021 school year, following emergency remote learning from the spring. While the "I can..." statements would be consistent across all schools, Ms. Sampson reflected that she loosened the district requirement outlining the amount of time spent in each of the content areas, allowing principals to make adjustments based on the changes in the school day schedule necessitated by the COVID health and safety mitigation strategies and based on the needs of the students in each building. Assistant

Superintendent Sampson remembered:

We are not going to say, ‘You must have 90 minutes in reading; you must have 75 minutes in math’ because we don’t know what the kids might need. And maybe we’ll have to come back to that at some point if we see big disparities, but we didn’t feel comfortable and we want to make sure that teachers feel like they can have an interdisciplinary approach as well. So, we didn’t feel comfortable blocking up a schedule without knowing some of the unknowns.

In research examining districts’ responses to the COVID-19 pandemic conducted from April to August, 2020, Hubbard, Mackey, & Supovitz (2020) found that “districts that were more successful operating with strong central guidance tended to have pre-existing infrastructure in place that allowed for a more streamlined crisis response” (p. 2). Such strong central guidance from the central office of SAUQ was a part of the district culture prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and when the COVID-19 pandemic occurred and the district had to pivot to emergency remote learning, stakeholders in the system were accustomed to centralized procedures and decision making.

“Give us a directive so we can all be on the same page.” - Uncertainty Leads to Increased Centralization & Uniformity. As leaders became more aware that schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic would require changes to nearly every aspect of the institution, the uncertainty about what to do led building leaders to seek guidance from district leaders and led district leaders to seek guidance from other districts and from the DOE. With so much uncertainty, SAUQ was adopted an even more centralized decision-making process, and decisions across schools, particularly the elementary

schools, prioritized consistency and uniformity in procedures.

The leaders and teachers throughout SAUQ were accustomed to a centralized approach, particularly as it related to the instructional core. They were less familiar with a centralized approach to the more day-to-day operations of schools. From the moment schools shifted to emergency remote learning and continuing throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, district and school leaders faced operational challenges and questions that were entirely novel and for which they had neither the experience nor organizational structures in place to address. Principals, including very experienced administrators, were also navigating frequent, unfamiliar and diverse questions from their staffs. Recalling the first days in emergency remote learning, one principal recounted the challenge of establishing consistent expectations while recognizing the differences between the positions required some flexibility in these expectations:

When we first broke, it was kind of like, ‘OK. Make sure to maybe run a zoom link, zoom morning meet to make sure that there are morning meetings with their class,’ but there was no new teaching involved. That was tricky. And people had to let go of the fact that what you do as a second grade teacher for your class isn't the same as what the gym teacher is doing. It's the reality of the situation.

Another principal described the challenge of having so many questions she could not answer:

I was just trying to field people's questions. People were good because I said, ‘I'm not going to know.’ It's just a lot of these questions—‘I'll do my best to figure them out for you.’ So people were really, really patient with that. I thought every meeting or every conversation I had with someone, I just got into questions and

then a lot of them that we just didn't have answers to.

The frequency and intensity of the complex questions that district and school leaders had never before needed to confront led to a sense of decision fatigue, or the sense that they lacked the capacity to make such significant and weighty decisions. An elementary principal observed: “I think we have the same sort of ‘Just tell us what to—somebody tell us what to do’ you know. But I think that's been the problem. I think nobody's really known what to do.” Assistant Superintendent Sampson echoed this when she said:

Our building administrators are looking for answers, just like we are, as districts, looking for answers from the DOE. Like, ‘Tell us what you want us to do or, you know, give us a directive so we can all be on the same page.’ That sort of has been the demand and we have shifted to a little bit of a top-down.

District leaders recognized the need to provide support to leaders throughout the district by providing answers to these questions and sought to do this through an articulated decision-making process, as well as a plan to collaborate with administrators and teachers to create the return to school plans throughout the summer of 2020.

“This isn't any one person's decision.” - A Decision Making Process

Characterized by Collaboration. Decision making is at the heart of how Johnson et al. (2015) defined centralization. Their author research examined decision making in a district on a continuum, with central office on one end and schools on the other end. Though SAUQ's orientation could be characterized as centralized based on the required consistency of curriculum and pedagogy, the district prioritized collaboration and

reciprocal feedback when establishing these consistent procedures and expectations.

Superintendent Jacoby characterized his leadership and decision-making process with the administrative team as collaborative in nature, noting that when it came to decision making:

I don't mind making tough decisions. I absolutely don't mind that. And I don't mind giving direction when I feel that direction is needed, but I would much prefer to be in a group and share ideas and reach some kind of consensus in terms of direction and decisions.

Both the assistant superintendent and the superintendent outlined their decision-making process with the administrative team. Superintendent Jacoby described using an A, B, C decision-making framework. “A-level decisions that affect the whole district; B-level decisions that may affect a unit like the elementary unit or the high school/middle school unit, and C-level decisions are building based decisions.” They explained that while this decision-making process was in place prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, it became more formalized throughout the pandemic. He emphasized the value he placed on collaborative decision making, recognizing that information he gleaned from his network of superintendents in the region was not germane to all members of the team and that some issues required different voices and perspectives at the table:

I constantly update my principals and directors with that information...communication with the principals, and the whole admin team. And then we do middle school, high school, and elementary principals in separate meetings whenever we need to—that ends up about once a week—And those are

very collaborative meetings. I'm very transparent in terms of what I share with them, and they're not shy about letting me know how things are going.

From those first chaotic weeks leading up to the shift to emergency remote learning to the subsequent weeks and months, the sheer number of decisions confronting educational leaders—at all levels—was described by one of SAUQ's principals as “overwhelming.” Nearly every decision fell into the three key sets of decisions on which districts focused: decisions about academics, including curriculum, instruction, and assessment; budgeting and resource allocation; and staffing (Johnson et al., 2015). Frequently these decisions affected everyone in the district and, as such, were what Mr. Jacoby described as “A-decisions.” In addition, these decisions needed to be made in the context of a global pandemic, when districts were asked to pivot to be able to provide education from a distance. In this context, few of the established systems and procedures, including attendance, grading, and the school-day schedule, could be applied. In addition, in the spring, there were few structures in place that allowed central office administrators to incorporate teacher voice and, at times, other administrators' perspectives in decision making. The superintendent acknowledged how the sheer number of issues affected this established decision-making process:

I have been pretty clear with all the administrators that this situation is kind of unusual and I think it calls for a little bit more of a different leadership style than I might normally exhibit. So, if I'm making decisions that seem to be a little less than my normal, thoughtful, slow-paced, collaborative self, it's out of necessity.

The administrative team also revisited the decision-making process within the administrative team, refining it and creating a more clearly articulated division of decision-making responsibility (see Table 3).

Table 3

Decision Making within District Leadership Team

Superintendent
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ultimate approval of ad hoc committee recommendations and/or final decision when/if consensus is not made through the administrative team. ● Establishes, with team input, the re-entry scenario that will be followed (in person, hybrid, online) ● Determines, with team input, the safety protocols that will be used ● Determines staffing levels and finances
Principals / Directors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Determine daily schedules aligned to instructional requirements ● Develop a plan to use existing resources to comply with strategic decisions ● Establish and apply procedures complying with strategic decisions
Community Input
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Re-Opening Survey—We want to gauge perceptions and comfort levels of both families and employees ● Board Meetings—Families may attend board meetings to provide input ● Once developed, a plan will be shared with families and the community

While some decisions, particularly during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, required less collaboration, the district and school administrators recognized the need to include more people in the decision-making process. To address these decision-making challenges, district leaders in SAUQ gathered information from teachers, principals and other administrators to identify what needed to be done in the fall, 2020 to address the shortcomings of the spring, 2020. Assistant Superintendent Sampson held a series of Zoom meetings to solicit teachers' ideas as a "critical

component of helping to shape our collective thinking in necessary next steps.” Teacher feedback during these sessions was shared with administrators and used for subsequent planning. One district leader noted:

Starting in May, we worked with the admin team to develop a list of the major priority areas that we need to make sure that we have cohesion around [social-emotional learning] (SEL), instruction, attendance, grading procedures - those types of things.

Once these major priority areas were identified, ad hoc committees were formed (see Table 4).

Table 4

SAUQ Ad Hoc Committees

Ad Hoc Committee	Task	Chair(s)
Health Protocols	*Develop protocols for staff, students, and families/visitors entering and working in our buildings	Head Nurse
Technology	*Designate common platforms that can be used across the district *List common expectations of a “one stop shop” website at schools *Suggest and develop professional development	Director of Technology & MS Principal
Accountability	*Re-assess applicability of grade level performance indicators for grades K-8 *Develop expectations for student participation digitally as well as face to face if hybrid (hours per day depending on grade span....what parents can expect for work load and how parents can support their child) *Recommendations for student grading and use of assessment	Assistant Superintendent ES Principal MS Principal
Assessments (benchmarking and diagnostics)	*Revision of assessment calendar *Provide recommendations of specific assessments if any may need to change *Expectations around virtual testing	Assistant Superintendent 2 ES Principals
Attendance and engagement	*Criteria for tracking attendance (in-person and virtual) *Develop suggestions to increase engagement	Superintendent HS Asst Principal
<i>Coordinate with accountability committee</i>	*Expectations for student participation digitally (in-person and virtual)	
Staff Work Expectations	*Suggestions for engagement of staff and staff wellness *Guidelines for substitute teachers entering the building	HS Principal HS Asst Principal
<i>Coordinate with accountability committee</i>	*Guidance for use of ed techs in virtual learning *Clarity of work plan expectations for staff *Ensure more inclusive role of allied arts	ES Principal

Ad Hoc Committee	Task	Chair(s)
SEL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Recommendations for how we will use the tools we already have in place for SEL programming *Recommendations for how we will identify new resources, supports, or partners that schools may need to access in the fall *Recommendations for how we will assess and screen students for what they need in regards to Social/Emotional supports How will we use that information *Recommendations for how we might use a district emergency support system/response for any school that may need it *Establish what longer-term SEL responses might need to be considered 	2 ES Principals
Special Ed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Develop processes and protocols to ensure requirements and IEPs are followed in all three scenarios *Ensure there is a plan to support students' needs 	Director of Special Education

These ad hoc committees comprised administrators and teachers and were chaired by different administrators and principals from throughout the district. When considering the composition of these groups, Assistant Superintendent Sampson recalled:

This isn't any one person's decision. It's not even just an admin decision or central office decision. We really need to have teacher input on these. So we actually had teachers on these ad hoc committees, meeting throughout the summer. Most of the meetings ended in mid-July, so that we could vet all of the recommendations as an admin team, but teachers helped to develop these recommendations.

Teachers recalled their involvement in these ad hoc committees:

We did end up getting a good voice at that table, but we had to push for it. And I think all of those committees, because there was so much to consider - So breaking them down into small cohorts of teachers and administrators willing to do the work, it let them tackle a large variety of topics in depth. And that was one

great thing I thought they did, was establish a bunch of committees that each sort of took a little sliver so they could go deep into each sliver because there's so much - you know, attendance, engagement, curriculum, health and safety protocols - I could go on and on, but that was one nice thing.

The ad hoc committees worked together throughout the summer to produce recommendations that were included in the district's return to school plan. Because teachers and administrators drafted the recommendations that were the basis of the district's return to school plan, the plan was largely accepted by administrators and teachers even before it was adopted by the Board.

The nature of the COVID-19 pandemic meant that it was difficult for groups of teachers and administrators to gather. Leaders of SAUQ nevertheless sought teacher, student, and family feedback through the use of surveys that were administered in the spring, summer, fall, and winter. The survey feedback was used to inform decisions related to meals, transportation, schedules and instructional planning. Assistant Superintendent Sampson described their use of staff surveys and other forms of feedback:

We try to give people an avenue to provide feedback when we give surveys and try to take that into account and make the decisions, the best that we can that way, and then they certainly can always let their leadership team know or even talk to their building principal and let them know their concerns.

Surveys were administered to teachers, families, and, at times, students throughout the COVID-19 pandemic to gather their feedback about their experiences and their needs. A survey was administered to families and staff in early January to get their feedback to

help determine whether and how changes to programming and scheduling would occur in the winter. A teacher described how this survey was used:

Administration did do a survey to see how we felt about being back in school, so I do think they were asking for input and you know seemed to listen and take our advice or the majority of the people's advice. I would assume that's how they made their decision. So we have had the opportunity to at least reflect on how we thought things were going, what we would like to see for schedules moving forward. And they did involve all levels and the parents and community in those decisions.

In addition to surveys, each school in SAUQ also had leadership teams made up of teachers that met regularly. One principal described these meetings as a place where teachers could share their questions and concerns:

I think they just wanted to be able to share their concerns. I feel like we have lots of platforms to do that though, like team leaders meet twice a month. And that's pretty much what we do—we talk about what people are concerned about, what are they worried about, what questions people have.

The district's use of ad hoc committees, surveys, and leadership teams in schools encouraged collaboration and contributed to coherence in the system.

“They were kind of my people.” - Navigating Complex Decisions: The Role of Networks

While the recommendations of the ad hoc committees allowed for greater clarity and consistency of expectations, as outlined in the district's reopening plan, there was

broad understanding that the reopening plan would evolve as Maine's Framework for Reopening Schools was updated and as they received additional guidance from the Maine Centers for Disease Control (MCDC), the Maine Department of Education (MDOE), and other external policy domains as circumstances changed related to the COVID-19 pandemic. When asked how he managed the myriad changes in guidance from these agencies, Superintendent Jacoby described his connections to other superintendents in the region, to the Commissioner, and to other educational organizations that allowed him to ask questions and collaborate.

I get a lot of information, and I make sure that I've got it. So, I share that with the board, and I share with my administrators on a regular basis, so they feel like they're pretty well in touch with what's going on, so there... there aren't many questions that come up that they don't know the answer.

The frequent administrative meetings acted as a venue for the dissemination of this information, and also as a platform for questions and additional discussion.

Nevertheless, immediately following the release of the reopening schools plan and continuing throughout the fall, principals and other school leaders still found themselves fielding specific questions related to details not explicitly outlined in the school reopening plan. While central office leaders were seen as supportive, the principals of the elementary schools in SAUQ reported that they worked more closely with one another because they had shared experiences and were seen as a supportive network of colleagues. One principal reported: "I feel like lately the K-5 administrators—we've been looking to each other a lot because some of us are like, 'Have you had this question? Did you already have this figured out at your school?'"

Another principal reported:

I met with elementary principals—we met a lot since March and it was good. We actually—this whole thing has made us kind of closer as a team, which has been cool. We haven't always agreed, and some things are specific to our buildings...So they were kind of my people.

By the start of the school year, the K-5 principals were working closely and had very consistent plans for how they would implement some of the decisions, particularly those related to health and safety. Assistant Superintendent Sampson reflected on the start of the year, saying:

In terms of how we're responding to staff and safety and putting our plans in place, [the K-5 principals] are lockstep with each other. And I think that that's great. I think that part of that is also that they're nervous that if they do anything different in their building than another school is doing, they're going to hear about it from their teachers. But I think they've done a tremendous job working together.

Such close collaboration allowed principals to establish consistent expectations across their buildings. Principals who valued autonomy struggled with this tendency toward uniformity because as they adopted strict consistency, they had less flexibility to adapt to meet the needs in their individual buildings. One principal described the tension they experienced as another colleague wanted everyone to do the same thing. “[They] want to be consistent with what we are doing, and sometimes I don't. I don't feel like that's really necessary. I feel that's something buildings work out with their team.”

Despite such discomfort, decisions that affected the elementary schools were generally

made when the principals reached consensus.

While there was not perfect agreement about when the schools would do the same thing, networking allowed the district and schools to be “on the same page,” as one administrator noted. The principals acknowledged that because teachers in different schools talked with one another and “compared notes,” it was important to be consistent. Not only is consistency helpful when addressing questions related to the day-to-day operations of the school, consistent expectations and shared understanding of the roles that each person plays are important hallmarks of a highly coherent district.

Reorienting the Organization to Achieve Coordination and Coherence

Fullan & Quinn (2016) defined coherence as “what is in the minds and actions of people individually and especially collectively” (p. 2). Honig & Hatch (2004) define coherence as “a dynamic process, which involves schools and school district central offices working together to craft or continually negotiate the fit between external demands and schools’ own goals and strategies” (p. 16). Ultimately, a coherent district is one in which there is a common understanding of what needs to be done and why. SAUQ was a highly coherent system as seen in their communications and planning documents. Yet while there was significant evidence of coherence, teachers’ experiences of being excluded from decision-making processes highlights the importance of conceiving of coherence as a dynamic process that demands ongoing attention and scrutiny. It also underscores the importance of maintaining a reciprocal relationship between teachers and school and district leaders, characterized by all stakeholders having a meaningful voice in policies and decisions.

“Stay safe. Stay open.” - Policy Alignment: Focused Work Toward Common Goals. Coherence refers to a high degree of alignment within a system, allowing focused work toward common goals. Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, Superintendent Jacoby focused the health and safety efforts of SAUQ and the broader community around the mantra, “Stay safe. Stay open.” He stated this phrase in School Board meetings and in meetings with the central office and administrative teams. And this mantra was soon echoed by others in and associated with the district, including Board members. This continued to be at the heart of the work around which other plans were made. By the beginning of July, the district, drawing on the initial considerations of the ad hoc committees, administered surveys to staff and families to learn more about their thoughts on returning to school in the fall. At that time, they also released their “Re-entry Planning Document,” which was a framework that articulated the district’s priorities for reopening. The priorities were divided between “pre-established priorities” and “additional priorities given the COVID-19 situation” (see Table 5). These priorities were maintained throughout the planning process and were reflected in the district’s final reopening plan.

Table 5

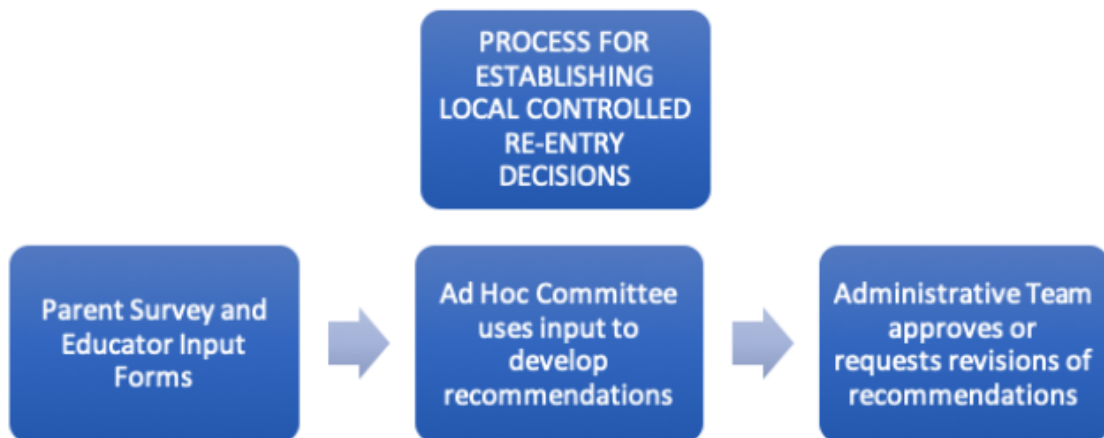
SAUQ’s Re-Entry Planning Framework: Priorities

<p>SAUQ’s Pre-Established Priorities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Provide social and emotional support to all students, specifically building connections with students and fostering students’ connections with each other ● Provide sound academic instruction through proficiency-based education
<p>Additional Priorities Given the COVID-19 Situation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ensure health and safety of students, staff, and community ● Ensure that we have a system in place to respond to an anticipated increase in student mental health ● Ensure equity for students

The re-entry planning document also outlined the process for re-entry decisions (see Figure 2), the timeline for the process of establishing locally-controlled—rather than state mandated—decisions, listed the ad hoc committees, and listed the team members’ roles and responsibilities.

Figure 2

Process for Establishing Locally Controlled Re-Entry Decisions



In the outline of the team roles and composition, the framework identified the members of the central office team and the full administrative team and outlined the responsibilities of each group. This comprehensive planning document was shared with district personnel on July 1, 2020 a day before it was shared with the broader community. In the letter introducing the planning process, Superintendent Jacoby identified the overarching goal, stating, “Though our primary goal remains to open the schools for in-person instruction, we are also looking at different scenarios given the changing nature of the COVID-19 pandemic situation.” In that same community letter, Superintendent Jacoby included the results of the survey administered to families at the end of the school year, asking about their return to school plans. The framework and associated documents clearly articulated the districts common priorities and goals.

“Get them here. Get them fed. Get them home safely” - Aligning Resources and District Structures. As described above, to achieve coordination and coherence throughout SAUQ, district leaders had to reorient the focus of the organization on common district priorities and expectations. Once the priorities and expectations were established, district and school leaders aligned resources to support them. Reorienting the district involves shifting the structures and resources in an organization to support systemic reform (Rorrer et al., 2008). During the COVID-19 pandemic, SAUQ focused its attention and resources on health and safety measures to decrease the likelihood of in-school transmission of the virus, address social-emotional needs of students and staff, in order to provide as much in-person learning to students as possible. In the first days of emergency remote learning, the focus was on getting resources into students’ hands and ensuring teachers had what they needed to provide instruction.

In the first weeks of emergency remote learning, central office administrators assumed different responsibilities and functions, including obtaining resources. SAUQ, like other districts, scrambled to ensure that they had the right resources in place to carry out emergency remote learning. Assistant Superintendent Sampson described how she organized resources that families could access. When the district made the initial shift to emergency remote learning, she created a centralized clearing house where teachers could organize learning materials. She explained:

I put together a whole framework for online instruction all linked to every grade level. They've got a folder. They've got a framework of what teachers need to prepare to put together, set that up for teachers and then that Monday—there was no school for anybody. So, our teachers came in, they prepped for two days. We got materials out—hard copy materials out to families that Wednesday, and then we were emergency learning virtual.

Another participant who was also a parent of a student in the system remembered their child coming home with adequate resources for emergency remote learning: “My kid came home with a binder full of stuff and with a schedule and ideas of what to do every day. And their math book came home, their iPad came home, everything.”

Teachers recalled their primary focus of their time and resources in the first weeks of emergency remote learning was on connecting with students. One teacher explained, “So after we started, my focus was actually getting in contact with the kids, making sure that they're responding somehow, whether it's phone calls or email, some type of response.” Another teacher remembered, “I focused mostly on just trying to get my kids on to Zoom.

And we did a lot of games and morning meetings sort of things and just getting everybody...back together.”

As the district’s focus shifted from emergency remote learning to preparations for reopening in the fall, Superintendent Jacoby reoriented the focus of the district by establishing, “Stay safe. Stay open.” as the mantra for the district and the broader community. These words effectively prioritized the district's work to include health, safety and wellness protocols at the heart of the work the district undertook. Reorienting the organization and establishing policy coherence necessary for implementing and sustaining change both require the alignment of organizational structures, redefining roles, and coordinating resources (Cobb et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2015; Forman et al., 2017; Honig, 2009; Coburn, 2003). During a pandemic, reorienting the organization meant that teachers and administrators focused on safety, health and wellness protocols as they thought about instructional practices.

Priorities for the new school year were different during the COVID-19 pandemic. When asked about the priorities for the start of the school year, one principal reported,

Just get them here. Get them here. Get them fed. Get them home safely...I guess getting here and getting settled is priority number one. Priority number two is figuring out what kids need and what staff need because it's going to be stressful when we start. And priority three is developing routines - brand new routines.

While health and safety were paramount, leaders also recognized the need to attend to the social-emotional learning needs of students and staff. Another principal repeated the concerns about health and safety and added:

Safety is the number one priority. I want everybody to be safe. I'm worried about morale... This is a big adjustment to their teaching. It's a big adjustment to life here at school—their ability to gather with colleagues, you know, all of that is just really impacted. So, I'm worried about the morale of staff. And I'm really worried about the impact on kids...about the social-emotional impact and academic impact on being gone so long.

To prepare for the reopening of schools, district leaders worked with the MDOE to secure personal protective equipment (PPE), and principals worked with central office leaders to acquire resources for students and additional personnel for their schools. A principal recalled:

The kids got what they need, for sure. The staff? Yes. I mean, you have materials; you have things - we've ordered a ton of stuff with the funding resources like consumables, glue sticks, markers. And so, from a material standpoint, the teachers have what they need. We've added one new teacher as well...we finally were able to get somebody on board to officially separate that class, which has been good.

Reorienting the district and realigning resources was seen when the district determined that from November until the winter break, Wednesdays would be workshop days. After the first quarter, SAUQ noted that between already scheduled workshop days, parent-teacher conferences, Veteran's Day, and Thanksgiving, there would be five Wednesdays when the normal school schedule would be interrupted. District leaders were

also hearing from association leaders and administrators that teachers, particularly at the elementary level, felt they needed more time and that the impact of the health and safety protocols was having a wearing effect on teachers. The district determined that they would hold teacher workshop days on Wednesdays in the district as a means of addressing the concerns of teachers and attending to cleaning protocols in buildings, as this time would also allow for there to be a deeper cleaning in the buildings and time for teachers to meet and work together. One principal described these Wednesdays and their impact on teachers:

I do think actually having those Wednesdays has helped morale quite a bit. I think teachers were—not having that time—were extremely overwhelmed and fearful and tired and it's just a tough year for everybody. I think them having that ability to have that time on Wednesday - to prepare, to decompress, to be unmasked, to breathe—has I think that's helped teachers to feel less stressed.

Another principal explained how the time was used to prepare and to collaborate with other colleagues, particularly the educational technicians that worked with their students and with whom collaboration rarely took place:

It has given the gift of time which we—no one has ever had—we have never had this much time to talk and meet and have ed techs—like everybody is here today! And you know I see and I hear ed techs talking with teachers about students and about interventions they can do. It just seems like we're all in sync. And I mean they're just—they're doing they're really knocking it out...I think, we're doing better with the four days than we would with five days.

In addition to the Wednesdays providing valuable time for collaboration, it also allowed teachers to plan lessons and give student feedback, which led to a greater sense of efficacy and competence. A teacher reported:

I feel like with only having four days instead of teaching five mediocre days, I really feel like I can give four good, solid days. I feel like that Wednesday really helps me. It lets me really plan, really dive deep, really think about where I'm going and a lot better planning than just on the fly or at home or at night or after school. I can really get a lot done on those Wednesdays.

Prioritizing the resource of time for teachers contributed to a perception among teachers that the district and building leaders recognized them as professionals who required time to attend to their craft. This was reflected in a teacher's remark:

Four days a week is an incredible model for elementary. How incredible it is to feel like a true professional and be able to just do deep, rich planning, studying your content, not feeling like you're flying by the seat of your pants? It has been absolutely amazing to feel like a professional and do my work at my workplace, not feeling like it's after school, rushing, home, or on the weekends.

Making the initial shift from five in-person days for students to four was supported by members of the School Board, in part because reports from administrators indicated that these workshop days were an important way to address staff morale and thus consistent with their work to address the health, safety and wellness of students and staff. When the superintendent proposed continuing four in-person days beyond January, he was able to advocate for this based on the results from family and staff surveys that

indicated support for this schedule. In addition, the district leaders recognized that while their original reopening plan imagined seamless pivots between full in-person, to hybrid, to full-distance, they realized that such changes would have been extraordinarily difficult for families to manage. Though the rationale could be articulated, the superintendent and other district leaders had to manage questions and concerns raised by external stakeholders, including parents and some individual members of the School Board.

Factors that Supported or Hindered District Coherence

District and building leaders undertook actions—including increasing centralization and coordination of decisions, articulating decision-making processes, and reorienting the district to direct resources and align policies—in an effort to achieve coherence across the district. While these actions established the conditions necessary for a coherent and coordinated implementation of the changes brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, there were a number of factors that impacted the effectiveness of these actions. These factors included the bridging and buffering roles between layers of the organization played by building and district leaders, clear and consistent communication, and the presence of relational trust in leaders and the organization.

“You're my person right now.” - Bridging and Buffering: Spanning the Layers

Like those of other bureaucracies, school districts' organizational structures comprise nested layers, with the leaders of the organization in the outermost layer—closest to external entities, including federal and state governments—and classroom teachers and school staff in the most central—or nested—layer. Within the same organization, the layers between central office and the schools can lead to breakdowns in communication and can challenge shared understanding related to a change. In addition,

the School Board, which has oversight and authority over the district, sits apart from the organization. The Superintendent acts as the bridging—and sometimes buffering—agent between the Board and the district. Similarly, the unions or associations are made up of employees and yet the associations are entities that sit apart from the school district as an organization. The Superintendent and other central office leaders have the responsibility to interact with and respond to questions and address requests from these organizations, acting either as a bridge that connects the entity to the district or as a buffer that mediates the effect of the outside entity on the district. While the effects of the nested structure are somewhat ameliorated by the relatively small size of the district and the proximity of district leaders to schools, the layered nature of the district nonetheless posed a challenge to coherence and coordination.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, district leaders sometimes perceived the MDOE as an external policy domain whose directives needed to be buffered or mitigated to ensure they were consistent with the district's established priorities. Historically, the district leaders in SAUQ were ambivalent about the role of the MDOE. Shortly before the shift to emergency remote learning, one district leader remembered hearing MDOE's preparation recommendations:

'You've got to have two weeks' worth of sub plans. And you've got to have this; you've got to have that; and plan for remote'—whatever they were saying at the time. And even then...it was sort of like, 'We don't always trust the DOE.' And to what extent do we need to do that? ...Are we local control? Do we get to figure that out, or do we have to do this?

In their work to reorient the school system and to mediate the effects of external entities and policy domains, central office leaders must evaluate the impact these external entities' demands could have on the district. When bridging, leaders communicate requirements, or build capacity of building-level leaders by providing resources (Honig, 2009; Rorrer et al., 2008). When navigating the guidance from the Maine CDC and the MDOE, superintendents turned to the leaders at the MDOE to understand the guidance and to get questions answered, thus acting as a bridge between the school district and the state agencies. This collaboration was seen in July when the Maine CDC and MDOE recommended that school districts plan for three opening scenarios: full in-person instruction, hybrid instruction, and fully remote or distance learning. SAUQ, whose leaders had been communicating with regional superintendents, had already begun this work. Nevertheless, they followed the recommendation and developed their school reopening plan with all three scenarios and consistent districtwide procedures outlined in it.

Superintendent Jacoby also reflected that, while it was challenging to manage the changing guidance and information coming from the state and federal governments, he found the leaders from the Department of Education to be valuable and helpful resources that allowed him to support his staff. He explained:

I'm very impressed with [them] too and what they've built for their team in terms of their ability to communicate. They don't always have the answers. I don't always expect them to have answers, but they don't make it up. They're honest. 'We don't know that. This is what's going on, and we'll let you know when we have further information.' So that's been great. I don't feel like I'm three steps

removed from things that are going on at the State. I'm right in it. And I'm glad.

It's a lot of work. It's a lot of work to stay on top of all that and stay up with all of that meeting schedule, but it's really paid off.

Because the leaders of SAUQ perceived the guidance from MDOE as helpful and relevant, leaders shared information coming from the Department and consistently made plans based on that guidance.

While such sharing reflects bridging actions relative to the relationship between the state and the school district, the superintendent also acts as a bridge between the district and the School Board, which has the responsibility to oversee and direct the district, to ask questions of the superintendent and to represent the voices of its constituents. At a School Board meeting the summer prior to reopening school, members of the School Board did not adopt the reopening plan, which was the product of the ad hoc committee meetings that had been occurring throughout the summer. An additional School Board meeting was scheduled for two days later. Superintendent Jacoby had anticipated the need for a second meeting, saying, “We'll give them the draft at least a week prior to the meeting where we discuss it and I wouldn't be surprised if it takes two meetings [to adopt it]. A lot of them have opinions.” Between the first meeting and the meeting two days later, Mr. Jacoby talked with members of the Board, answering their questions. He also arranged to have an epidemiologist report out for the first part of the meeting to address the members' concerns. When asked about his plan for the meeting, Mr. Jacoby explained his thinking:

I'm hoping we can get over that and keep the focus on the kids. So that's where I'm going to drive every time is that we need to keep the focus on the kids. And

we know really that these kids need to be in school. They do. And that if we can do it safely, they can be in school and if we can't do it safely, we'll do it virtually but they need to be in school.

The superintendent acted as a bridge between the district and the Board, conveying the need for the plan, emphasizing the importance of passing the plan, and answering questions. While the Board did not approve the plan on the first night of their meeting, they approved the plan two days later in a subsequent meeting.

Bridging occurs in a system when a leader at one level of the organization is linked to another level and uses that connection to communicate and build capacity by securing resources or information (Honig, 2009). Because SAUQ is a small district, district leaders frequently served as bridge leaders for different layers in the organization, linking to building principals and to building and district leadership teams of teachers, rather than bridging only to adjacent layers as often happens in larger districts. For instance, while Ms. Sampson was perceived as a bridge leader for principals, she was also able to act as a resource for teachers to address their questions. She talked about a time when she was able to meet with members of a leadership team to answer questions about why the district was asking schools to identify goals and objectives this year though the teachers felt that “surviving the year” should be enough of a goal. Ms. Sampson was able to provide the rationale for the work:

And that was such an important moment to talk through with your team leaders and just be really candid and be able to say, ‘We're not asking you to do this because it's a mandate or another thing to put on the plate. It's to really think about why we are here, what is it that we actually want to accomplish? Because we've

done all this work, but it's not just to get kids in school because we're childcare. We were doing it because we have a purpose for why we're getting them in school, and I think that was really good for them to hear from me.

Principals reported that they see Ms. Sampson as their primary bridge to central office and to resolving questions. One principal said:

[Ms. Sampson] was a wonderful resource. She was kind of a catch-all. I told her, 'Unfortunately for you, you're my person right now' by way of kind of access to the central office type level because I have a lot of concerns and things like that.

Another principal reported, "For most of my questions, usually my go-to is [Ms. Sampson.] Sometimes it might be [Ms. Jacoby] or it might be...our business manager."

Ms. Sampson recognized her role, as well:

I guess I've always sort of felt this is a part of my role, but it's really increased right now - It's to help support everybody. I need to support my superintendent wholly because he needs that. And I also need to support all of my building administrators. I need to support our special education director. So, they all need a level of support and it's pretty intense right now - being that support - and they recognize it, too.

By acting as bridge leaders, district leaders are able to span the layers of the district. Bridging allows leaders to communicate and interact directly with stakeholders in different layers. Such bridging—and buffering when necessary—supports coherence and coordination. Throughout the pandemic, in particular, district leaders in SAUQ assumed different responsibilities, which entailed increased bridging between layers of the district.

Because it is a smaller district, where the central office and administrative teams meet regularly and are accessible, principals and members of the central office team were able to act as bridges between central office and schools.

“We're going to communicate with one voice.” - Coherence Through Communication and Challenges in Common Understanding

Recognizing that multiple and often different messages from different leaders throughout the district would lead to confusion, inefficiencies, and frustration, district leaders centralized their procedures for communicating information. Superintendent Jacoby recalled:

One of the things that we decided kind of early on, I think, you know, I said what we don't want to do is to have mixed messages out there for folks. That's going to be important. So, we're going to communicate with one voice, and it's going to be coming out of [the Assistant Superintendent's] office or my office.

The Assistant Superintendent also remembered the decision to centralize communication:

So, I became the district communication - so sort of the PR piece. I've actually got a document - I've kept everything I've sent out to all employees and it's about a 60-page document - with every email that I sent out. It was - at one point - 2 to three times per week that I would send out district-wide emails, keeping everybody up to date on what we were doing - even through the summer. We've never communicated this much.

Teachers recalled that the teachers' association got involved to ask that communication be streamlined. One teacher said, “The [association] got involved and said, ‘Whoa, we're

getting this. Can one person step up and do it?' And [Ms. Sampson] stepped up and that's where the big messages started coming from."

District messaging in emails and in other resources provided to staff and to members of the community, including the Reopening Plan, were very detailed and comprehensive. The intention of this clear communication plan was to be transparent and to ensure that teachers, staff, students, and parents knew where to get information and what was expected. Though the plans were complicated, the intention behind the district messaging was to ensure clarity and consistency in the implementation of plans. But despite the plans and communication, there was inconsistency in how these plans were implemented. Teachers observed that this was, in part because of the way that building leaders interpreted different plans. One teacher explained:

Historically, there is a breakdown at the administrative team level. I think our superintendent and [assistant superintendent] deliver a certain message to a larger group of building principals and expect or depend on them to deliver that information. And that's where the breakdown is in our district because every principal does things very differently.

Another teacher observed that each principal's leadership style affected how they interpreted the message relative to how it should be implemented in the building they led:

All the elementary principals have very different styles, so I think sometimes that creates a little bit of difficulty if you're talking to a teacher from another building where they have to do this, this and this, and you're like, 'Oh, really? I don't have to do that or that.'

These different interpretations and subsequent different implementations led to different expectations for teachers across the buildings. As teachers from different buildings shared their experiences, they recognized that the expectations were not uniform, which caused confusion and frustration. One teacher explained:

Every elementary principal seems to have a very different spin on what is coming down the pike...you know, teachers talk...We do a lot of grade level work together and you talk and you sit in the meeting and talk about something that you're doing, which really should be the same thing but it just really isn't.

Assistant Superintendent Sampson observed that because the issues under consideration were often complicated and the decisions happened quickly, administrators sometimes left meetings with different understandings of the decisions that had been agreed upon in the meeting. Administrators would also leave a meeting and have second thoughts about the decision. Ms. Sampson remembered:

It was a lot of information and we voted and everybody in that meeting voted for the plan. I went through...every person, they all agreed. And then, the superintendent and I get phone calls... And I think that's one of the really interesting dynamics that this might be something to dig into a little bit further: What's decided in a full admin team meeting versus what happens after when you get the ear of somebody in a private meeting?

Superintendent Jacoby observed the same tendency towards varying interpretations of decisions, observing, "I think we have to revisit the decision-making fairly frequently to make sure that we're all on the same page."

The process of revisiting decisions to ensure that stakeholders share a common understanding of the decision and how it is to be carried out ensures the reciprocal collaboration necessary for building coherence in the institution. During the pandemic, however, it was not always possible to take the time to return to the decision.

“Everybody had a different expectation.” - Changes in Plans and “Understanding Drift” as Challenges to Coherence

As reforms are adopted and implemented in a complex organization, like a school system, they are shaped by the circumstances of their implementation and by the way that those carrying them out understand them (Cuban, 1998). Starting with the abrupt shift to emergency remote learning, teachers and administrators worked to carry out instruction in an entirely different context.

District leaders used email to communicate regularly with the teachers and staff in the district. In the first weeks of emergency remote learning, they sent two to three emails each week, answering questions and outlining myriad details related to district operations taking place remotely. As the weeks progressed, the frequency of these communications decreased, though the messages continued to focus on district updates and responses to questions, as well as explanations of information coming from the MDOE.

In the spring when the district moved into emergency remote learning, the district leaders in SAUQ communicated their plans. In April, they presented the district’s Emergency Learning Plan to the School Board. The Emergency Learning Plan outlined the district’s systemic and instructional leadership work, and the expectations for learners and instructional staff. The plan was broken into three phases: the first weeks in emergency remote learning, the weeks before spring break, and from spring break until

the end of the school year. This plan reflected the evolving expectations about teaching new material. In the first days of the shift to emergency remote learning, the SAUQ administrative team recognized that not all students had internet access and not all teachers were able to equitably deliver instruction. With that in mind, they announced that the goal for instruction during emergency remote learning was to maintain education without introducing new learning. In an email message from district administration to school staff, they explained:

A reminder that we are not grading our students, we are not taking attendance, and we are not providing new instruction. Families are still adjusting to helping oversee their child's learning, and we want to ensure we are a support for them as opposed to the wave that buries them. The current goal and guidance is to *maintain learning through our continued learning plans.* In addition, we want to try to maintain contact with students and families as much as possible as stated in the previous section. This can certainly come in the form of **feedback** and support for students and families, but should not result in a grade.

In a subsequent email less than a week later following a priority notice from the MDOE that seemed to suggest schools should be providing new instruction, district leaders reiterated their expectation and clarified the district's position:

Special education and [free and appropriate public education] (FAPE) are not the primary reason we are holding off on new instruction. While we have one to one iPads across our district, not all students have internet access, creating a level of inequity. In addition, not all students have the same level of support at home in order to access their education, which goes well beyond special education.

Finally, we are being incredibly sensitive to families and their needs during this time. Parents and students have only had access to the continued learning materials that we've provided for a week now, and it takes time to adjust to new routines. Some households will struggle to develop a new routine, particularly with working parents at home trying to juggle it all.

These statements had the effect of clarifying what was expected, while also providing the rationale for the decision. By repeating the message—often using exactly the same language—district leaders emphasized the importance and focus of the work at that time. While the message and the rationale were clear, it was nevertheless challenging for teachers who were frustrated that the expectations changed. One teacher observed that, even prior to the expectations changing, teachers were doing different things:

I definitely saw [inconsistencies between teachers] in our building in terms of teachers having different expectations because...part of what we're doing is helping our parents and students navigate and sometimes we couldn't even figure out what somebody was thinking...Some people were like introducing brand new materials and just rocketing and some were giving them like the option to do it.

She went on to say that once the decision was made to allow new learning to take place and for that to be graded, that many students were disadvantaged because they believed the work was optional:

So then you saw this disparity because the kids you had who were the go-getters or the kids who were in a family situation where the parents were on them to do the optional learning, had been doing it for five weeks. And then there was a large group of kids that hadn't done any of it because it was optional.

Principals were the primary conduit through which the information about the change traveled. Each principal's interpretation was affected by what they understood the directions to be, by their ideologies, and by what they believed made sense for their building. Assistant superintendent explained how each principal's leadership approach affected how decisions that had been agreed upon were diffused to each building:

[Some] of our K-5 administrators would say, 'I'm a rule follower and I'm going to do what I'm told to do and I'm going to make sure that I'm implementing what I'm told to do.' And [some] of the others would... admit to not being a rule follower and being more likely to apologize after the fact, but doing what they know is right—not purposely, not following what we're asking them to do, but, you know, trying to adjust to what their group needs.

Different interpretations led to different implementations, leading to some confusion about what was really expected for all teachers and staff across schools.

In addition, there was also confusion about what implementation should entail. While district and building leaders in SAUQ worked to provide clear direction to staff through regular and detailed communications, teachers reported not knowing exactly what was expected. One teacher remembered trying to navigate the expectations:

The challenge I had personally was our interpretation of what was expected, so everybody had a different expectation. Like one teacher just said, 'Oh, I'm just going to give all these things for kids to do and they can pick and choose.'

Whereas my interpretation was to—as best as I could—continue to conduct class and assignments, and that's what was frustrating for me.

While teachers reported understanding the changing directions, they continued to be frustrated because they saw inconsistencies in how these changes were carried out—in their buildings and throughout the district.

Relational Trust and Organizational Trust

The COVID-19 pandemic led districts to adopt situational reforms—short-term changes enacted to address a crisis or critical need. SAUQ adopted a number of situational reforms, including different schedules for each of the grade level spans, food services equipped to provide meal pick-ups, distance learning programs for students who could not attend school on an in-person basis, revised attendance and grading procedures, newly-adopted social-emotional learning programs, and myriad other operational reforms. Each of these changes required significant planning and, for those involved in these reforms, trust in the leaders who crafted the plans and implementation. In the extreme circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic—as is the case in other systemic reforms—stakeholders in the organization experience a sense of perceived risk and vulnerability as they encounter the unfamiliarity of the reforms. The presence of relational trust reduces the sense of risk, enabling stakeholders to engage in the reforms (Rousseau, 1998; McAllister, 1995; Mayer et al., 1995; Bryk & Schneider, 2002). A leader's actions and dispositions are interpreted and associated with trustworthiness or a lack thereof.

In their relational trust framework, Bryk & Schneider (2002) theorized that relational trust between all stakeholders in a district is created as a result of daily social exchanges. And regardless of one's formal position in a school community, each person in the community maintains an understanding of their responsibilities in carrying out their

role and to others in the school community, referred to by the authors as “role obligations.” Through these social exchanges and interactions, individuals assess or discern the intentions of others based on different factors that contribute to trustworthiness including respect, personal regard for others (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), competence (Bryke & Schneider, 2002; Pirson & Mahotra, 2007; Handford & Leithwood, 2013; Hoppes & Holley, 2013; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015), benevolence (Mayer et al., 1995; Pirson & Mahotra, 2007; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015), openness or transparency, and consistency (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015; Handford & Leithwood, 2013; Hoppes & Holley, 2013). In my analysis, I focused on competence, respect, integrity, and benevolence, which is similar to personal regard for others (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). While their research focused on the relational trust between major adult role sets in a school—between teachers, parents, and building leaders—the same factors define relational trust between the subjects in my research—principals, teachers, and central office leaders. District leaders in SAUQ frequently interacted directly with teachers and staff who discerned the actions of the leaders as a reflection of their trustworthiness. Relational trust factored into participants’ sense of coherence and coordination of the district’s situational reforms during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“You will get action.” - Relational Trust: Competence. Teachers, staff, principals, and leaders navigate their school community, analyzing, interpreting, and discerning others’ intentions using social exchanges, previous experiences and others’ reputations to inform their analyses and discernments. One’s competence, their ability to carry out the responsibilities of their formal role, is an area of discernment and is a

necessary component of relational trust. Of all the factors that are attributed to school and district leaders, competence affected teachers' perceptions of leader trustworthiness more than any other factor (Pirson & Malhotra, 2006; Handford & Leithwood, 2013). The role obligation that is characterized by competence is the expectation that the leader will be able to effectively address the concern or answer the question. One teacher characterized Assistant Superintendent Sampson's competence,

If you take anything to [Theresa], you will get action. One hundred—I mean, I shouldn't say 100 percent of the time because I know that she apologized a couple times through this process just in general, because she just couldn't respond to every single person's email, so she was trying to maybe respond through the education association—But for me, for most things, she's very responsive or can push you in the right direction.

Another teacher added to this teacher's assessment of the assistant superintendent, "But I will tell you that whenever I had a concern during this entire thing, starting from day one, she was all over it." Each of these teacher's experiences with the assistant superintendent resulted in their concern being addressed, reflecting her functional competence, which is to have the skills to address the more technical aspects of managing a complex organization (Handford & Leithwood, 2013). Functional competence is also demonstrated through a leader's problem-solving skills. A teacher described their principal's action-oriented approach to solving problems:

I feel like any time I have a question about things that are happening or if there's something new that comes down the pipe, he is always really great at being, 'Alright, here's what we have to do and here's why.' He's kind of like no nonsense

and he doesn't fluff it up and make it this big - It's like, 'OK, here's what we're doing and this is why we're doing it.'

In this case, the principal's decisiveness, coupled with his openness about what could be expected, conveyed competence and, thus, contributed to relational trust.

In addition to attending to the task dimensions of functional competence, leaders must also cultivate interpersonal competence and relational trust (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). When a teacher raised a question about a district decision related to reopening school, one principal recognized other teachers probably had the same question. The principal recalled:

I had a teacher reach out to me and say, 'What does this mean for us at Pine Tree Elementary?' And so, it made me realize that if she has that question, I bet just about every other teacher has the same one. And so, what I wrote was not a terribly...you know, two-thousand-word email, but just putting down what it would mean for staff. I mean, this is what it could look like here at Pine Tree Elementary. You know, kids coming in through the doors and not having a morning recess and going straight to their classrooms. That's brand new.

In this case the principal sent the email because he anticipated that others would have the same question, and by sending a clear explanation about how this change would affect teachers—even those who had not raised the concern—this leader demonstrated his care and concern for their staff. This care, coupled with the functional solution—the way that students would arrive at school and report to their classroom—was additional evidence of competence.

While stakeholders observe leaders' actions and dispositions to discern their

trustworthiness as individual leaders, a leader's role-specific actions on behalf of the district leads to attributions of trustworthiness extended to the organization. In his role as superintendent, Mr. Jacoby reflected on the kinds of concerns that the representatives from the school education association (SEA) raised in the first weeks of school:

I think their biggest concern in the first two weeks was PPE [personal protective equipment]...I got complaints from the SEA about the hand sanitizer dispenser and hall number two at River Bend Elementary is empty. And so, for a superintendent that's really not my level. I really solve big picture things. So that was a little hard to deal with. I realized that those kinds of complaints went to morale. So, I really did kind of dig into that more and talk more with the maintenance and custodial director and said... 'Don't get mad; don't get defensive. Let's work together to try to make this work and try to keep these people happy so they can do their jobs.'

In this instance, Mr. Jacoby recognized that by working with other leaders to attend to an aspect of daily operations—one to which he would not normally be asked to attend—he demonstrated both functional and interpersonal competencies of the organization.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, trust in a leader's competence was also perceived when a leader put into place expectations that were maintained and with which they followed through. One teacher talked about the principal's expectation that teachers follow a set schedule for Zoom meetings with students during emergency remote learning and that the principal sometimes joined these meetings. When asked what she thought about the expectations, she said:

I think it pushed some of the teachers who probably wouldn't have done that, you

know. And then some of us teachers that would have done it anyway. So, I think it kind of leveled the playing field a little bit because it kept us all on the same page so I wasn't too opposed to it.

Not all teachers, however, felt that expectations were clear. Moreover, some teachers were hesitant about additional expectations. Reflecting on the work plans that they submitted to administrators during emergency remote learning, one teacher explained:

I just want to know that if I'm going to put in all this work, because it was added work that we had to do, which I don't mind doing, I want comments. I want my principals to say, 'Hey, that sounds like a good idea.' or, 'Why did you do that? But if there's no feedback, if you get nothing, then I just feel like it's wasted, wasted time.

While some teachers expressed frustration that leaders did not have expectations or provide feedback, some leaders expressed feeling less competent because they could not address teachers' questions as promptly during the COVID-19 pandemic. One principal stated:

I'm having to ask - again, I feel it's a little less than it was - but I'm still having to ask [the assistant superintendent] more than I would like. You know, I really would prefer to very rarely have to ask a question.

Principals and other leaders throughout SAUQ reported feeling pressure to be able to answer questions as quickly as possible. The addition of the new procedures and expectations at the start of the 2020-2021 school year meant that people throughout the organization had questions, and it took time to get the questions answered, which caused

frustration echoed in a teacher's comment, "If I asked a question, they wouldn't have an answer right off and then they'd say, 'I'll go get an answer' but then it's days before you get the answer."

When a leader's competence was in question, teachers tended to rely more on colleagues and other bridge leaders for support. One teacher described her response when she did not feel that her principal was responsive or supportive. "We were just kind of like on our own and we relied heavily on our teams."

A leader's competence is a necessary component of relational trust. Leaders were perceived as competent when they were responsive to questions and concerns, solved problems, and set clear expectations. When a leader's competence is in question, relational trust is adversely affected.

"It really matters to him what we think about things." - Relational Trust:

Respect. "Relational trust is grounded in the social respect that comes from the kinds of social discourse that take place across the school community" (Bryk & Schneider, 2003, p. 41). Social respect is interpersonal in nature and involves real, genuine listening in order to understand others' experiences. Leaders, and by association the organization, demonstrate respect when their actions and words acknowledge the vital role that teachers and others in the district play (Handford & Leithwood, 2013). Such respectful exchanges throughout SAUQ were described by participants. The superintendent described the importance of genuinely listening to people throughout the system, particularly when he first began in his position:

So, I just go right in the school and plop myself down in the teachers' room and say 'What's going on? Tell me what's happening. What's right, what's wrong,

what would you see from your perspective?’ And I made a lot of contacts that way and got to know who people were and who the sort of movers and shakers were, and who would be willing to pitch in and help.

In this case, Mr. Jacoby, recognizing the asymmetrical relationship resulting from the hierarchical nature of their formal roles, went out of his way to meet with people where they work (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). When he listened to principals, teachers, and staff share their experiences, the superintendent acknowledges the vital role that all members of the district play in carrying out the mission of the district. In the context of the district, a superintendent’s respectful behaviors are a reflection of the organization; when a stakeholder associates respect with the leader, they are more likely to associate respect with the organization, as well (Handford & Leithwood, 2013).

Similarly, principals established relational trust in their building through regular meetings and interactions with teachers. One principal described his efforts to ground his leadership and his interactions with the teachers in his building by listening from the perspective of a teacher:

I see myself as a teacher first. And the one thing I kind of promised myself when I left the classroom is, as I said, I'm never going to forget what it was like being a classroom teacher...But I think thinking through it through that lens has been incredibly helpful.

Exercising empathy allows this principal to listen to the perspectives of the teachers in his school, and teachers report that this listening feels genuine. One teacher described her principal’s efforts to listen and gather their feedback:

I also think that he's good at making the rounds, maybe not with everybody, but

certainly with team leaders and maybe a few teachers when he knows something's coming up at an admin meeting just to sort of get the lay of the land, get the feel of the building...it really matters to him what we think about things.

Such informal exchanges allow for ease of communication and the flow of information throughout the school, particularly between the principal and the staff, which has been found to be related to teachers' perceptions of organizational effectiveness (Ellis et al., 2001 as cited in Handford & Leithwood, 2013).

While the social distancing requirement posed a challenge for informal social discourse in schools and throughout the district, leaders continued to meet with staff and teachers to listen to their perspectives. Superintendent Jacoby explained that, whenever possible, he still met in-person with colleagues, particularly when establishing new relationships:

And I really think there's a lot more power to sitting across the table with people and looking in their eyes and understanding what they're feeling and thinking and whatnot. It's much tougher—it's really difficult over email because you don't know what the person's tone is.

By prioritizing meeting in person during the pandemic in order to increase the likelihood of effective communication, Mr. Jacoby conveyed the respect for and value that he placed on the relationship with this staff member. He observed that when such in-person, face-to-face conversations were not possible during the COVID-19 pandemic, he made it a priority to engage with principals outside of the normally-scheduled administrative meetings:

I started making time to just call people or have a Zoom just to talk—not about

anything in particular, just like, ‘How's it going? How are you doing, you know? Anything special happening at the school?’ that kind of thing. So that seems to have helped quite a bit. Just trying to keep that human connection.

Respect is fundamental to interpersonal relational trust because when social exchanges are not respectful, the likelihood of subsequent interactions declines, particularly during a pandemic when social distancing requirements mean that there are fewer informal social interactions.

“We just continue to be honest and open with each other.” - Relational Trust: Personal Integrity. When discerning relational trust, a person’s perceived personal integrity is another important factor. One is perceived to have personal integrity when their actions reflect a moral and ethical core (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Mayer et al., 1995; Handford & Leithwood, 2013). Integrity is also perceived when a person's actions are consistent with their beliefs. In schools, a leader’s integrity is reflected in their work to balance meeting the needs of staff and students.

Relational trust also exists in the context of the organization—the school district. Organizational trust exists when the organization is seen as honest and open, and that it will honor commitments to all its stakeholders (Pirson & Malhotra, 2006).

Superintendent Jacoby reflected on his efforts to demonstrate respect and personal integrity in his interactions with a new colleague from the school education association (SEA) who questioned whether or not the district was acting fairly and carrying out agreements, “[They] can see that I'm trying to be supportive and trying to listen and trying to understand their points of view. So that's definitely helpful.” Superintendent Jacoby met with this stakeholder in person, as a demonstration of respect and in an effort

to establish trust. In a subsequent interview, he reflected that their relationship had improved, noting, “I think I've finally gotten to the point where they understand that I want what's best for the whole system and the teachers.” When asked how they reached this understanding, he explained that he emphasized their shared beliefs, saying:

I think just stating and restating that I was a teacher. I still consider myself to be a teacher—I may not have children anymore, but I'm first and foremost an educator and I have the best interest of the teachers at heart. So, if you need something, if you're fearful of something, if you think I can help, then I need to know what that is. Tell me how I can help. And understand that I look after the interest of the board. But you're all my employees and I want you to be successful. I want you to be safe. I want you to be happy to the extent possible, and I will do what I can to help to do that.

This statement reflected Mr. Jacoby’s moral and ethical core and his actions were consistent with his words, leading to greater relational trust. The work to build interpersonal trust with this colleague points to an important aspect of the factors that are associated with relational trust: they often overlap or evolve. In this case, the superintendent demonstrated respect in their exchanges and, over time, through these social exchanges, the colleague was able to discern his integrity as well as the integrity of the organization.

Finally, transparency in the values and ethics that guides one’s leadership practices reflects personal integrity (Mayer et al., 1995; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Handford & Leithwood, 2013). A principal explained their values and priorities as a school leader:

I'm really passionate about some things. I'm really passionate about kids being in school and social-emotional learning is school. It's not "Second Step." It's - well it is, but it's not - it's something separate. It is how the culture and atmosphere of your building is, how your staff interact with kids, parents and it's all tied together. And so, I value that and I admire so much what everyone here does every day.

This leader's openness about their values and priorities, which are a reflection of their moral-ethical purpose, is indicative of personal integrity. They went on to explain how that moral-ethical core—that all decisions must be made based on what is best for students—allows them to navigate difficult decisions with their staff by focusing on the needs of the students while attending to the concerns of the staff:

We just continue to be honest and open with each other. We don't have staff meetings, but I do get together with the teams and I get together with groups of people like ed techs and things like that. We talk about it. We think of ways to make things better. And we keep it positive and, at the end of the day, we're all talking about kids first and how we accommodate kids while not losing our minds in the process.

Integrity is perceived when there is consistency between a leaders' values, words, and actions, and this consistency lends itself to relational trust.

“People are taking care of each other more.” - Relational Trust: Benevolence & Personal Regard for Others. While a leader's integrity is a crucial factor in a stakeholder's perception of trustworthiness, for there to be organizational trust, stakeholders must see evidence that the organization's policies and procedures reflect

concern for the well-being of those in it—that it is a benevolent organization (Pirson & Mahotra, 2007; Mayer et al., 1995). When an organization acts in the best interest of its stakeholders, even when this action is unpopular or comes at a cost, it is demonstrating benevolence. During the COVID-19 pandemic, organizational benevolence was reflected in myriad newly-adopted practices that established health, safety and wellness protocols that focused on the needs of students while not ignoring the needs of the staff serving those students.

While perceived benevolence of the organization is a factor leading to organizational trust, interpersonally, the leader's integrity and their personal regard for others are necessary factors associated with relational trust. Personal regard for others is present when "individuals perceive that others care about them and are willing to extend themselves beyond what their role might formally require in any given situation" (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, p. 25). The COVID-19 pandemic placed significant stress on teachers and administrators, as they worked to chart a course of action in such an unfamiliar context and with frequently changing and evolving circumstances. In such stressful conditions, instances when colleagues went above and beyond expectations to support the functioning of the school or organization were worthy of note. Ms. Sampson relayed an instance where such personal regard for others was observed. She explained that, as a part of their administrative meeting norms, members of the team began every meeting with "commendations and concerns" to share the good things occurring in the different schools, as well as to identify issues to be addressed. She recalled that in their first administrative meeting following the county's "yellow" designation in the COVID-19 School Health Advisory System, that resulted in the district's shift to a hybrid model, one

principal commended their building and the staff for being “flexible and accommodating and positive.” Ms. Sampson continued, noting that this flexible, accommodating and positive experience was not shared throughout the district. She said, “And hearing that, I was sort of like, ‘That’s so great—wonderful!’ because that’s not really the sense that I’ve been getting here at central office, especially hearing from some other building administrators.” A school or a district where members are willing to go beyond what is expected of them reflects personal regard for others, which is associated with relational trust throughout the school.

When a leader and other members of a school community demonstrate genuine care for others and a willingness to help, particularly in high-stress situations, the sense of risk and vulnerability is reduced and collaboration and affiliation to the organization increases (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). A principal’s description of the collaborative culture in their school reflected personal regard demonstrated by staff during the COVID-19 pandemic:

I feel people are taking care of each other more. I know, even though we can't get together as a staff so much I feel I can see it happening. I can see it happening in other places. I see, I've had teachers come to me and say, 'I'm willing to do this so they can get that.' I've seen teachers say, you know, 'I'll take this duty, so that this person can go and take care of, you know, whatever it is that comes up.' I've seen teachers step up and say, 'I'll teach the library class. Don't worry about it. I got this.' Or I don't know, I'd have to create a list. I just, it feels like they're taking care of one another.

Another leader in the district observed staff members’ willingness to be flexible in the

changing circumstances. “The staff is cohesive enough where they're willing to give a little to somebody else, even though that means they might lose a little.” When people in a school community sense that others care about them, it contributes to a culture where people feel connected, and relational trust in and throughout the organization increases.

“Your darkest hour is your finest hour.” - Benefits of Relational Trust. When relational trust is present in a school or organization’s culture researchers have identified benefits, including improved student achievement. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the existence of relational trust was associated with broad buy-in of changes. This buy-in was evident in a principal’s comment:

And so with anything, it's give and take. It's balance. All in all, I think at the end of the day that you're never going to have 100% consensus on everything. And so you kind of got to make the decision and do it for the right reasons.

As more people in the organization adopt the changes, the perceived risk of doing something different and new is reduced and collaboration increases. One teacher explained:

This year has really kind of put us on a level playing field and we're both like, ‘Oh, my goodness! What do we do?’ And so that's really strengthened my relationship with the other teacher in my grade level because we have been forced...to work together a lot and figure this out and both just be like, ‘I don't know, what are we going to do? OK, here's how we're going to do this.’ And we're going to do this the best we can. And so for me personally, I've seen—it's been nice to just kind of have this feeling with the colleagues around me that, you know, this is really hard and there's no easy way around it, but we are just going

to do the best we can and work together to help each other do the best we can. In this comment, the teacher referred to doing the best they can three times. This comment was echoed by other teachers, as well, and reflects a culture of trust among members of this school community. When teachers believe that not only are they doing the best they can, but that others around them are also doing the best they can, it is a reflection of trust in one another and a sense that everyone is working towards the same goal.

Another teacher described a sense of collective responsibility for a common goal—maintaining the health, safety, and well-being of the school community. “I definitely think colleagues are doing their part...But with the mask-wearing and the ability for everybody to feel safe, I think for COVID we've come together in that way and in a way that we haven't before.” The members of a school district are bound together through interconnected mutual dependencies, each member depending on another to carry out their responsibilities. People in the organization had a visible reminder of their collective responsibility to one another’s health and safety, as seen in masking and hygiene procedures, and they could also see people throughout the district following the same procedures. By adhering to all of the health and safety procedures, the anxiety and vulnerability that people in schools experienced as they worried about contracting the virus were reduced.

In addition to collaborating to carry out health and safety measures, collaboration also occurred across schools in SAUQ. A teacher remarked on the recent collaboration with colleagues to plan for instruction, using a new and unfamiliar program.

I've been reaching out to other third grade teachers that are piloting the math

program like I am. And again, like we don't get to see each other, but we'll Zoom together on our Wednesdays and plan together. So I agree, I think it really has kind of put us all—we're all—all of our kids are lower and all of our kids need the same kind of things and let's just work together the best we can to help.

Collaboration during a time when in-person meetings had to be limited is especially challenging. Teachers' willingness to collaborate with other teachers with whom regular social exchanges are limited, particularly during the pandemic, is an indication that the sense of vulnerability and risk has been reduced and that trust exists between teachers.

Principals also reported greater collaboration, which is indicative of the presence of relational trust. One K-5 principal described their meetings:

We always reconnect. We have fun with one another and then we also work to try to make those difficult decisions. We don't always necessarily agree, I mean, in the end we make a decision, but it's not like we always first agree right away. Sometimes we don't always agree, but we usually will and we'll work it out to the point where we can come to a decision that we all are willing to move forward with.

Superintendent Jacoby also observed greater collaboration between the elementary principals, who had previously been less trusting of one another:

That group has kind of coalesced to be a much more solid, higher functioning group of principals than it was. So whereas before we had poker players, right? Sitting in the meeting, waiting to see who was going to give up one... 'Because I'm not losing my PE teacher this year!' They're much more collaborative... in terms of 'Let's work together on a budget, and then we'll make a joint proposal.'

So instead of a singleton asking for things, hoping they'll get to keep them...they're much more like, 'Okay, we're going to make our proposal jointly on the way we'd like things to go.'

Throughout the pandemic, the K-5 team of principals worked together and, as trust grew between the members of the team, members experienced a greater social affiliation with one another in the group, as seen in their willingness to submit a budget proposal as a group, leading to a willingness to put the needs of the organizational team—the K-5 team—ahead of school-based needs.

Finally, when relational trust is present, “the myriad social exchanges that make up daily life in a school community fuse into distinct social patterns that can generate organization-wide resources” (Bryk & Schneider, 2003, p. 42). Superintendent Jacoby expressed his belief that such collective trust can result in organization-wide resources, when he observed:

You can do a lot more than you think you can, and you can put up with and withstand a lot more than you think you can. And I think when we're all trying sometimes you discover that your darkest hour is your finest hour. And I think we found out this year that even though we've had this impossible set of circumstances imposed upon us, people have risen to the challenge. And you can do it; you can do a lot more than you think you can.

“Are we doing what's best for kids?” - When Relational Trust is Diminished.

Relational trust requires attention and can be fragile, particularly during periods of crisis and quickly evolving circumstances. Reflecting on her work with principals in the fall follow a period of decisions and changing guidance, the assistant superintendent observed

the fragility of relational trust in the administrative leadership team:

It's sort of like that whole relationship piece that I mentioned—it's like you build it and then you know you get focused on moving things forward, but you lose sight of that for a minute or you forget the impact of what one decision could do and that can crumble in an instant.

Personal regard for others leads to a stronger sense of a school community, characterized by people willing to extend themselves beyond expectations. Conversely, when personal regard for others or any of the other considerations are not discerned in the intentions of people in the organization, relational trust is diminished or absent. Leaders, particularly principals, play a vital role in establishing relational trust because they set the tone by consistently demonstrating respect and positive regard for others. When a leader's expressions of respect or positive regard are perceived as insincere, trust is inhibited. One teacher observed, “You get kind of this blanket email of, ‘You all are great.’ That really sort of actually makes me feel worse...Somehow, that feels very hollow.” Another teacher added:

I think as teachers, we all know that if we can find one special thing in every one of our students and we will say something to that child about, ‘Oh, I like the way you do this...’ so, it feels special to them, an administrator can easily do that to their teachers, but they don't. What we get is, ‘Thanks for all you do.’ I hate that term because it's like, ‘Well, what am I doing? You tell me what I'm doing and maybe I'll feel better from that.’ But.. I don't know...normally doesn't bother me, but this year it does. This year is like the morale is pretty low and we just need

something - a little something.

In the absence of relational trust, particularly when a leader's integrity and competence are questioned, there is greater resistance to change and a diminished willingness to engage in collective decision making or to buy-in to subsequent changes. This was observed in teachers' observations. One teacher noted:

It seems like the decisions that are being made are based on one person's belief and whoever our principal wants to listen to for that day. And I don't feel like there's a whole lot of deep thinking about how it's going to impact the students, especially the families and the teachers. And I worry more about the families than anything because things are constantly changing and no thought to what the families are going through.

Another teacher added, "I think sometimes the reason a decision gets made is because the loudest voice didn't like the other decision and that that's just like, come on, what are we doing? Are we doing what's best for kids?" As teachers question the rationale behind a decision, they are less inclined to accept and implement the decision.

In the absence of clear expectations, trust in the leader and in the larger system is also eroded. Without clear expectations for how teachers should manage their virtual students, teachers began to establish their own expectations and collaborate less with colleagues. One teacher reflected:

I used to—when we had our virtual days, I Zoomed with all my students. And I found out nobody else was. And I was like, 'Well, shoot! If nobody else was Zooming with their kids...' So...I have an open zoom link, so if kids need

help...but...when we get to the expectation piece, this is a problem.

Another teacher explained, “Within my department, we handle remote days four different ways.” A teacher concluded the discussion by noting:

Expectations are always nice, especially when it comes to [expectations in a virtual setting], because when you have some teachers that do one thing and other teachers that do another, it does create gossip among parents. It creates trouble amongst teams.

Relational trust is built through day-to-day social exchanges (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). The COVID-19 pandemic and the social distancing requirements changed how these day-to-day exchanges took place, but such exchanges still occurred and through these exchanges, a leader’s integrity, respect, benevolence, and competence were discerned. When any of these considerations were lacking or perceived to be absent, relational trust was diminished. When relational trust was absent or adversely affected, stakeholders questioned the leader’s decision-making motives and felt uncertain about decisions.

Summary

My research examined the actions that leaders in a complex system—a school district—undertook to achieve coordination and coherence throughout the district as they navigated new and changing circumstances resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. This study examined the actions, perceptions, and experiences of leaders and teachers in a small district in Maine.

My research suggests that, while district leaders acted to achieve coordination and

coherence by centralizing decisions and establishing a decision-making process, and reorienting the resources and policies to achieve coherence, there were factors that acted to facilitate or inhibit the effectiveness of these actions. I have organized the summary of my findings by examining how these factors affected the district's actions.

Relational trust was the most consequential factor. When it was present at high levels, members reported a common purpose and a willingness to go beyond what was expected to support colleagues or the school. Conversely, when relational trust was diminished, members of the organization experienced greater anxiety, frustration, and vulnerability. Consequently, members who trusted neither their leader nor the organization experienced isolation and a sense of being disconnected from the school or district.

When examining the role that relational trust played on centralization and decision making, a key finding was that when trust in the principal and district leaders was high, those affected by the decisions and changes—including principals, teachers and staff—were better able to accept decisions, including decisions that were made outside of their immediate school community. In these cases, the trust that members of the organization had in the leader allowed them to ask clarifying questions and raise concerns directly to the leader. In schools, the principals often acted as bridge leaders for teachers to the central office, as they conveyed teachers' concerns and questions and also were able to provide explanations reflecting the district's position or rationale for the decision. This two-way communication contributed to a sense of trust that teachers had in principals because in having their concerns conveyed, teachers believed their concerns were heard and taken seriously. The two-way communication also flowed from the

district office back to the building, reinforcing those centralized decisions. When trust in leaders and in the organization was present, generating the will to implement the change was improved, as this two-way communication across the layers of the organization contributed to the likelihood that stakeholders understood what the change entailed and accepted the rationale for the change.

In schools where trust in the principal was not as strong, the findings suggest that teachers were more likely to question both the leader's decisions and the leader's intention. Weak relational trust prior to the COVID-19 pandemic was found to remain weak throughout the pandemic. In these cases, the teachers discerned the leader's actions as a reflection of a lack of competence or integrity, which diminished their willingness to accept decisions and directions from the leader. This led to inconsistencies between teachers and a lower sense of coherence.

Interpersonal relational trust was found to be related to organizational trust. When members of the organization expressed trust in a leader, that trust was more likely to extend to the larger organization. As the district worked to reorient the organization to better align resources, trust played a role in how stakeholders perceived and interpreted these changes. While central office leaders were able to interact more regularly with principals, the social distancing requirements meant that they were less visible than prior to the pandemic. The absence of the day-to-day social exchanges between central office leaders and building-level teachers contributed to an initial sense of "us and them" articulated by some participants. As the year progressed, however, and more exchanges occurred - in person and virtually - and as there were fewer unknowns related to the virus and the operation of schools, the impact of the diminished social exchanges was greatly

reduced.

With each passing week, different questions arose associated with those normal events of a school year, including parent/teacher conferences, grading, and kindergarten screening. At the same time, the course of the COVID-19 pandemic and guidance from external policy domains affected school operations and the decisions affecting all aspects of school. The existence or absence of relational trust was found to be associated with how teachers understood the stream of changes in practice or procedure. In low-trust settings, the changes in direction were met with frustration, confusion, and exasperation and were sometimes attributed to what they perceived as the leader's low competence. In high-trust settings, changes in directions were met with less resistance. Questions and concerns were relayed to the principal or to the assistant superintendent because there was the perception that these questions would be heard and responded to. In these cases, these leaders acted as bridges between the layers of the district.

When schools suddenly were forced to close their doors and pivot to emergency remote learning within a week, district leaders found themselves confronting issues and answering questions that were entirely novel. As district and school leaders made decisions and adopted procedures, they had to navigate the complex organizational structure of a school district. A district's nested layers meant that as decisions and messages crossed each layer, there was an opportunity for interpretation, adaptation, and, in some cases, misconstruing.

Leaders acted to bridge the layers, aiding in clarifying messages and expectations, and ensuring consistency. And, in other cases, leaders acted to buffer the impact of a directive or a mandate. During the pandemic, the superintendent of SAUQ served as a

bridge and a buffer, depending on the origin of the demand. However, his bridging leadership was seen most prominently in his work with those entities on the outermost layers of the organization, including the School Board, the representatives of the association, and state agencies, including the Maine Department of Education. The assistant superintendent acted as a bridge leader, spanning the layers between central office and buildings, often working most closely with principals, but also working directly with teachers. In her role as a bridge leader, Ms. Sampson addressed issues, answered questions, and facilitated collaborative work, particularly with groups of principals. The support that bridge leaders provide runs from central office to the schools and throughout the district, and it also aids in the flow of information from schools and the district back to central office. Such efficient flow of information is associated with coherence in school districts (Chrispeels et al., 2008; Honig, 2009; Elmore, 2014).

Bridge leaders served a vital role in both centralizing decisions and in the decision-making process. Bridge leaders were able to cross the layers of the organization to meet with colleagues to answer questions and problem solve. During the pandemic, building leaders confronted new challenges continually and the bridge leader was able to act as a sounding board and thought partner, while also maintaining the decision-making authority of central office. Bridge leaders also acted to interpret and clarify decisions that were made. These leaders were considered highly accessible to principals, allowing the bridge leader to support the principal while also providing clarification and reinforcement of those decisions that had been made, ensuring greater consistency of implementation.

Finally, the consistency of the district's communication to members of the system was found to reinforce the decisions by providing a reliable and predictable avenue for

the flow of information. Centralized communication contributed to a sense of coherence because it was used to generate will.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

The purpose of this research was to describe and analyze how school and district leaders in a small school district collaborated to coordinate their responses to the myriad challenges that arose during the COVID-19 pandemic and to implement and sustain system-wide changes. This study examined the experiences, decisions, and actions of district and school leaders in the days leading up to the shift to emergency remote learning in the spring, 2020, and the subsequent planning and implementation of changes required to allow a school system to operate during a pandemic during the 2020-2021 school year. Using a grounded theory approach, this research identified actions that leaders took to achieve coordination and coherence in the district, including centralizing decisions, establishing a decision-making process, and reorienting the district's focus to meet the necessary health, safety and wellness protocols and to allocate resources to align with this focus. The study also examined the factors that contributed to or hindered coordination and coherence, including relational trust, communication, and the work of leaders to bridge the layers of the district. To understand the district's role in educational reform, this study examined how the district acted as an institutional actor in carrying out systemic reform (Rorrer et al., 2008). The research also examined the connections between central office and schools to elucidate the tension between centralized and decentralized controls and decision making (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010; Johnson et al., 2015). The role that relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015; Handford & Leithwood, 2013) played in the effective implementation of the changes necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic was also explored. This research

was situated in a small district in Maine, a state where educational decision-making is locally controlled.

The data for the study were collected from interviews with four administrators—two district-level and two building-level—and a group of teacher leaders. The district met the study criteria, as it enrolled more than 1,000 students, had a central office leadership structure that included an assistant superintendent or curriculum director, and had a superintendent with three years of tenure in the district. The building-level leaders were principals from two of the elementary schools in the district. The administrators and teacher leaders participated in three in-depth, semi-structured interviews that took place in summer, 2020, late fall, 2020, and winter, 2021. The participants provided thoughtful and insightful reflections on their experiences in the district during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to interviews, school board meetings were observed, and relevant documents were reviewed. These multiple sources of data lend validity to the discussion of the key findings presented below.

Discussion of Key Findings

Key findings from the study were identified by analyzing participants' reports of their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic relative to their role in the district to understand how the actions of leaders contributed to a sense of coherence and coordination during this period of significant educational upheaval. This study sought to answer the overarching question: how do district leaders achieve coordination and coherence in complicated systems comprising many schools, each with its own culture, in order to implement and sustain change. The findings address the research questions in the context of the actions taken by leaders to achieve coordination and coherence, and the

factors that affected coordination and coherence. The key findings also draw connections to the literature to deepen the interpretation of the findings in an effort to ground the findings in a larger body of research.

Actions that Enhance Coordination and Coherence

Reorienting the District. Reorienting the district involves refining structures and processes to align with the reform goals (Rorrer et al., 2008). The initial shift to emergency remote learning forced SAUQ to examine existing practices and resources, redirecting them to address needs of families and students. The closing of schools to in-person learning meant that schools' initial priorities shifted from education to addressing basic needs of students, families, and staff. In the first days following the closure of schools, districts, including SAUQ, redirected human and physical resources to redesign food service programs to accommodate food deliveries and community food pick-up locations. Teachers and administrators in SAUQ reported the challenge of finding and connecting with students, expressing growing concern for those students who could not be located. Kaul and her colleagues (2020) found that from April through August, building and district leaders across the United States reported similar experiences and also sought to prioritize addressing the basic needs of students, families and staff. Administrators in SAUQ recognized that, for many students, school was a stable place where they could get their basic, as well as their social and emotional, needs met. According to research by Hoffman and Miller (2020), in addition to addressing food insecurity, schools facilitate access and provide basic health care to students by administering medications, conducting screenings, administering vaccinations, and managing chronic health conditions, like asthma. These researchers found that schools

also provide a continuum of mental health services to children, including prevention and intervention. In the absence of access to these resources in the school building, districts were forced to try to create new structures and to realign resources to try to address these needs.

In addition to addressing students' basic needs, schools also directed resources to address technical needs necessary to allow emergency remote learning to take place. While students in SAUQ each had their own internet-enabled device, consistent access to the internet was less certain. The state provided hotspots that districts could distribute to families, but it took time to acquire and distribute these resources and, according to administrators in SAUQ, there were areas in the district where the hot spots were not effective in establishing connectivity. According to an April, 2020 Pew survey, 20% of parents with a student at home at this time reported that access to education was limited because of lack of reliable internet (Vogels et al., 2020). Another challenge for districts, including SAUQ, was consistent internet access for teachers from their homes, as well as deficits in the technical expertise necessary to carry out remote instruction.

Districts also adjusted expectations, reflecting their understanding that teachers and staff were also managing work, caring for their own children, caring for sick family members, and learning new ways of teaching in an online context (Kaul et al., 2020). Administrators in SAUQ acknowledged these limitations on human resources in the first days following the shift to emergency remote learning and modified expectations for staff, requiring them to hold office hours but not requiring them to deliver learning content.

In the early days of the pandemic, SAUQ reoriented the organization to attend to the basic needs of staff members, students, and families. As the initial shock of school closures abated and systems for addressing basic needs were established, the district again reoriented its focus back to an educational one. During this time, SAUQ leaders increased the frequency of their administrative team meetings, clarified decision-making procedures, and identified issues that would need to be addressed to plan for the return to school in the fall. The small size of the district's central office led district leaders to adopt different and sometimes overlapping responsibilities. Responding to the changing needs throughout the organization, the district's assistant superintendent assumed primary communication responsibilities, as well as addressing questions related to personnel matters, which were usually addressed by the human resources director. In addition, the superintendent engaged in more "hands-on" tasks, including directly addressing concerns about school operations, which had typically been handled by principals or the facilities director. By assuming these different roles and responsibilities, district leaders strengthen resource linkages between the district and the schools by providing material, technology, and human capital to schools (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010; Hubbard et al., 2020; Honig, 2009).

District leaders also acted to achieve coherence by clarifying the district's goals, aligning resources to meet these goals, and managing external entities that could distract or interfere with the focus on the goals. As SAUQ planned to reopen, the superintendent and members of the central office team adopted a mantra, "Stay safe. Stay open," that became the focus for the year. This motto captures the essence of the underlying health and safety protocols, mandated by the state, and adopted by the district, and served as the

rationale for subsequent decisions related to in-person learning and the plan for co-curricular sports. In addition to the “Stay safe. Stay open.” mantra, the administrative leadership in SAUQ—in collaboration with participants on the ad hoc committees—established the *Re-Entry Planning Framework: Priorities*. These reflected the district’s established priorities, as well as additional priorities necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. These priorities guided decisions about resource allocation and contributed to coherence (Honig & Hatch, 2004). By attending to what Johnson and her colleagues (2015) referred to as the organizational elements, including resources, systems, and structures, that operate in the relationship between central offices and their schools, districts are able to meet goals more consistently and are more likely to operate coherently. By reorienting the district’s systems, such as their leadership team meetings, and structures, including the roles and responsibilities that leaders assumed, and realigning resources, including physical and human resources, SAUQ was able to work more coherently toward realizing the district’s goals.

District Orientation Toward Centralization Before Pandemic; Centralization During Pandemic. In a study of five large urban districts, Johnson et al. (2015) analyzed the relationships between central offices and their schools. Johnson and her colleagues found that the relationship between a district’s central office and its schools was more important to achieving coherence than a district’s orientation toward centralization or decentralization, or school-based autonomy. Because Johnson et al.’s research (2015) examined large districts, with enrollments ranging from 70,000 to 160,000 students, some of the challenges to coherence they cited were not observed in SAUQ, a district serving fewer than 2,000 students. Nevertheless, even in the smaller district, the role of

centralized decision-making was less directly associated with coherence than the relationship between the district and schools. Prior to the pandemic, the relationship between central office and schools was characterized by collaboration and regular communication. The full administrative team met regularly to address logistical considerations, and individual building leaders met with the central office administrators to review school-based goals and progress toward these goals. These structures and established practices of collaborative problem solving allowed the members of the administrative team to meet frequently throughout the pandemic to ask questions and resolve issues. In their study of 120 principals in 19 states between April and August of 2020, Hubbard et al. (2020) found that during the COVID-19 pandemic, collaboration between the district and its schools was essential and district and building leaders “recognized which services were more effectively planned and delivered centrally and those that needed more nuanced and individualized attention and took advantage of both of these system strengths” (p. 9).

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the leaders in SAUQ maintained their centralized strategy of decision making and resource allocation. This centralized orientation was already established, as observed in centrally-directed academic programming that was consistent across grade levels throughout the system. During the pandemic, the district established a decision-making process for the administrative team that articulated the levels at which decisions were made. As the district began its planning for the fall, they invited groups of administrators and teachers to serve on ad hoc committees to examine some of the issues that arose during emergency remote learning in the spring and to propose procedures and expectations for the fall. These committees

weighed a range of issues, including identifying common technology platforms, establishing staff work expectations, examining grade-level performance indicators, assessment, attendance, and engagement criteria. These committees made recommendations for the superintendent to approve. Throughout the 2020-2021 school year, members of SAUQ's administrative team engaged in collaborative decision making. The frequency of the meetings of the full administrative team, composed of central office and school-based leaders, led to increased opportunities to discuss and collaborate on decisions that needed to be made. While the superintendent maintained decision-making authority, many decisions—including whether the K-5 schools should return to five days of in-person learning class time following the winter break—were made in consultation with and through reaching consensus between the building-level leaders. By incorporating the voices of school administrators as well as different stakeholders throughout the district, district leaders were able to generate will (Rorrer, 2008), individual buy-in and commitment (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010) for establishing consistent expectations across the district.

The Role of Networks and System Coherence. The pace, scope and novelty of decisions related to the COVID-19 pandemic drove building and district leaders to access networks of colleagues, in and out of the district, to collaborate and share experiences and ideas. Research examining leadership in extreme contexts identifies the importance of social resources, including social networks and boundary spanners, to connect networks to external resources (Hannah et al., 2009). Within SAUQ, principals from the K-5 schools began meeting weekly, in addition to the full-district administrative team meetings. Principals reported that this network—this team of colleagues—was

instrumental in answering questions, solving problems, and sharing experiences. District leaders observed the collaboration between these administrators, noting that they were a cohesive group that had really come together during this time.

District leaders also sought a network of colleagues for support and to gain insight into others' experiences. Whereas the K-5 principals in SAUQ gained insights and information, as well as a sense of group affiliation from one another, the superintendent reported accessing networks of other superintendents and leaders from Maine DOE for information and organizational resources, including technical guidance. The superintendent's description of his contact with these networks is consistent with bridging leadership, or boundary spanning, as he worked with the members of these external entities in order to bring information back into the district (Honig, 2006; Hannah et al., 2009).

Members in these networks collaborated to answer questions and share experiences and plans. Coburn and Russell (2008) used the term *tie span* as a dimension of the structure of social networks that crosses social, subgroup, and organizational boundaries in order to access information that is not readily accessible in a system. As members in networks shared ideas, experiences, and plans, the tendency to conform or adopt greater homogeneity increased. This was consistent with reports from the K-5 principals, who identified the need to have consistency across schools or to be "on the same page." Such a driver toward homogeneity or uniformity limited an individual's principal's ability to act independently of the group. The superintendent in SAUQ also noted the pressure to coordinate decision making across districts in the region, particularly related to the decision to close to in-person schooling in March, 2020.

Summarizing the Actions that Enhance Coordination and Coherence. The district's orientation toward centralization was not a strong determinant of a district achieving coordination or coherence. While SAUQ adopted strategies and procedures that originated centrally and were diffused out to the system, centralization was not synonymous with top-down decision making. Instead, the small size of the district allowed for increased collaboration between members of the administrative team. This team worked together to reach consensus on decisions, and in cases when consensus could not be reached, the superintendent made the final decision. Such collaborative decision making that incorporates the voices of other members of the organization is not consistent with the definition of centralization or radical decentralization (Johnson et al., 2015). While the district's authority over budgeting, staffing, and academic programming was consistent with a centralized orientation, centralization does not sufficiently describe how decisions were made during the pandemic. Throughout this period, when there was increased uncertainty, decision makers were driven toward consistency and uniformity across the district and throughout the region. Collaboration with colleagues within the system and in other districts to examine issues and reach agreement characterized the decision-making process during the pandemic. Consistency between schools and districts reduced risk for leaders who reported being overwhelmed by the volume, range, and scale of novel decisions (Brackett et al., 2020). This drive toward homogeneity and consistency imposed similar limitations on school decision-making autonomy as seen in centrally oriented districts.

Factors that Enhanced or Hindered Coordination and Coherence

Relational Trust. The COVID-19 pandemic placed extraordinary stress on school systems and the administrators, teachers, and staff working in them (Kurtz, 2020; Kaul, 2020; Hoffman & Miller, 2020). In addition, though schools in SAUQ provided in-person learning four days each week for the K-5 students, and every other day for students at the secondary level, the altered school schedule also imposed a significant disruption to students and families. Many decisions resulted in changes that affected stakeholders throughout the organization. According to Rorrer et al. (2008), one of the roles that a district, as an institutional actor, plays is to provide instructional leadership. In its role of instructional leadership, districts must generate the will to reform, which involves conveying the rationale for the change, and build the capacity to carry out the reform. During the crisis of the pandemic, there was no question that changes needed to be made. Thus, generating will in this situation involved persuading stakeholders, including teachers and members of the community, that any particular decision was the most appropriate given the changing circumstances. SAUQ used a collaborative problem-solving process in the ad hoc committees to produce the return to school plan. According to participants, this was a productive process where participants understood the changes and felt engaged in the final recommendations. In the fall, as these plans were carried out, the focus shifted to capacity building and ensuring that resources were in place to enable teachers and staff to carry out the reform.

Teachers' willingness or commitment to adopt the changes and their sense of capacity or efficacy—the knowledge and the skills to carry out the change—was related to their trust in the leader and the organization. While relational trust applies to the

organization, it begins with interpretations and discernments that an individual leader's actions or words are indicative of trustworthiness (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). During the COVID-19 pandemic when there was increased uncertainty, stakeholders looked to leaders' actions to assess a number of characteristics, including competence, which was discerned by the leader's ability to get the task done as expected. Leaders in SAUQ demonstrated functional competence in the planning and implementation of the health and safety measures and myriad new day-to-day school operations that allowed students and staff to attend school in-person as safely as possible. Interpersonal relational trust was established and strengthened by the day-to-day social exchanges. Participants described casual interactions—between colleagues, between principals and teachers, between building and district leaders, and between teachers and district leaders—that led to increased understanding of why a decision was made and how to carry out change. In cases where the leader's actions were perceived as respectful, sincere, competent, and reflective of concerns for others, participants expressed increased trust in the leader. This was evident in teachers' descriptions of their principal, in principals' descriptions of district leaders, and in principals' reports of parent feedback. Relational trust was also observed in the interactions between the members of the school board and the superintendent.

While relational trust has been associated with increased student achievement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015), it also serves as the “lubricant’ for most interactions in the organization” (Fukuyama, 1995, as cited in Handford & Leithwood, 2013). In instances where participants' reports reflected relational trust, participants also reported more collaboration with colleagues, a sense of a

common purpose, and increased efficacy. This is consistent with the research about outcomes associated with relational trust, which indicates that relational trust leads to broad diffusion of the reform across the system, as well as a commitment or will to carry out the reform. Relational trust is also associated with a sense of affiliation with the group, leading to a willingness of stakeholders to extend themselves beyond the expectations (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Coburn & Russell, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2019). Evidence of such affiliation and prosocial behavior was found in participants' reports of helping others and an increased sense of closeness with colleagues arising from a sense of sharing a common, challenging experience.

Conversely, in cases where a leader's competence, integrity, or genuine concern for students or teachers was in doubt, participants expressed frustration about the leader or about the policies and practices. Participants who expressed such frustrations were also more likely to report that they did not have confidence that the leaders were acting in the best interest of the staff or the students. Whereas participants in high-trust environments reported collaborating with colleagues and a willingness to extend themselves to support colleagues, those participants who experienced less trust were more likely to report working in isolation and arriving at their own interpretation of the expectation or change after talking to colleagues. Collaboration is associated with dense social networks, which facilitate the diffusion of information and capacity to carry out the reform across a system (Coburn & Russell, 2008). Relational trust is a vital precursor for a district to achieve coordination and coherence. It is also necessary to enable a leader and an organization to generate the will to reform and to build the capacity to carry out the reform. "The extent to which teachers are willing to authentically further their districts' goals and vision may

depend as much on the perceived trustworthiness and support of central office leaders as on the forms of control and coordination enacted by those leaders” (Leithwood, 2019, p. 533).

Bridge Leaders and Communication. Two other factors that contributed to district coordination and coherence were the effectiveness of bridge leadership and communication throughout the nested layers of the system. Moreover, there is a compounding effect, as the impact of bridge leadership and communication is directly affected by the presence or absence of relational trust. School districts, even smaller districts, are complex organizations made up of nested layers arranged hierarchically. These nested layers include classroom teachers in the deepest layer, with radiating layers including grade level or departments, principals and schools, district entities—including special education, English Language Learner programs, and food service—and central office at the outermost layer. Organizationally, the role responsibilities at each layer are defined, but the layers themselves act as a barrier to coordination and coherence, as they insulate one layer from the effects of the other. Nevertheless, each layer is dependent on and affected by the others and the system, as a whole (Weick, 1976).

This organizational structure of a district, which is situated in a larger state and federal organization, poses a challenge to coordination and coherence, as each layer acts as a barrier to communicating complex information and diffusing resources—human, social, and physical—across the system. In addition to insulating, each layer also acts as a filter where information could be interpreted, modified, or blocked. Reeves (2009) described a “telephone” effect, named after the children’s game, to describe the problem of communicating a change across the layers of a school system:

In the adult version of the game, the superintendent whispers to the deputy, who then whispers the same—or almost the same—story to the assistant superintendent. The story—or a pretty close variation of it—is repeated to principals who pass it along—or something fairly close—to the assistant principals, who, if they have time, will attempt to recall what they heard to department heads and grade-level leaders who may share it with faculty members. Months later, the superintendent is shocked to learn that the change initiative that was crystal clear when they first announced it is, at the classroom level, shrouded in mystery or wildly distorted. (p. 50)

This characterization reflects the structural and interpersonal challenge to communicating information—even simple information—across the layers of the system.

SAUQ established an articulated communication strategy, identifying the assistant superintendent as the “one voice” that would convey messages from the district office to the staff. In addition, the frequent administrative team meetings—made up of all building and district administrators—provided another avenue for ensuring consistent communication by essentially reducing the number of layers through which the message would pass. Nevertheless, participants reported that building-level leaders interpreted the same messages differently. The effect that an individual’s understanding of the change initiative has on implementation is well documented by established research (Glennan, 2004; Spillane, 2004; Cuban, 1998). During the pandemic, accurate messaging of changes was also affected by the dynamic nature of the pandemic, the complexity of the information, and the social distancing guidelines that limited the nature of social

exchanges. While each of these posed a real and substantial challenge to communication, the existence of relational trust acted as the first layer through which the message passed.

Trusting interpersonal relationships, based on prior social interactions, reduce risk and vulnerability among stakeholders and may also increase the frequency and depth of social exchanges, leading to an increased willingness in members to engage (Daly & Finnigan, 2012; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). During the pandemic, the sense of risk was heightened, as members throughout the district reported a decreased sense of efficacy and an increased sense of uncertainty, leading to anxiety. In such conditions, establishing the relational trust necessary to engage in new social exchanges necessary for establishing the social networks across which a message could be conveyed was especially challenging. As a result, bridge leaders became especially important. Bridge leaders, when perceived as trustworthy, were able to span layers, addressing questions and, in essence, providing stakeholders with another avenue to ask questions, thus reducing risk and vulnerability.

Even when trust was present, however, leaders were still required to consider how messages would be conveyed. An intervening problem arose when leaders in SAUQ observed that the volume, scale, and scope of the decisions sometimes resulted in members of the same administrative team leaving a meeting where a decision had been made, only to interpret it differently, change their mind about whether or not they could support the decision, or have questions that slowed the implementation. Once this problem was identified, district leaders worked to revisit decisions to check for understanding and to give people time to raise concerns or to talk about how their thinking may have changed. The superintendent reflected that, while this was the

intention, the volume of the decisions, and the immediacy of some of them, often did not allow time for this feedback loop. In these cases, participants reported seeking out bridge leaders to continue to process the decision or to ask clarifying questions. Such a feedback loop, facilitated by bridge leaders, enhanced coherence as information and decisions were clarified, allowing for greater consistency across the system.

When decisions were made but not consistently applied across schools in the same organization, this inconsistency was interpreted differently, depending on whether or not relational trust was present. Those participants in high-trust schools and parts of the organization, reported greater capacity to tolerate uncertainty, attributing the changes to the pandemic, whereas those in low-trust schools or parts of the organization were more likely to attribute the changes and uncertainty to a leader's perceived lack of competence.

Summarizing the Factors that Enhanced or Hindered Coordination and Coherence. While district SAUQ established procedures and structures during the COVID-19 pandemic to coordinate decision making and communicate decisions throughout the district, certain factors, particularly the presence or absence of relational trust, worked to enhance or hinder coordination and coherence. While the nested nature of districts' organizational structures posed a challenge to effectively conveying complex information through each of the layers of the organization, the existence or absence of relational trust throughout the organization affected these efforts to achieve a coherent and coordinated district response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This finding is consistent with Johnson and Chrispeels (2010) assertion that the relational and communication

linkages between the district's central office and schools are essential to the successful implementation of reforms.

Summary of Key Findings

Throughout this period of unprecedented educational disruption and transformation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, districts worked to manage the volume, scope, and scale of information and decisions. School district's organizational structures, characterized by nested, interrelated layers, arranged hierarchically and situated within a broader educational context of local, state and federal policy domains, posed a challenge to achieving coordination and coherence throughout the district during this critical period. This study found that while a district can adopt a centralized orientation to decision making and resource allocation, such an orientation alone does not ensure coordination and coherence across a system.

Relational trust in the organization and its leaders is a necessary feature of districts or schools where coordination and coherence was achieved. As the actions of the leader and the district are discerned to be trustworthy because they reflect competence, respect, integrity, and regard for the well-being of all in the organization, the sense of vulnerability and risk—particularly during this period of increased uncertainty—is reduced and stakeholders are better able to engage in new practices and tolerate uncertainty. Relational trust throughout the district also fosters social exchanges that, when characterized by respect and concern for the well-being of others, are experienced as productive and rewarding, thus reinforcing ongoing social exchanges. These exchanges and the resulting relational trust serve as the basis for collaborative problem solving, innovation, affiliation with the organization and the people in it, a common sense

of purpose, and increased efficacy. Coupled with effective communication and allocation of resources, districts are more likely to achieve coordination and coherence across a complex school system.

Recommendations for District and School Leaders

Achieving coherence in a complex system is a dynamic process between the district and its schools, requiring collaboration to manage the demands driving the district, balanced with the needs, goals, and strategies of each school (Honig & Hatch, 2004). Coherence is experienced by members of an organization as “being on the same page” or working together toward a common purpose. As an institutional actor, the district is made up of an organized collective linked by interrelated and interdependent roles, responsibilities, and relationships that promote reforms (Rorrer et al., 2008). Even in a small district, the organizational structure is still characterized by hierarchical layers and interdependent, loosely-coupled entities, including the schools and departments in the district.

As this research indicates, achieving and maintaining a sense of coherence requires an understanding of the district’s complex organizational structure in order to purposefully communicate and direct resources and information throughout the district. This was especially necessary throughout the COVID-19 pandemic when districts managed a series of changing and sometimes contradictory guidance as they shifted to emergency remote learning and a return to school in the fall. The changing guidance and, as the year wore on, the increasing public pressure to return to in-person learning full time, contributed to frequently changing directions from districts, leading to confusion, frustration, and anxiety. Relational trust acted as a both a lubricant between entities

within the system, and a bulwark against external demands. Throughout the pandemic, community members and school boards, in looking to district leaders, have discerned the actions and words of leaders as reflecting trustworthiness. Looking ahead, there are a number of potential recommendations for leaders interested in achieving coherence throughout the district, while being responsive to external demands. I draw from my analysis of the case study in the context of extant research to form my recommendations.

Recommendation #1: Attend to the Relational Trust Throughout the Organization

Given the importance of relational trust to the effective functioning of the system, leaders would benefit from a purposeful examination of those factors and actions that enhance relational trust. Participants cited numerous instances when small actions by a leader reflected the existence or absence of competence, integrity, respect, and genuine concern for the well-being of others. In cases where trustworthiness was perceived, participants also indicated an overall sense of satisfaction in their work—even during this challenging year. To that end, it is important for leaders to identify opportunities to improve and build relational trust in their district or school.

Leaders play a central role in establishing and maintaining relational trust through their actions as leaders, but leaders must first be aware of how relational trust is established and how it is diminished. Improving leaders' understanding of relational trust and its effect on carrying out initiatives would better situate them to attend to their actions such that they exhibit trustworthiness more consistently. As principals direct and support new teachers to build their capacity to be effective in their positions, so must district leaders purposefully support building level leaders by providing information and resources to examine how they can build relational trust throughout their schools. Trust is

characterized in part by a leaders' listening to stakeholders and addressing concerns. Leaders, particularly those in small schools and districts, can capitalize on the advantages of scale and engage with stakeholders in face-to-face interactions. These interactions provide an opportunity for the leader to have meaningful exchanges where they can understand the stakeholders' experiences. Participants identified a leader's visibility and engagement as an indicator that they were aware of and understood the stakeholders' experiences, particularly during the pandemic. While listening in small-group and individual exchanges allows a leader to demonstrate respect and concern, soliciting feedback from the stakeholders in the organization—the school or district—is another action that can provide evidence of trustworthiness. Such an action will provide evidence of trustworthiness only if the leader acts upon the feedback, incorporating it into their practice. In the absence of a perceptible response to the feedback, however, trust is eroded.

Leaders can also attend to trust by establishing professional learning networks focused on explicit and manageable goals. These learning networks collaborate around a common goal or purpose, simultaneously building capacity to meet the goal and establishing social networks. Participants stated that experiences collaborating with colleagues reduced stress and provided a sense of sharing in the challenges they were managing. Professional learning networks are also an effective vehicle to institute and reinforce common norms and behaviors, including a focus on student achievement and the value placed on collaboration. Increasing opportunities for social exchanges that focus on the organization's common purpose enhance relational trust.

Finally, leaders must be able to balance advancing the core mission of the district and school—meeting the needs of students in order to improve student achievement—with concern for teachers’ well-being. This tension was expressed by participants in the study who reported that some decisions that were clearly in the best interest of the students, including returning to school in the fall, caused stress and anxiety for teachers who expressed concern about increased risk of exposure to the virus. Principals that engendered trust were able to strike a balance by responding to the needs of teachers while also maintaining a clear and transparent commitment to their moral-ethical core of improving outcomes for students.

Recommendation #2: Drawing on the Benefits of Social Networks

The novelty, volume, and scope of many of the issues that arose during the pandemic led leaders to seek support from colleagues in and out of the district to build understanding and to engage in collaborative problem solving. Through these frequent collaborations, new social networks were established, and existing ones were strengthened. Participants reflected on the benefits of such collaborations, noting that they provided ideas as well as a community of colleagues engaged in a shared experience: leading during a global pandemic. Social networks often span organizational entities, like schools or the district, linking people and providing a forum for participants to exchange ideas and learn from each other. These networks reflect new connections that can be used to more efficiently convey information. In schools, teachers frequently organize professional learning networks around a new academic program or to examine students’ progress. Attending to the relational linkages that connect people in an organization while also building members’ capacity by providing technical assistance to

implement a change can be done through social and professional networks where the exchange of ideas is associated with improved student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2019; Coburn & Russell, 2008; Daly et al., 2009).

The networking that occurred between district superintendents during the COVID-19 pandemic was exceptional because, in a local-control state such as Maine, districts are accustomed to acting independently of other districts. During the pandemic, however, superintendents from regional districts worked together to coordinate individual districts' planning. This was seen in the initial discussions about whether and when districts closed in the spring, 2020; how districts were planning for and reopening schools; how districts were grading and reporting during the spring, 2020; and how to respond to growing calls to return to full-time in-person classes in the spring, 2021. Other leaders throughout the state, including principals and curriculum leaders, also formed networks and began to meet regularly throughout the pandemic. While these different leaders in Maine regularly met in county or regional groups prior to the pandemic, the frequency and purpose of the meetings during the pandemic were markedly different, as leaders collaborated and shared resources.

When the crisis of the pandemic abates, maintaining these networks in order to share resources and promote connections across districts throughout the state will continue to be important and could be expanded to include regionalizing some programs and services for students.

Recommendation #3: Maintaining an Equity Focus

There is little question that the pandemic has affected communities and students differently. Nationally and in Maine, there is evidence that the pandemic has

disproportionately affected communities of color, which have experienced higher rates of infection and death. In schools, students living low-income homes were more likely to have higher rates of truancy and reduced access to internet or devices, and less likely to be offered synchronous or live classes while engaging in remote learning (Herold, 2020; Hoffman & Miller, 2020). Participants' concerns about student learning and the adverse effects of the pandemic echoed throughout the study. Even prior to the pandemic, the achievement gap experienced by economically-disadvantaged students, English Language Learners, and students of color was a persistent problem facing districts throughout the United States. Based on the initial findings since the beginning of the pandemic, it is likely that, for the students in these subgroups, the gap has only grown wider. District leaders will need to target federally allocated resources to provide programming that supports the varied needs of those students most profoundly affected. Drawing upon the resources of the social networks, leaders are in a position to explore innovative ways to address and meet the needs of students by partnering with other districts to provide regional programming for students.

Recommendations for Further Research and Policy Implications

This study adds to the body of research related to the role of the district and its leaders in implementing and sustaining changes. By examining the roles played by leaders in the context of the district organization during the COVID-19 pandemic, this research provides distinctive insights about the factors that enhance and hinder achieving coherence in the implementation of reform. Research demonstrates that trust in the district and its leaders is a crucial component in successfully carrying out changes, particularly during a crisis characterized by increased and prolonged uncertainty, but

additional research is needed to better understand how trust in an individual leader extends to the organization.

One additional area of future research is the effect of the newly-strengthened social networks connecting educators across Maine on decision making and the development and delivery of programs. While the pandemic drove schools and districts to align and homogenize policies to present a “unified front” to the public, it is unclear to what extent some of these practices will endure beyond the pandemic. Though district leaders may experience reduced pressure to compare as many operational practices as they have throughout the pandemic, the collaboration and resource sharing that has occurred will likely continue as relational trust has been established throughout these networks. Such collaboration spanning districts and policy domains offers the promise of economies of scale enjoyed by large districts and rarely experienced by the small, locally controlled districts in Maine. In the event that such collaboration continues, examining how these linkages between districts affect policies and instruction practices may be an interesting area of future study.

Although relational trust is difficult to measure, a leader’s ability to cultivate relational trust, interpersonally and organizationally, is a skill that is consequential to their effectiveness as a leader. While the state has limited authority to dictate the specifics of a district’s performance evaluation and professional growth (PEPG) system, consideration should be given to how this quality can be incorporated into the leadership standards that are used to assess administrative leadership.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to describe and analyze how school and district leaders collaborated to coordinate their responses to the many challenges that arose during the COVID-19 pandemic amid the need to implement and sustain coherent system-wide changes. The findings indicated that a district's strong centralized orientation to decision making and resource allocation was not as strongly related to coherence as was the presence of relational trust in the district and its leader. Bryk and Schneider (2003) summarized the role of trust in schools, "Good schools depend heavily on cooperative endeavors. Relational trust is the connective tissue that binds individuals together to advance the education and welfare of students" (p. 44). The existence of trust enhanced communication and collaboration, which contributed to broad diffusions of knowledge across the system. When members of a school or district find the organization trustworthy, they are more likely to adopt a reform as the right thing to do. And in a high-trust district, the district, as an institutional actor, is able to provide instructional leadership, reorient the organization, establish policy coherence, and maintain an equity focus to implement and sustain a reform with greater coherence across the system.

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APPENDIX A

Semi-Structured Interviews Protocol #1

<u>All Participants</u>			
<p><i>Introductions</i></p> <p><i>Explanation of the structure of the interview</i></p> <p>This interview is focused on your leadership in SAU Q prior to and after the shift to emergency remote learning, necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. While schools have remained open for emergency remote learning, we will use the term “school closure” synonymously with emergency remote learning.</p> <p>In my research, I am particularly interested in how leaders carry out system-wide changes, including external mandates, navigating the layers of education—federal, state, regional, district, school, and classroom. The research will also examine how decisions are made within and throughout the district, and how resources are coordinated to carry out the change and establish coherence.</p>			
<u>Superintendent</u>	<u>Assistant Superintendent</u>	<u>Principals</u>	<u>Teacher Leader Focus Group</u>
Tell me about yourself and your background, including how you came to be the Superintendent in SAUQ.	Tell me about yourself and your background. How long have you worked in SAUQ? What was your path to this position?	Tell me about yourself and your background. How long have you been principal at ____ school.	Introduce yourself and tell me where you work, what you teach, and how long you have been in the district.
What do you take pride in as an administrator? In what ways do you share or promote these things?			Not Asked
What do you struggle with as an administrator and leader? How do you navigate these challenges?			Not Asked
Looking at the organizational structure of your central office, it appears your team includes the [list those in central office]. Are there other people you would include in a description of your CO team? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How do the members of this team work together? ● How do they work with the principals of the schools? 	Not Asked	Not Asked	

<u>Superintendent</u>	<u>Assistant Superintendent</u>	<u>Principals</u>	<u>Teacher Leader Focus Group</u>
How was the decision to close back in March made?	Describe the days leading up to and immediately following the decision to shift to emergency remote learning. How have your responsibilities changed?	Describe the days leading up to and immediately following the decision to shift to emergency remote learning (ERL). What did you focus on? What were your priorities?	Describe the days leading up to and immediately following the decision to shift to emergency remote learning (ERL). What did you focus on? What were your priorities?
In the initial days following the closure, how did the members of your leadership team—in CO and in buildings—work together to make decisions?		How did you and have you led your staff? Talk about your leadership style in this time—what about your leadership style worked and what was difficult?	In the first weeks in ERL, what were the biggest challenges? How did the challenges change (or stay the same) as the spring went on?
Not Asked		Who are some of the people you look to for support? Are these the same people who act as thought partners for you?	
Not Asked	Thinking about your role in the district, what were some of your responsibilities? How did these responsibilities compare with your responsibilities prior to the pandemic?	Thinking about your role in the district, what were some of your responsibilities? How did these responsibilities compare with your responsibilities prior to the pandemic?	What were some of the structures or practices that your principal put into place that you found particularly helpful? Why were they helpful? What were some of the structures or practices that district leaders put into place that you found particularly helpful? Why were they helpful?particularly helpful? Why were they helpful?

<u>Superintendent</u>	<u>Assistant Superintendent</u>	<u>Principals</u>	<u>Teacher Leader Focus Group</u>
<p>Addressed in previous question</p>	<p>How would you describe your relationship with other Central Office leaders? Principals? Teacher leaders? How have these relationships been affected by the shift to ERL?</p>	<p>How would you describe your relationship with Central Office leaders? Other principals? Teacher leaders? How have these relationships been affected by the shift to ERL?</p>	<p>How would you describe your relationship between the teaching staff in your school(s) and building-level administrators? Central Office leaders? How have these relationships been affected by the shift to ERL?</p>
<p>In these first weeks of emergency remote learning, what kinds of decisions did you leave to schools and what decisions were made at the district level? How was this similar to and different from how decisions were made before the shift to ERL?</p>		<p>In these first weeks of emergency remote learning, what kinds of decisions were left to schools and what decisions were made at the district level? How was this similar to and different from how decisions were made before the shift to ERL?</p>	<p>Looking back, do you wish that your building and district leaders had provided something different? If so, what?</p>
<p>Addressed in previous question</p>	<p>Given that your district has more than one school serving the same grade level students, how much continuity or sameness is expected across your schools? How has this been affected by the pandemic?</p>		<p>How different were the elementary schools in the district (including instructional strategies, use of curriculum resources, and assessment practices) <i>prior to</i> the shift to emergency remote learning? Did this change following the shift to emergency remote learning?</p>

<u>Superintendent</u>	<u>Assistant Superintendent</u>	<u>Principals</u>	<u>Teacher Leader Focus Group</u>
How have you and the other leaders in SAU Q worked with members of the community and the Board in your decision-making processes over the last month or two?		Not Asked	
Thinking about some of the more complicated decisions last spring or this summer. Who was involved in the decisions? How were these decisions made? How do you think it all worked out?	Talk about some of the more complicated decisions. Who was involved in these decisions? How were these decisions made? How do you think it all worked out?	Thinking about some of the more complicated decisions last spring or this summer. Who was involved in the decisions? How were these decisions made? How do you think it all worked out?	Thinking about some of the more complicated decisions last spring or this summer. Who was involved in the decisions? How were these decisions made? How do you think it all worked out?
What do you see as the 3 biggest priorities for the next 6 weeks? For the fall? How would you describe the work of your leadership team in realizing these priorities?			Not Asked
Is there anything else I haven't asked that you think is important for us to know about your district and your work as a leader?			

APPENDIX B

Semi-Structured Interview of Administrators Protocol #2

<u>Superintendent</u>	<u>Assistant Superintendent</u>	<u>Principal A</u>	<u>Principal B</u>
<p><i>Explanation of the structure of the interview</i></p> <p>The question I’m trying to answer is what are some of the things district leaders do to bridge the layers of our education system so that the district achieves coherence or alignment between all the stakeholders.</p> <p>The purpose of this second interview is to build on our last meeting, focusing on a few areas:</p> <p><i>The story of the start of the 2020-2021 school year: How is the plan you drafted going?</i></p> <p>How are all of the stakeholders at the different levels interacting and getting along?</p> <p><u>How are decisions made now? (top-down vs bottom-up)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>How much sameness is needed?</u> • <u>How much difference between schools/levels is acceptable?</u> 			
<p><i>Tell me about the start of school. How did the decisions that were made and the systems you put into place last spring prepare you and your staff? Lots of committees this summer worked to develop plans. How have those plans gone (so far)?</i></p>	<p><i>Tell me about the start of school. How did the decisions that were made and the systems you put into place last spring contribute to the opening of school and the first quarter of the year?</i></p>	<p><i>Tell me about the start of school.</i></p> <p><i>When we last talked, you identified three priorities: Safety of students & staff; Teacher morale; & concern about impact on students</i></p> <p><i>How have you addressed each of these priorities?</i></p>	<p><i>Tell me about the start of school.</i></p> <p><i>When we last talked, you identified three priorities: Get them here, fed, & home safely; Meeting needs of kids & staff; & new routines</i></p> <p><i>How have you addressed each of these priorities?</i></p>
<p><i>What has been the biggest success thus far this year? What contributed to this success?</i></p>			
<p>Thinking about the layers in any educational system in the US, how are those at those different layers interacting with each other and how are they influencing your work as a district leader?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Board • Your CO admin team • Larger admin team • Parents/community • Teachers’ Association • other 		<p>Not Asked</p>	<p>Not Asked</p>

<u>Superintendent</u>	<u>Assistant Superintendent</u>	<u>Principals</u>	<u>Teacher Leader Focus Group</u>
Not Asked	<p>In our last interview, you talked about coordinating communication and messaging from Central Office. Have you continued to do this? Compared with last spring, what is the same and what is different?</p>	<p>Last time we spoke, you talked about the pride you felt in your school and teachers' comfort coming to you with concerns. How are those relationships the same? How are they different?</p>	
<p><u>Describe the way the admin team has changed or stayed the same since the start of the pandemic.</u></p>		<p><u>Thinking about the K-5 admin meetings and the bigger admin meetings, how are they the same? How have they changed? To what extent to they serve the following purposes:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Connection</u> • <u>Decision making/information flow/getting questions answered</u> • <u>Communication—getting information out</u> 	
<p><u>How has your thinking about what should be consistent between schools changed and stayed the same?</u></p>		<p><u>In our last meeting, you talked about the tension between making sure that all K-5 schools were on the same page, while also recognizing that the schools were different. Describe an example of a decision that was driven at the school level and another decision that was more “top-down” in nature or driven by the will of the K-5 team.</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>How are they going?</u> • <u>How do the decisions that are made at your school affect decisions in other schools?</u> 	
<p><u>Impact of the pandemic—limited opportunities to meet in-person (forced to Zoom). Has this affected the way members of the team interact?</u></p>		<p>How have you managed the challenges of meeting with staff on Zoom? What is working? What is still challenging?</p>	Not Asked

<u>Superintendent</u>	<u>Assistant Superintendent</u>	<u>Principals</u>	<u>Teacher Leader Focus Group</u>
<p>In our first interview you described your preference for consensus-building, as opposed to top-down mandates. Given the demands of running a school district during a pandemic, how would you describe the role of consensus-building in your decision-making process?</p>	<p>In our first interview you talked about the importance of allowing processing to occur to build consensus. Is that still as important? Why or why not? Given the demands of leading a school district during a pandemic, how would you describe the role of consensus-building in your decision-making process?</p>	<p>In our first interview you talked about the work that was done on the work expectations and accountability committees. How is the work done by the committees serving everyone—across the schools—in the first 12 weeks of the year?</p>	<p>Clear expectations for teachers—you talked about some of the inconsistencies you observed between what you saw at your school and what was happening around the district. Have expectations become clearer & are they enforced? How’s it going? Is that work group (from this summer) still meeting?</p>
<p>Describe an example of a decision that was driven at the school level and another decision that was more “top-down” in nature. How are they going?</p>		<p>When you have a problem to figure out—covering classrooms when a teacher is found to be a close contact, for example—how did you figure that out? Who do you talk to?</p>	
<p>Have any decisions been met with resistance? How did Central Office admin address this resistance? How did building-level leaders address the resistance?</p>		<p>Have any decision been met with resistance? Where was this resistance felt? How was it addressed?</p>	
<p>Not Asked</p>		<p>Can you think of a decision or an aspect of the return to school plan that you didn’t agree with? How did you deal with that?</p>	<p>How has decision making or the flow of information changed or stayed the same? Who is your go-to person in CO?</p>
<p>Not Asked</p>	<p>Describe your role in directing resources to PD and staff support.</p>	<p>Not Asked</p>	<p>Not Asked</p>
<p>What do you see as the biggest challenges SAUQ will confront in the coming months?</p>		<p>What do you see as the biggest challenges your school will confront in the coming months? Are they the same as those facing SAUQ?</p>	

APPENDIX C

Semi-Structured Interview of Administrators Protocol #3

<u>Superintendent</u>	<u>Assistant Superintendent</u>	<u>Principal A</u>	<u>Principal B</u>
<p><i>Explanation of the structure of the interview</i></p> <p>Thanks to our conversations, a few themes have emerged:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Instructional leadership & the role of relational trust - District orientation: Continuum of Centralization to Decentralization - Coordinating & Coherence: Holding the District Together <p>The purpose of this last interview is to build on our first meetings and to tie it all up and look ahead.</p>			
<p>What is the story of the winter?</p> <p>What are your priorities at this moment?</p> <p>Going into the spring?</p>			
<p>This summer, teachers were key players on the committees that worked on parts of the reopening plan. What are some of the avenues for getting feedback from teachers related to the reopening plan and subsequent decisions that have been made?</p>		<p>Not Asked</p>	<p>Not Asked</p>
<p>Not Asked</p>	<p>Tell me about the most recent survey you conducted with your community, focusing on off-site learning and people’s sense of safety. What did you learn from those surveys? How has that affected your planning and work?</p>	<p>How have your meetings with your teachers (i.e., staff meetings) or your teacher leaders been structured?</p>	<p>How often do you meet with your teams/groups (i.e., PK2, 3-5, ed techs)? What is the purpose of those meetings?</p>

<u>Superintendent</u>	<u>Assistant Superintendent</u>	<u>Principals</u>	<u>Teacher Leader Focus Group</u>
<p>In our last conversation you talked about how the sense of camaraderie among the members of the Leadership Team has been affected, as has the sense of fellowship. What is your sense now?</p> <p>How would you characterize how your relationship with the teachers' association (and their leadership) has changed or stayed the same since last March?</p>	<p>In our last conversation you talked about that feeling some uncertainty and worry about communicating information and how it was interpreted. How is that now? Has it improved?</p>	<p>In our meeting in November, you talked about trying to balance your time in staff meetings and with our leadership team addressing problems. How have you balanced the “responsive services” kinds of work (management) with bigger picture priorities?</p>	<p>How are the K-5 schools balancing the need for consistency with doing what makes sense for each school? Have other issues come up that have pushed you and the K-5 principals to do things “the same”? If so, how did you bring it back to your staff?</p>
<p>You have described your leadership style as one grounded in collaboration and consensus-building. In our first two meetings, you reflected that the pace of decision making and the limitations of meeting online affected collaboration. Is that still the case?</p>	<p>When we last met, you talked about the challenge of moving from surviving to leading. How is that challenge now?</p>	<p>How have Wednesdays been used? Have they helped staff morale?</p>	
<p>How have you kept all of the leaders and schools on the same page? How do you decide when each school can do their own thing?</p> <p>How did you arrive at the decision to increase in-person time at the MS & HS?</p>	<p>Do you think there is a sense at your school that everyone is on the same page? Do you think that people feel that the district is “on the same page”?</p>		<p>Not Asked</p>

<u>Superintendent</u>	<u>Assistant Superintendent</u>	<u>Principals</u>	<u>Teacher Leader Focus Group</u>
How is that decision-making process like the original decision this summer to start the year in hybrid at MS and HS, but in-person for K-5?		Not Asked	Not Asked
Can you think of any practice or procedure that had not been consistent across the schools, particularly the elementary schools, that you and the Central Office team realized would have to be consistent?		How is the sense of consistency between school going? Improved? Do you feel like you are still reaching out to your principal colleagues and CO administrators as often to get answers?	Can you think of a decision that was made by the district that folks in your building struggled to accept? What did you do to support them or meet their needs?
How has your job/work and focus changed? How do you think these changes will affect how you lead in the future?		Prior to COVID, what was the focus of your school improvement plan? Where is that work now? Are there new/different goals for this year?	
How have you managed the many changes from the DOE, CDC, and now federal government?	Not Asked	Not Asked	Not Asked
Looking ahead to the summer and new year, what pandemic lessons have you learned and is there anything you will try to keep in place?			
What has this <i>unprecedented</i> year taught you about leading your district?		What has this <i>unprecedented</i> year taught you about leading your school?	

APPENDIX D

Semi-Structured Teacher Leader Focus Group Interview Protocols #2 and #3

Interview Protocol #2

Explanation of the structure of the interview

The question I'm trying to answer is what are some of the things district leaders do to bridge the layers of our education system so that the district achieves coherence or alignment between all the stakeholders.

Initially, I intended to study how some kind of a state or federally mandated policy was enacted by district leaders. And while the changes necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic aren't exactly a policy mandate, the pandemic has resulted in significant changes to SAUQ.

Framing Protocol #2

When we last met, a few themes emerged:

- Committee work this summer, that included teachers, was important and meaningful;
- Leaders (of the buildings) have different styles & approaches. Each leader's style drives how decisions (from CO) are not only interpreted, but how they are implemented;
 - The difference between between schools and teachers' experiences can be frustrating
- It was hard not knowing or having clear expectations because people did their own things;
 - Attempted to have expectations, but there was not always follow-through

The purpose of this second interview is to build on our last meeting, focusing on a few areas:

- The story of the start of the 2020-2021 school year: How are the plans going?
- How are decisions made now? (top-down vs bottom-up)
 - How are the voices of all stakeholders expressed and heard?
 - How much difference between schools/levels is acceptable?

Tell me about the start of school.

- What went well?
- What was something that was difficult?

SLIDES - Peardeck (formative feedback tool; drop the flag along the continuum; we will go through all 8 slides and then we'll talk about them)

Using the participants' feedback on slides, the following questions were posed on each slide:

- What do you notice?
- Please share why you placed your flag where you did?

What do you see as the biggest challenges SAUQ will confront in the coming months?

Interview Protocol #3

Explanation of the structure of the interview

A few themes have emerged from our conversations:

- Instructional leadership & the role of relational trust
- District orientation: Continuum of Centralization to Decentralization
- Coordinating & Coherence: Holding the District Together

The purpose of this last interview is to build on our first meetings and to tie it all up and look ahead.

Framing Protocol #3

When we last met, a few themes emerged:

- The start of the school year went a little better than expected as the anticipated SEL needs were not as intense, and there were relatively few issues with students' masking. For MS folks, felt that the smaller class sizes allowed for better relationships and for you to cover more material;
- Strong sense of "togetherness" and support with immediate colleagues (in hall or on team); that sense of connectedness and support from principal and central office was not as strong;
- Frustration and sense that teachers' voices are not as valued as they have been in the past and that their input is not sincerely sought;
- Anticipated challenges:
 - Remote teaching and keeping kids involved and engaged;
 - Concern that students are not ready for next year
 - Keeping staff healthy, safe, sane, and positive

What is the story of winter?

- What went well?
- What was something that was difficult?

SLIDES - Peardeck (formative feedback tool; drop the flag along the continuum; we will go through all 8 slides and then we'll talk about them)

Using the participants' feedback on slides, the following questions were posed on each slide:

- What do you notice?
- Please share why you placed your flag where you did?

Looking ahead to the summer and new year, what pandemic lessons have you learned and is there anything you will try to keep in place?

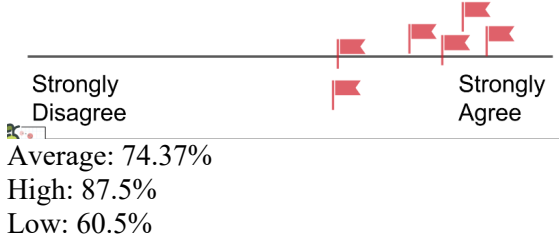
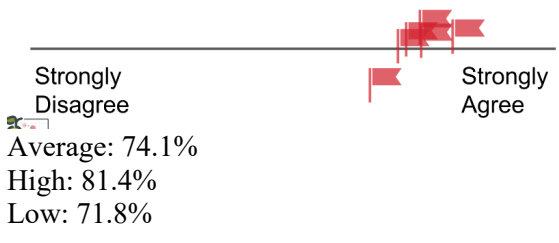
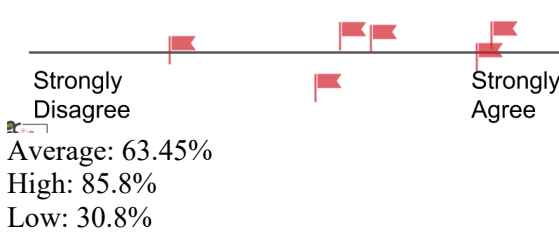
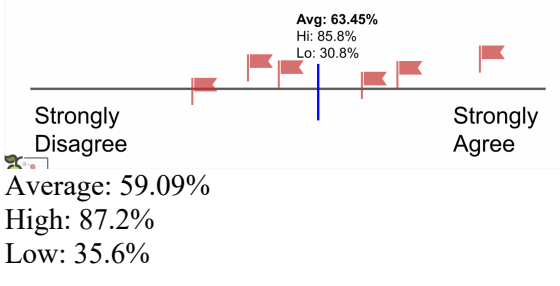
APPENDIX E

Slide Questions

Teacher Leader Focus Group Interview Responses

<p><u>Teacher Leader Focus Group Interview #2</u> <u>November of 2020</u></p>	<p><u>Teacher Leader Focus Group Interview #3</u> <u>January of 2021</u></p>
<p>There is a sense that we are all in this together.</p> <p>Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree</p> <p>Average: 74.25% High: 93.2% Low: 34.7%</p>	<p>There is a sense that we are all in this together.</p> <p>Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree</p> <p>Average: 70.31% High: 99.9% Low: 46.1%</p>
<p>I trust that the leaders in the district are acting in the best interest of teachers and students.</p> <p>Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree</p> <p>Average: 68.71% High: 87.2% Low: 49.37%</p>	<p>I trust that the leaders in the district are acting in good faith to balance the needs of teachers & students.</p> <p>Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree</p> <p>Average: 68.8% High: 98.5% Low: 31.8%</p>
<p>The expectations of what we are supposed to do are clear throughout the district.</p> <p>Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree</p> <p>Average: 56.52% High: 67.8% Low: 37.2%</p>	<p>The expectations of what we are supposed to do in our building are clear.</p> <p>Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree</p> <p>Average: 76.75% High: 99.9% Low: 36.5%</p>

<p><u>Teacher Leader Focus Group Interview</u> #2 <u>November, 2020</u></p>	<p><u>Teacher Leader Focus Group Interview</u> #3 <u>January, 2021</u></p>
<p>I believe that colleagues in my building are following the expectations.</p> <p>Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree</p> <p>Average: 78.63% High: 89.2% Low: 37.6%</p>	<p>I believe that colleagues in my building are following the expectations.</p> <p>Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree</p> <p>Average: 84.13% High: 98.8% Low: 65.6%</p>
<p>I believe that colleagues throughout the district are following the same expectations.</p> <p>Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree</p> <p>Average: 64.85% High: 93.2% Low: 34.7%</p>	<p>I believe that colleagues throughout the district are following the expectations for their school/grade level.</p> <p>Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree</p> <p>Average: 69.33% High: 81.9% Low: 58%</p>
<p>When decisions are made that affect me, I generally understand why the decision has been made and what need is being addressed by that decision.</p> <p>Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree</p> <p>Average: 53.88% High: 90% Low: 13.4%</p>	<p>When decisions are made that affect me, I generally understand why the decision has been made and what need is being addressed by that decision.</p> <p>Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree</p> <p>Average: 53.86% High: 75.3% Low: 23.8%</p>

<p><u>Teacher Leader Focus Group Interview</u> #2 <u>November of 2020</u></p>	<p><u>Teacher Leader Focus Group Interview</u> #3 <u>January of 2021</u></p>
<p>So far this year, building and district administrators are working effectively to get resources to teachers and students.</p>  <p>Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree</p> <p>Average: 74.37% High: 87.5% Low: 60.5%</p>	<p>Not included in Protocol #3</p>
<p>I have the skills and resources needed to produce meaningful student learning.</p>  <p>Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree</p> <p>Average: 74.1% High: 81.4% Low: 71.8%</p>	<p>Not included in Protocol #3</p>
<p>Teachers are able to convey needs or ask questions administrators respond.</p>  <p>Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree</p> <p>Average: 63.45% High: 85.8% Low: 30.8%</p>	<p>Teachers are able to convey needs or ask questions administrators respond.</p>  <p>Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree</p> <p>Average: 59.09% High: 87.2% Low: 35.6%</p> <p>Avg: 63.45% Hi: 85.8% Lo: 30.8%</p>

APPENDIX F

Analytic Codes Used

Name	Description	Files	References
Autonomy vs. Centrally-directed	Decision-making authority	1	2
Decision-making process	How are decisions made?	14	85
Differences between schools & levels	Differences between schools & grade spans within district	14	52
Different expectations between teachers	Inconsistent interpretation & implementation of decisions & expectations	3	13
Feedback loop	Once decisions are made, how do people express experience	10	26
Loose-Tight Leadership	Leaders provide some autonomy of decisions within a centralized framework	9	32
Top-down directives	Decisions made by leader(s) and directed to “lower” layers	9	18
Coordination & Coherence	Acts to work together; Including reorienting the organization and establishing policy coherence	0	0
Allocation of resources	Resources, including human, shifted to meet new priorities	7	16
Buffering & Bridging	Leaders connect or insulate one layer with/from the other	0	0
Collaboration across policy domain	Policy domains working together to address common problem	11	43
Managing influence of external organizations	Buffering impact of an external organization on district/school	8	34
Role of Bridge Leaders	Leader as resource connecting one layer with another	13	47
Role of network	Impact of affinity group on information sharing and decision making	9	20
Structure of the organization	Organizational structures that impact coherence	8	36

Name	Description	Files	References
Changing directions & expectations	Impact of changing information, directions, and expectations	14	110
Communication	Actions & organizational structures that direct and articulate information	2	8
As a means to stay connected	Communication and social exchanges necessary for trust	7	12
Clear messaging	Information is understood consistently across organization	8	24
Virtual communication	Impact of virtual social exchanges and communication	6	18
Communication with community	Communication between school and district and the community	11	27
Focus on students	Prioritizing needs of students in decision making and resource allocation	7	22
Reorienting the organization	Things the district leaders do to refine and align the organizational structures and processes	5	11
Role of the teachers' association	Role of external teacher association on decision making and communication	9	19
Us vs Them	Sense of belonging and exclusion	4	20
Hierarchical relationships between layers	Formal leadership structures in a district	10	87
Sense of a common purpose	Coherence and alignment of belief and action that is consistent across organization	10	33
Suspicion between policy domains	Lack of trust between layers and policy domains	10	39
Instructional Leadership & Relational Trust	Role of leader directing a learning organization and the importance of interpersonal relational trust	0	0
Building Capacity	Capacity to enact the collective will; build skills and knowledge to enact change	7	13
Buy-in	Shared belief in the importance of change	8	16
Generating Will	Agreement that this is what should be done; aligned with beliefs and values	11	20

Name	Description	Files	References
Resistance vs. Acceptance	Demonstrations of resistance to change	6	9
Role of a leader	Leader's role in enacting change and directing staff	1	5
Leading & Managing	Shifting the focus from managing and surviving to mission-directed leadership	5	15
Qualities of a leader	Actions and dispositions of a leader	8	36
Responding to needs of staff	Leaders listen and respond to needs of staff	12	70
Managing their stress	Actions of leaders to respond to and alleviate stress	10	24
Teacher Efficacy	Teachers' sense of effectiveness and competence	6	31
Teacher morale	Teachers' experience and feeling as they do their work	6	16
Sense of school community	Sense that those in a school are a united group working together	7	38
Role of Trust & Relationships	Impact of interpersonal relational trust on a leader's effectiveness	15	219
Discernment - Competence	Execution of someone's formal role responsibilities; able to achieve desired outcomes	15	99
Discernment - Integrity	Consistency between what people say and do	5	24
Discernment - Personal Regard	Expressing concern	7	23
Discernment - Respect	Genuine sense of listening to one another; genuine listening	7	14
Uniqueness of COVID	Situations and decisions occurring because of COVID	1	13
Health & safety concerns	Attending to real and perceived issues of safety and maintaining healthy schools	6	28
Initial response & planning	Decision making and planning in spring, 2020 at the start of ERL	10	65
Priorities for reopening school	Decision making priorities when planning on school reopening in Fall, 2020	3	4
Return to School in the Fall	Situations and issues arising before and in first days of school in fall, 2020	9	28

Name	Description	Files	References
Students' Experience	Impact of ERL and going to school during the pandemic	9	42
Teachers' experiences	Teachers' experiences and perceptions of teaching through the COVID-19 pandemic	0	0
Addressing Learning Loss	Challenge of catching students up while keeping up with existing instructional scope and sequence	10	31
Frustration about not being able to teach	Experience and response to expectation that no new learning be introduced in first weeks of ERL	4	10
Impact on teachers' own families	Impact of teaching during ERL and in pandemic on teachers' parenting and family life	6	9
New Normal	Adjusting to teaching using new routines, safety protocols, schedules, and expectations	2	5

Name	Description	Files	References
Initial Coding	Retired codes that have already been merged	0	0
Becoming a leader		3	9
Building a high-functioning team		3	12
Challenges as a leader		3	9
Change resulting from COVID		9	28
Changing Roles & Expectations		12	81
Characteristics of the Team		3	15
Collaboration		3	14
Common expectations		10	35
Communication between school & home		3	4
Comparing schools		5	13
Competence		3	12
Connecting with Students		6	24

Name	Description	Files	References
Connection to local community	Connection to community lends participant more credibility in community	4	9
Credibility & Competence		10	73
Decision making		5	28
Feedback loop		1	3
Differing messages between schools		3	9
Distributive Leadership		4	9
Equity concerns		3	7
Experience in the spring affects plans for the fall		6	15
Feelings of isolation		2	2
Getting resources to students		1	1
Leading controversy		6	15
Perceptions of leaders		1	15
Pressure to teach in impossible circumstances		3	17
Relearning how to teach		2	2
Role of Relationships		4	28
Setting & holding clear expectations		11	47
Structures that support team		6	11
Student disengagement		9	35
Teachers collaborate with teachers		2	9
Teachers' Changing Practices		5	21
Dependence on parents to support learning		1	3
Obstacles related to technology		1	2

Name	Description	Files	References
Tension between policy domains		2	2
Time needed for processing		1	1
Understanding of direction from another layer		3	21
Worry that they're not preparing kids		7	18
Worry that they're not preparing kids		7	18

APPENDIX G**Informed Consent Form****University of Southern Maine
CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH**

Project Title: *Leadership in the Time of COVID-19*

Principal Investigator(s):

Megan Welter, Principal Investigator

Anita Stewart-McCafferty, Associate Professor, Dissertation chair - USM

Introduction:

I am studying how leaders in a district work together to carry out system-wide changes, particularly those necessitated by the coronavirus pandemic.

Please read this form. You may also request that the form is read to you. You are encouraged to ask any questions that you may have about this study, now, during or after the project is complete. Your participation is voluntary.

Why is this study being done?

Districts are complex organizations, subject to external demands from federal and state policies, as well as by the district's local community. Because Maine is composed of school administrative units, many which span large geographic areas, leaders have to contend with demands from different communities within their district. These competing demands challenge leaders' capacity to coordinate responses that lead to enacted policies and practices within the same district. These challenges are especially apparent as districts navigate educational and organizational changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Who will be in this study?

Your SAU was chosen as a case study because it was large enough to include district leaders other than the superintendent and it also has multiple elementary schools in more than one community, both of which allow for the examination of how district leaders coordinate and manage varying demands throughout the system.

This study is a case study of the leaders and teachers in one district. The district was selected based on the following criteria:

- Superintendent has been in the position for three years (as of the 2019-2020 school year);
- At least one Assistant Superintendent or a Director of Curriculum in Central Office;
- SAUs with enrollments of more than 1,200 students; and
- SAUS serving more than one community or town.

Participants selected for interviews will include the Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent or Curriculum Director, two principals, and teachers in the participating principals' schools. Teachers will be interviewed in two focus groups, comprising 4-5 teachers, one group from each of the schools.

What will I be asked to do?

You will be asked to participate in 3 interviews over approximately 6 months. The first interview will take place in the summer, 2020, while the second will take place late in the fall, early winter, 2020. These first two interviews will take 45-60 minutes each. The third interview will take place in late winter/early spring, 2021 and will be based on the first two interviews. The third interview will take 30-45 minutes.

The interviews will be semi-structured, which means that while some of the questions will be scripted, your answers and observations will also direct subsequent questions. The initial interviews will be held through a video conferencing application (i.e., Zoom) and the interviews will be transcribed. The hope is that the second and third interviews will be able to be in-person, but this will be guided by health and safety recommendations from the district, as well as the Maine CDC. You may opt to participate in-person or remotely.

What are the possible risks of taking part in this study?

There are no reasonably foreseeable risks associated with participation. Your overall level of risk is minimal, and is comparable to everyday living. Many of the questions that will be asked will involve your experience of your work throughout the spring, 2020, when school buildings first closed and schooling shifted to emergency remote learning. Depending on your experiences throughout this time, including during the Governor's "stay at home" order, you could experience some discomfort related to thinking about this time.

If you experience discomfort, you will be invited to take a break from the interview and determine if you would like to continue at another time or discontinue altogether.

What are the possible benefits of taking part in this study?

A benefit of participation is the opportunity to reflect on experiences and consider how the larger school system is working.

The pandemic represents a singular event that has led to a common, transformative experience for schools at the same time. Understanding how leaders navigated these changes will contribute to our understanding of effective leadership, organizational change, and changing instructional practices.

What will it cost me?

Participants will incur no costs or expenses to participate in the study.

How will my privacy be protected?

Care will be given to ensure that your privacy is maintained. No information obtained in this study will identify an individual and the district will be described demographically and by its regional location. I will use pseudonyms for the district and subjects, referring to them in the transcript of the interviews by this pseudonym.

Member checks will also be used and you will be able to review the transcript of the interviews to ensure that it accurately reflects what you intended to convey.

The records of this study will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law.

Please note that regulatory agencies and the Institutional Review Board may review the research records.

Members of focus groups will be asked not to repeat what is discussed, but the researcher cannot ensure that they will respect other participants' privacy.

Results of this project will be shared with the dissertation committee, and will be presented during the dissertation defense.

The video and audio recordings, and transcripts will be maintained throughout the study and the subsequent writing of the dissertation. Following the completion of the dissertation and the closing of my USM account, these documents and recordings will be maintained in a private secure, cloud-based server, which is password protected, for 3 years following the completion of the dissertation.

I will maintain a separate file with information connecting each pseudonym to the subject's actual identity. This file will be stored separate from the other files, using a secured cloud-based server (e.g. Box).

What are my rights as a research participant?

As a research participant, your participation is voluntary. If you choose not to participate, it will not affect your current or future relations with the University.

You may skip or refuse to answer any question for any reason.

You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time, for any reason. If you choose to withdraw from the research there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.

If you choose not to participate there is no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects at the University of Southern Maine has approved the use of human subjects in this research. This approval is indicated by the IRB date-stamp on this consent form. The IRB is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of people involved in research.

Whom may I contact with questions?

The researcher and principal investigator conducting this study is Megan Welter. For questions or more information concerning this research you may contact her at 207-318-4602 and megan.welter@maine.edu. You may also contact Anita Stewart-McCafferty, Associate Professor and faculty advisor, at 207-780-5479 and anita.stewart@maine.edu.

If you choose to participate in this research study and believe you may have suffered a research related injury, please contact Anita Stewart-McCafferty, Associate Professor and faculty advisor, at 207-780-5479 and anita.stewart@maine.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may call the USM Office of Research Integrity and Outreach at (207) 780-4517 and/or email usmorio@maine.edu.

Will I receive a copy of this consent form?

You may print a copy of this consent form.

Participant's Statement

I understand the above description of this research and the risks and benefits associated with my participation as a research subject. I agree to take part in the research and do so voluntarily.

Participant's signature

Date

Printed name

Researcher's Statement

The participant named above had sufficient time to consider the information, had an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in this study.

Researcher's signature

Date

Printed name

IRB 20-05-1487
Approved by USM IRB
June 17, 2020