DISSERTATION

"SCHOOL REFORM IS LIKE CLEANING OUT YOUR GARAGE": A CASE STUDY OF ONE SCHOOL DISTRICT'S INFLUENCE ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Submitted by

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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE DISSERTATION PREPARED UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY BRENDA K. GIFFORD ENTITLED *"SCHOOL REFORM IS LIKE CLEANING OUT YOUR GARAGE": A CASE STUDY OF ONE SCHOOL DISTRICT'S INFLUENCE ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT* BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING, IN PART, REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY.

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

"SCHOOL REFORM IS LIKE CLEANING OUT YOUR GARAGE":
A CASE STUDY OF ONE SCHOOL DISTRICT'S INFLUENCE ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

The purpose of this qualitative constructivist case study is to explore one school district's organizational constructs, policies, and structures that influence student achievement especially for marginalized students. The focus is on the school district as the unit of analysis. Michael Fullan's (2004) conceptual framework of ten integrated components to realize large-scale systemic improvement in school districts provided a scaffold for the literature review and data analysis.

Topical questions included:

- How do the district's organizational constructs, policies, and structures provide support to schools?
- How do the theories about school improvement held by the school district leadership team impact the support to schools? 'What is tight' and 'what is loose'?
- How do the explicit theories of action of the district leadership team materialize into organizational constructs, policies, and structures that impact teaching and learning at the school and classroom level?

A small urban school district in Colorado was the focus of this case study. Four themes resulted from direct observations, document reviews, and responsive interviews with district administrators, principals, and teachers.

- There is a resounding coherence of a collective moral purpose and compelling conceptualization regarding the theory of action and 'what is tight' and 'what is loose' (DuFour, 2007).
- The alignment and interconnectedness of the organizational constructs and structures with the compelling conceptualization provides a framework of support to schools.
- Building capacity is a core function throughout the district.
- There is an emerging understanding of the 'defined autonomy' between the district expectations and each school's unique flexibility.

The thread that is woven throughout this dissertation is the interconnectivity between district structures and schools; between hopes and dreams and constructs; and between each one of us, our experiences and the children for whom we advocate. The four themes are a springboard for a call to action to public school advocates to be courageous, to be reflective, be nimble and responsive, create coherence and interconnectedness across school district systems, define autonomy, and be inclusive in all processes.

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Prologue

A dear friend asked me, after reading the first draft of my proposal, "Are you writing a dissertation or the next Meg Wheatley book?" He knows how much I love Meg Wheatley's thinking and writing style. His question was very perceptive as it described the dissonance that I feel as an educator, researcher, change agent, and storyteller. Dissertations are supposed to be scholarly and sound academic, part of my brain says. However, it will take a story to fully understand what is happening in school districts and specifically our schools with our most vulnerable, underachieving students and the staff that are teaching and leading them. The richness of the participants' lives and their stories should resonate with the reader. These stories add flavor and vitality to theories, frameworks, and research questions. I am seeking a balance between dueling writing styles so the reader understands what is currently known about effective school districts, the context in which they survive, the underlying theoretical frameworks, and my own epistemological lens. I want you to know these children; those that are responsible for their education; and to project the difficulty to scale-up single school success stories into system-wide exemplars. The thread that is woven throughout this dissertation is the interconnectedness of district structures and schools; between hopes and dreams and constructs; and between each one of us, our experiences and the children for whom we advocate. Finally, I hope that you are compelled to action based on the theories, stories, and obvious urgency to create coherent educational systems for our children.

Reflection is the beginning of reform

Mark Twain

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Our Children— the Human Context

> Estéban recited his well-rehearsed lines, his pride evident, smile bright. After all, he is the fisherman, the lead character. Looking on nervously, Esmeralda awaits her turn. She has only been in this school, actually, in this country for a few months. Her English, she frequently tells me in Spanish, is not as good as Karla's. Karla is her best friend in the trailer park. Their moms won't let them play at the park near their homes because the older boys that don't go to school any more hang out there and smoke. She nails her lines and turns to her teacher and flashes a brilliant smile.

It was such a privilege to be the elementary principal where these children go to school. La directora, they called me. It always made me smile; I love the sound of the word. At the same time, being 'la directora' carried a weight and a responsibility that was, at times, daunting. Don't get me wrong, being a principal anywhere is one of the most demanding jobs in our educational system. There is a connection and a synergy that is needed for all of the parts and pieces to come together. Understanding the students and who they are as learners, collectively and individually, leads to a realization of who needs to teach them. Estéban, Esmeralda, and Karla represent hundreds of children who came to school not only to learn to read and write and become mathematicians but to also get breakfast, lunch, warm snow boots, toothbrushes, and books to keep at home. I knew that we needed teachers who could effectively engage students in the content areas in two languages. We were developing bilingual and biliterate students. Collaboratively studying students' work and crafting plans for the next steps in instruction is critical

teacher work. And you also had to know the parent community. What did the parents need and what did they expect? What were their hopes for their children? Being cognizant of the reality that many parents were working two or three jobs didn't align with an expectation of extensive math support at home each night. I felt like an orchestra director. And some days I felt sure my title was "stagehand"!

For those who have chosen to lead schools with significant percentages of children who live in poverty, who move around from one rental to another, or whose first language is not English, all of the components of quality instruction, the staff, and the student and community engagement all has to come together. No more rules, guidelines, mandates, or oversight is needed ("No Child Left Behind Act of 2001," 2001). Rather, school district leaders and other supporters must comprehend the complexities of this work, the dynamic interplay of poverty and language acquisition to create systems that support and elevate students, and to roll up the proverbial sleeves to get done what is needed.

Throughout this case study, a common thread emerged. The importance of interconnectedness and coherence was striking. The thread was visible in my own researcher's perspective. The interconnectedness of the organizational constructs, structures, and policies within the case study and the themes in the literature review was evident. Nothing could stand alone---not instructional strategies, not educational theories, not dynamic leaders—it must all be connected to reach coherence across a system to provide support to those dedicated to increase student achievement. To that end, how a school district supports the schools where children like Estéban, Esmeralda, and Karla attend is the focus of this dissertation.

Researcher's Perspective and Beliefs

We all bring our background and experiences when reading about this work. Our lenses are influenced by how we were educated, our beliefs about the impact of poverty and language, and our own successes and frustrations to effectively educate diverse learners.

I, too, bring these influences to this research. The interconnectedness between my experiences, the literature review, and this case study is compelling. I hope to draw you, the reader, into this work and ask that you explicitly reflect upon your own experiences as you read and make connections with this story.

I wrote the following letter to my Director of School and principal colleagues as a tool to find my voice as a qualitative researcher and to express my profound passion for this work. I place this letter at the beginning of this writing to be transparent about who I am. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) remind us that we come to our research in the midst of living our lives and our stories. My personal story includes background and experiences that are closely connected to this research topic. It feels as if I have been studying how to support schools for my entire 26 year career and even before that as an adolescent volunteer. As a White female who has lived my life in a middle-class community of wealth, education, and accessibility, I constantly challenge myself to view the world through a more informed lens.

To my dear friends and colleagues,

I want to write this letter to you as an explanation about why I am so passionate about the work that we are doing in our schools and in our preK-12 feeder systems. I believe that we all bring our own stories and experiences to this work and this is my story. My intent in sharing it with you is that you know my background, my experiences, and the genesis of this intensity that I have about creating school districts that are focused on schools and the students' needs.

As a teenager, I traveled to Bolivia and then Paraguay to vaccinate children. I saw the most devastating poverty. I walked from house to house, some were no more than huts. Almost all had hard-packed dirt floors. Countless times, I approached a home to find the mother with a worn and hardly functional broom, sweeping the inside of her home. There was so little, but what was hers, was going to be clean. And then there were the children. Quiet, some shy, who ran away when they saw me and the long-haired blonde girl who was working with me. They had never seen anyone who looked like us. I am still amazed that these mothers would let 17 year old kids vaccinate their children. Who were we? Well, we were from America. Of course, they would allow us to vaccinate their children, they would say. And please stop by my sister's, just over the hill. She is a good woman and her children also need to be safe from these diseases that you talk about but we cannot see.

These many years later, I wonder, how was it that these women and I were so different? Was it really no more than where we were born? I believe that that is part of it.....but, although I never actually articulated this, I know at the core of my being that part of the difference was because I was an educated, free woman. I had choices, I had options. The future was mine for the taking. These women and their children did not have options; their lot in life was to survive. I can still picture these children, they never cried. They never cried. They knew pain in their belly that exceeded the needle prick in their arm.

I came back home and have never been the same. I wanted to change the fate of children like those that I met along those dirt roads living just outside of the cocoa fields. I never imagined that in this country, the same reality would exist for millions of children. The simple home may be a subsidized apartment, a trailer, or a bedroom off of the main room of a friend's house, a person who took them in when there was nowhere else to go. I have learned so much from these children and their mothers. It is always the mothers, my friends. They are humble, and they look at me with pleading eyes, like those that I saw in Paraguay. "Por favor, maestra, ayudanos." Or "Please help my daughter get into Head Start, I don't know what I will do if she isn't in this preschool."

The images of watching 4 year olds play with wooden blocks with a curiosity and intensity that almost cannot be contained are images that are seared in my mind. Their voices rise, they don't want anyone to come near and knock over their structures. They

have never had anything like these materials and are so engaged in their creations that they didn't want to go outside for recess. In my preschool classroom, you could almost see the brain synapses tripling. And the books, they just loved the books. Friends, it was so simple. Like the cliché, their little brains and hearts were like sponges. Absorbing every story, "Read Brown Bear, Brown Bear again!!!!" "I want Mrs. Wishy-Washy!"

Their mothers were so honest. They worked hard in some unfulfilling hourly job; some worked several jobs so that their children had clothes, shoes, and food on the table, gas in the car. The stories were very similar, little variation. Each woman had a dream and a few of them still held onto those dreams, holding that image very close to their hearts. Many of them had children when they themselves were just children. They were trying so hard. And oftentimes just didn't know what to do differently. So little by little we talked about reading to their children every night at bedtime. "Yes, they should be going to bed about 8PM otherwise they are too tired for school. You could get books from the library or I will send some of Christopher's favorite books home from my classroom," I coached them. Each mother told me, "I want my child to have a better life than this. How do I do that? I want them to do well in school but I struggled. Will he also have a hard time reading?" These moms knew what was ahead for their children if something didn't change. Countless times, sitting at the Formica covered kitchen table, we talked about how to change that future; one child at a time.

The hours spent with moms and kids changed into hours at Board meetings and faculty conversations after school. Weekend lesson plans were exchanged with formal evaluation write-ups. Material preparation became hundreds of hours writing grant applications to obtain millions. Friends, it was always about changing the fate of the children. And you know what? Working hand in hand with so many others, we made a difference. More children were able to come to preschool, they were thriving. Moms had a safe place to come to. The little library nestled in the new early childhood center. Babies and toddlers were coming to a cheerful setting while their mamas could go to school.

Then came this wonderful elementary school. Wow, that place gets in your blood. There was a staggering comparison between the families that I met in South America and those that lived in the trailer park where many of the children in my school lived. How is it that in this country, we can have children who are hungry? Mothers heating their home by turning on the gas stove? Six year olds with holes in their teeth from decay and lack of dental care? Again, working closely with others, we supported the families and created a place called school that was so much more than a building. Fathers, mothers, and neighbors came at night to the library to learn how to speak and read English. Little children came to school to be immersed in an environment of rich literature, cozy classrooms, and hallways filled with artwork and evidence of their accomplishments. It was the most exhausting work that I have ever engaged in.

These personal and professional experiences have profoundly influenced my research interest in school district structures that support schools. However, what those structures might be is only one part of the equation. How people are engaged in the work, the discussions, and the decisions are equally important.

For as long as I can remember, I have identified myself as a constructivist and strongly believe that knowledge is socially co-constructed. From *The Case for Constructivist Classrooms* (Brooks & Brooks, 1993) I discovered a paradigm that encompassed and aligned with my own beliefs about how we learn and come to know our world. Building upon, refining, or significantly revising our schema is at the heart of constructivism. I constantly engage others in dialogue about education, students, systems, as well as the best coffee shops in town or a new Chardonnay. Constructivism isn't confined to conversations about lofty educational conceptualization, from my perspective; it is how we come to understand anything at any given point in time. The conversations with colleagues, with mothers, and with students have a profound impact on me. My own thinking is strengthened and enriched by the dialogue and the banter. Children's insights and interpretations change my thinking. Tried and true instructional practices that are not having the desired impact with a group of students lead to more investigation and a reconstruction of what I know about instructional practices. Engaging in a variety of genres and text modifies my understanding of the world. This all ties together and impacts my deeply held beliefs about how understanding and comprehension evolves. Our understandings deepen when "the presence of new information prompts the emergence or enhancement of cognitive structures that enable us to rethink our prior ideas" (Brooks & Brooks, 1993, p. 15).

My successes and frustrations as a classroom teacher, elementary school principal, Director of Early Childhood, Executive Director of Student Services, and currently as a Director of Schools, provide a wide array of teacher, student and family-oriented perspectives about educational systems. As a Director of Schools (DOS), I currently support eight schools in a preK-12 feeder system to increase student achievement. In a feeder system, the elementary schools feed into a single middle school that feeds into a single high school creating the structure for vertical articulation. Each day is filled with opportunities to work with these eight school leaders to optimize the potential of our students and the staff. Each day, we strive to support and not hinder. However, working in central office for more than ten years in influential positions, I know the opportunities and the challenges to support student achievement at the school level. Integrating and infusing the school-based needs and the central responsibilities is a formidable task. It is extremely difficult to move an entire system to embrace culturally responsive instructional strategies, differentiation for English Language Learners, or to understand why you don't retain immigrant children with sporadic formal educational experiences (Hamayan & Freeman, 2006; Miramontes, Nadeau, & Commins, 1997).

However, despite this diverse and applicable background, I was challenged by the responsibility of being an elementary principal, la directora, of a school where 91% of the children lived in poverty and more than two-thirds were English Language Learners. Of course the needs and abilities of the children were significant, but the challenge was not limited to the children or their families. Rather, the frustration stemmed from the fragmented support from the central office. In predominantly middle class systems, it is hard to be a school that is so different. The expertise that is needed throughout the system

to instructionally, comprehensively, and philosophically understand what is needed for schools with diverse students cannot be overstated. However, for my well-intended and dedicated colleagues in the central office, the energy needed to keep large systems in tact can divert precious resources, attention, and focus. At times too numerous to count, my fellow principals and I would say, "Why don't *they* get it? This isn't what we need." Or "Why don't *they* ask *us*? *The district* isn't listening." I just kept thinking, "There must be a better way to support schools."

I have reflected upon and engaged many friends and colleagues in conversations about these challenges and I come back to the same two issues of *time* and *courage*. What if district leaders really knew this school? What would change? How could existing structures and *time* be utilized to engage in dialogue about what is needed *from the school perspective*? That is a different approach then getting principal input on district administrative ideas, plans, or direction. The latter process is about reaction. The former process is about informed collaboration and truly comprehending what is happening in a school with the most diverse students. If there were a deeper understanding, what would we all do differently? Would the school community, in partnership with the district administration, have the *courage* to act upon the hopes and dreams to realize all students' potential? Would we have the courage to act upon thoughtful plans to change school schedules or calendars? Would we have the courage to say to others, "Yes, this school is going to be different and here is why?" Would we be compelled to action?

It is about time and courage.

This translates into a set of beliefs and practices about engaging people in the messy, collaborative, and continuous work of school improvement and professional

learning. It is possible. But why is it so infrequent that school districts systemically support schools based on the schools' needs and goals?

Throughout the interviews for this research, I found myself in rich conversations with the participants. I wanted to engage in the role of coach and mentor. More than once I told myself, "You are not their Director of Schools (DOS), their coach, their mother, or their superintendent." These dichotomies of who we are, who we are not, and what we are *suppose* to be like in our school and researcher roles still plague me. Do these perceived roles stifle the possible authentic relationships that could be forged with students, parents or colleagues? I wonder.

So I bring this section about my researcher perspective to a close with the final passages of my letter to my dear friends and colleagues. These closing passages bridge my own personal commitment to the research and to the case study findings that will unfold.

Friends, at the core of my soul, I believe that if these conditions for children don't change, our country will not flourish. Yes, there are daunting economic crisis and two wars that we are battling across this globe....and every day teachers and principals are battling the war against illiteracy and apathy. It is the hardest work. New rules come out daily via email or memo. Newspaper articles tell of our failures on tests never designed to show what children have learned over time. Adults who can afford to pay a few extra dollars a month to support our schools say no and still demand the same level of service. It is a new definition of insanity.

So recently, I have shifted my focus again. To do this kind of work effectively, teachers and principals need systems and people that support and encourage them. I want to influence school districts as organizations to understand how their systems help, nurture, or hinder the work in the classroom. That is now my focus, friends. It is messy. It is political, and there is no consensus on what that looks like. At times I feel so driven to make it right. The processes are frustrating, exhilarating, and difficult to manage all at the same time. And it is what I love to do. It is absolutely my passion and my dream all wrapped into this work so that children have options.

Friends, thank you for the work that you do every day and that we do together to support our schools and our children. Thank you for your understanding of my passion and for the frustration that I feel. You teach me every day how to be a better leader and educator.

Brenda

The threads that are woven throughout this writing are the interconnectedness between district structures and schools; between hopes and dreams and constructs, and between each one of us, our experiences, and the children for whom we advocate. As the previous writing has described, I bring significant personal and professional background as well as passion to this discourse about school district support for schools. The broader issues of student achievement are outlined next. The subsequent literature review and this case study research are framed within a student achievement context. All of the contexts, perspectives, and ideating is about increasing student achievement; maximizing students' potential in the broadest terms.

Statement of the Problem

This research will start and end with an emphasis on improving the education of marginalized children by examining how one school district supports schools' improvement efforts. Woven throughout the academic language of literature reviews, epistemologies, and research methodologies are stories about children, families, and schools; children who live in poverty, children of color, and/or children whose first language is not English. There are also vignettes from the case study that illustrate one school district's urgency, their efforts, and the hopefulness of a group of dedicated educators.

I believe that a school district *can* effectively and purposefully support the improvement of student achievement. With that belief as a basic premise and motivator, this case study explores the research question about how one school district's organizational constructs, policies, and structures influence the achievement of students; especially students like Estéban, Esmeralda, and Karla. The school district is the unit of analysis (Yin, 2003) in this case study as opposed to an individual school. Until recently, little research has been conducted about the effectiveness of school districts with the emphasis on the district system. However new frameworks with strong inquiry and action components are emerging that hold promise to better understand how school districts can support the instructional renewal across a system and at a school level (Hightower, Knapp, Marsh, & McLaughlin, 2002). To appreciate the complexities of the specific school district at the heart of this case study, the educational context in Colorado where this school district is located, must be understood. Additionally, the significance of the problem is more than a systems issue. It is a human issue as too many of Colorado's students of color and those living in poverty are not achieving at the same level of success as their White, middle-income peers (Colorado Department of Education Unit of Research and Evaluation, 2008b, 2008c).

Michael Fullan's (Fullan, et al., 2004; 2006) conceptual framework for effective school district systems provides a scaffold for the literature review and data analysis in this case study. Fullan's framework, with the embedded research of others, is detailed in Chapter Two.

In Chapter Three the methodology for the case study is delineated starting with the epistemological constructivist paradigm. The issue and topical questions create a

starting point for the data gathering activities that included interviews with key participants, document review, and specific direct observations. The methodology had the flexibility to account for the emergence of themes and expanded guiding, topical questions.

The findings and the emerging themes of this study are described in rich detail in Chapter Four. The participants' voices are pervasive throughout the story of this school district. And lastly, the compelling ideas and the implications for further research are found in Chapter Five.

Before the national and state context is described, the research questions are outlined. Understanding the intent and focus of this case study of one school district provides a lens to view the national and state context as well as the urgency and significance of the issues.

Research Questions

The research questions in this case study are organized on the foundation of one primary research question and six topical questions (Stake, 1995) that provide necessary information to describe a case. The overarching primary research question is: What are the district organizational constructs, policies, and structures that influence student achievement especially for marginalized students?

The six topical questions (Stake, 1995) that provide necessary information to describe the case are:

Topical Question 1: How do these district organizational constructs, policies, and structures provide support to schools to influence student achievement with a focused lens on marginalized student populations?

Topical Question 2: How do the theories about school improvement held by the school district leadership team influence the support to schools?

- 'What is tight' and 'what is loose'?

Topical Question 3: How do the explicit theories of education and action of the district leadership team materialize into organizational constructs, policies, and structures that influence teaching and learning at the school and classroom level?

Topical Question 4: How are the central office roles and focus supportive of the schools' efforts?

- How are these central office roles and focus communicated and understood throughout the system?

Topical Question 5: How do teachers change their instructional practices?

- How were these changes in instructional practices a result of district-supported efforts?
- Is it through formal structures or informal networks?

Topical Question 6: How is time structured to support professional learning communities, common planning time, and job-embedded professional development?

The National and State Context

Why are the effectiveness of a school district system and the proficiency of every student of such deep concern? The complexity of that answer lies in the interconnectedness of our society and global economy. The Educational Testing Service published a chilling report *America's Perfect Storm: Three Forces Changing Our Nation's Future* (Kirsch, Braun, Yamamoto, & Sum, 2007) which delineates the

convergence of three forces that will have widespread impact on our society. This report highlights the belief that public schools are one of the few institutions that thread our communities and our country together. The first of three forces is that adolescents are leaving our schools with inconsistent proficiencies in literacy and math. Next, the changing economy is literally restructuring the workplace. Finally, the demographic trends show increased ethnic diversity and an aging population Educational systems are the linchpin to addressing all three forces (Kirsch, et al., 2007).

Whether one is reviewing national standardized assessment data, graduation rates of urban high schools, or the need for remedial services in universities, few would argue that at the end of the first decade of the 21st century, we have realized the dream of public education and maximizing the potential of all students (Rothman, 2007). While there are isolated successes at a school level, the majority of public school *systems* are in serious jeopardy due to the inconsistent delivery of a high quality education, too many failures, and systems that contribute to white flight out of neighborhoods into private, charter, or choice schools.

Disaggregated student achievement data on state-wide assessments, albeit a snapshot of Colorado schools' results, reveals *gaps* of 27-33% between White and Hispanic and Black students in reading and math (Colorado Department of Education Unit of Research and Evaluation, 2008b, 2008c). This disparity is not acceptable. To echo the findings of *America's Perfect Storm: Three Forces Changing Our Nation's Future* (Kirsch, et al., 2007) no other institution, public or private, has the collective responsibility to educate and advance the next generation of its people. The new Department of Education Secretary Arne Duncan linked education and the economy as

well when he spoke about the urgent need to "educate our way to a new economy" (Department of Education, 2009) when addressing the educational components of the 2009 economic stimulus package.

It is our moral imperative to understand the complexity of these issues and respond with complexity-savvy ideas to scale-up reform beyond a few isolated schools.

What is proficiency?

At the heart of these examples are the fundamental questions, "What is proficiency? What is achievement? What is student success?" Is it the attainment of a 'proficient' rating on a state assessment? Many state accountability legislations would say, yes, that is the definition of proficiency. Is proficiency a letter grade in a class? The variability in grading practices would suggest that isn't a constant measure. So what is proficiency? This elusive question permeates this research. How would anyone know if a school district's support to schools to increase student achievement was effective or not?

Ideally, a school district's organizational constructs, policies, and structures when interconnected to each other and to the schools have a positive influence on student achievement. Many federal, state, and local policies now define student achievement as proficient or advance scores on statewide standardized assessments. However, achievement is more than a test score. Achievement is the realization of every student's potential not only in the core subject areas but also in the arts, athletics, and becoming responsible members of our society. Achievement and success should be connected to what is needed to be successful in the real world (Littky & Grabelle, 2004). In order to understand how school districts advance this broader definition of student success with a focused lens on the achievement of marginalized students, it is important to understand

the organizational constructs, policies, and structures that are imposed and deliberately designed.

Throughout the interviews for this study, participants did not refer to their state assessment results. In fact, few participants discussed their student achievement results at all. Maybe those measures of proficiency seem too illusive. Instead, a member of the Superintendent's Cabinet outlined some of the early indicators to define their success before they would expect to see gains on reading, writing, or mathematics state assessments. Contrasting the focus on relationships and relevance, with academic rigor, he explains some of the early indicators of success:

> So, relationships and relevance looks more like getting into college. Looks more like coming to school when you weren't coming to school previously. Looks more like being engaged in activities that your school sponsors, like, internships and things like that. Looks more like reduced discipline problems. They look more like satisfaction with your current school, and that sort of thing.
>
> So what I mean by developmental trends is we're just really just starting to look at, "What are the early indicators that [the reinvention] might be taking hold?" and have no doubt that the last indicator will be student achievement. Although, that's where we are right now in terms of reorganizing our work as we feel like we've gotten a lot of stuff done, now we need to get focused on the structure (Stephen, District Administrator).

So what is the 'real' definition of proficiency? And how to school districts articulate their meaning of proficiency?

Historical Context

School districts exist in the nexus of national, state, and local contexts. How schools educate children like Estéban, Esmeralda, and Karla is heavily impacted by these multi-leveled contexts. Schools no longer have autonomy to educate children in the matter they see fit. Those schools and districts with diverse student populations that

access federal dollars substitute local flexibility for resources. One such context is the federal government's mandates on local school systems namely in the form of No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

There have been multiple reauthorizations of the 1965 ESEA with increasing mandates for content standards, annual standardized assessments in reading, mathematics, and science, and accountability for increasing student achievement (Cohen, 2002). In the last 15 years, there have been substantial efforts underway at all levels of the educational system to improve schools. For example, a significant body of research emerged regarding the components of effective schools (Allington & Cunningham, 1996; Davenport & Anderson, 2002) and identified effective strategies regarding students living in poverty and/or English Language Learners (Education Trust, 2002; Jerald, 2001; Miramontes, et al., 1997).

However, despite monumental efforts and literally billions of dollars in additional federal and state resources to schools across the country, the gap between diverse student populations and White middle class students has not closed (Kirsch, et al., 2007). Too often local school district improvement efforts and individual school initiatives were fragmented, assumed teachers had the skills to teach all students, and were based on decentralized strategies that placed more responsibilities on schools without proportionate resources (Williams, 2003). The prevailing question was and continues to be whether schools would be able to educate all children to the level of proficiency to be successful in the 21st century.

No Child Left Behind ups the ante even higher. NCLB has four major components of school improvement (1) increased accountability, (2) greater flexibility

and local control, (3) expanded parental options, and (4) an emphasis on proven teaching methods (US Department of Education, 2002). As a result, state, district, and local school improvement efforts have additional, more prescriptive parameters and mandates that may or may not address the local educational context.

The increased accountability of NCLB is undoubtedly the most significant aspect of the legislation. The federal and state expectations for student achievement are clear. All students will meet the NCLB performance targets or the school and district will be identified as not making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Failure to meet these targets has increasingly severe fiscal and governance sanctions for each subsequent year that the target is not met. Districts must adhere to the NCLB mandates even though they may be misaligned with local needs and context. Elmore (2004) and Fullan (2006) argue that external accountability measures like those in NCLB will not produce long-term, sustainable growth. Instead, educators must internalize these expectations and create collective internal accountability systems and practices.

The NCLB performance targets in reading, math, and science increase until 100% of students are expected to be proficient by the year 2014. The definition of proficiency is narrowly defined by each state and is tied to each statewide assessment. Nichols and Berliner (2007) articulate the concern about the NCLB requirement that all states establish an accountability system where individual students, groups of students, schools and district are annually evaluated using standardized tests. "Stakes are high because of the life-changing significance of the consequences attached to the test scores" (Nichols & Berliner, 2007, p. 7).

It is not enough that aggregate achievement increases. Student subgroups must also demonstrate proficiency. For example, if a school or district has 16 students in any of the subgroup categories (ethnicity, gender, socio-economic class, English language proficiency, and disability) that group of students must also demonstrate proficiency. The importance of the disaggregation of the student subgroups cannot be understated. Districts cannot ignore the achievement gap by publishing only the aggregated scores. The message is clear: All means all.

These examples demonstrate some of the tensions and power issues between the federal government and the local school district. Legislation is passed hundreds of miles away from Colorado's public schools. Yet, principals and teachers that know their students, their needs, and their abilities have less and less flexibility to design and implement educational services and programs. Superintendents and district office leaders are less able to support the schools' needs and communities' interests with locally designed solutions.

To further complicate this complex situation, the NCLB mandates are driving toward a narrow definition of student achievement; a proficiency measured by an annual standardized assessment without consideration for growth. As difficult as it is to reach the NCLB performance targets in reading, mathematics, and/or science, this narrow definition of achievement is inadequate to many (Rothman, 2007). These definitions are too narrow and they do not reflect growth over time. While complicated, it would be more authentic to look at students' longitudinal growth in literacy and math; a growth model that recognizes that students start at different places when they come to school in Kindergarten or when they enter the classroom from another school at another grade

level. A growth model would recognize the progress made in a year's time. Understanding that Karla is just learning English as her second language and learning each content area, a growth model would measure her growth and not rely a single score that shows she is not at the same level as her English speaking peers. Under President Obama and Department of Education Secretary Duncan, there are promises to address the proficiency model outlined in No Child Left Behind (Obama for America, 2008). In 2008, Colorado rolled out a growth model for the accreditation of Colorado schools....there is a renewed hope that individual student growth as well as growth of the student subgroups will be the prevailing measure of a school and a school district's efforts (Colorado Department of Education Unit of Research and Evaluation, 2008e). There is hope.

Fully-prepared students will need more than proficiency in these core content areas. *Results that Matter* (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2006) outlines a vision for 21st century learning that exceeds mastery of the core subject areas. Twenty-first century content includes global awareness, civic, financial, economic, and business literacy as well as health and wellness awareness. The think tank that crafted this work also advocates that 21st century learners must possess the abilities to continue to learn and include critical thinking, creativity and innovation skills to the repertoire of needed abilities for the next generation.

This expanded definition of student achievement resonates with parents. Many parents are unable to supplement their child's school experiences due to financial and employment constraints. As an elementary principal, I can still hear the impassioned, almost frantic pleas from parents to provide quality art, music, and sports activities after

school. One mother told me, "Directora, here at school.....it is the only place where Jaime can learn to paint and to play fútbol on grass. The other moms, we talk about the violin lessons and the homework help that our babies get. The parents, we love that there are all of these choices after school." She concludes by tearfully telling me, "What would we do without this school? Where would our children go?"

A dynamic situation exists for the leadership within school districts and schools. Schools are filled with students with varied needs, skills, and abilities. There is an ever-increasing level of desired proficiency for all students. However, the federal and state governments are applying additional strict requirements, mandates, and expectations based on a national or state model of school improvement. Funds are tied to compliance with the outcomes (assessment results) and the means (scientifically-based instructional strategies). How does a system realize the federal outcomes within the local context?

The current reality for school district leaders is they are implementing multiple policy changes simultaneously, some imposed and others locally designed. In order to realize a district culture of transformational renewal and change, many superintendents and district office personnel articulate a theory of education and theory of action that outlines how they will maneuver through and integrate these policy implementations. Fullan (1999) describes the need to have a strong, well-articulated theory of education that outlines pedagogical assumptions as well as a theory of change with implementation strategies that are contextually-based. The clarity about 'what is tight' and 'what is loose' is essential to move a system forward (DuFour, 2007). This language articulates what is non-negotiable and where flexibility exists. A school district's explicit or implicit theory of action can be predictive of the degree to which these principles are purposeful

and will inform the district and school practices. The interconnectedness and coherence of these efforts tie together all of the organizational constructs, polices, and structures. Across an educational system, it is critical that there is a thorough understanding and articulation of these processes to ensure that the intended outcomes are realized- increased student achievement for all students.

In Chapter One, the breadth of the student achievement issue has been outlined; my researcher's perspective and beliefs exposed; and the lives of Estéban, Esmeralda, and Karla have been introduced to provide a human context to this study. The literature that grounds researchers and educators is laid out in Chapter Two, to further the understanding of the complex challenge of school district support to schools.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

ABOUT SCHOOL DISTRICTS

School Districts: Do They Matter to Student Achievement?

It has just gotten dark and I hear children laughing and running up to the front door of the school. Walking behind the children are their parents, coming to the "big meeting." Smiling to myself because the meeting doesn't start for over an hour, I think, "Good thing I bought pizza."

As I welcome the family inside, the father asks me, "¿Directora, es la noche con el superintendente y los padrones del districto? Estamos aqui porque el maestro David dice que es importante para la escuela." ("Principal, is tonight the meeting with the superintendent and the bosses of the district? We are here because teacher David said that it was important for the school.") These parents are the first of over 100 parents who came to school one night when the Board of Education wanted to speak with parents who don't typically come to Board meetings.

That evening, Board members heard parents speak eloquently about their dreams for their children to go to college, their interest in programs at the junior high such as the ones they have at our school where their children are reading real books, writing stories about famous people, and learning to read and write in two languages. While her infant child was being held by the Board president, one mother asked if there was anything that these nice people could do to help get more money for children who were the first ones to go to college. She heard that some students got to go to college for free if they worked hard, had good grades, and were the first ones in their family to go to the university. She proudly told of the three jobs that she and her husband had but she was afraid that it would not be enough. Others told the guests that Latinos love their children and want them to do well in school. One father explained that he was here tonight to show that Mexicans care about their children being good students. He explained how parents were learning about school and to speak and read English better in this library two times a week.

This scenario is an example of one evening of dialogue between parents, a superintendent and seven Board of Education members who were learning about each others' unique perspectives and experiences. It was abundantly clear that they shared one important goal- the children's positive future. Board members and parents didn't discuss standardized test results or formal school improvement plans but they talked about amazing teachers, programs that are working, friendly school environments, and how parents at this school were teaching each other English and Spanish. This story is shared to ground the focus during the literature review on the real people behind these studies; parents, principals, teachers, Board members, district administrators, and community members. These divergent stakeholders and processes are important when constructing meaning about how school districts can support schools' improvement efforts. This story also reveals the threads that are woven throughout this work including the interconnectedness of the stakeholders and their hopes and dreams. Hopefully it also compels the reader to think about his/her own experiences and expectations about diverse families. How can diverse, marginalized families in the community engage in conversations about their children and the schools where they attend?

This vignette also illustrates how school district leaders, including Board of Education members, engage in dialogue about the broadest definition of student achievement. This study is not about the work at the classroom or school level but rather at the school district level including board members, superintendents, and district administrators. The focus of this study is on the school district as a unit of analysis.

In order to bridge experiences with the current literature, Michael Fullan's (Fullan, et al., 2004) conceptual framework for effective school districts will serve as a

scaffold upon which to build the literature review. The literature review has an emphasis on studies published since the 2002 passage of No Child Left Behind.

Fullan (2006; Fullan, et al., 2004) outlines ten integrated components to realize large-scale systemic improvement in school districts. This framework is utilized in Chapter Two to consider the research on how districts can effectively support schools. A simple overview of the ten components is provided to set the stage. Other researchers' contributions are infused into the ten key components adding depth, clarity, and detail.

The ten components are:

- Collective Moral Purpose- Is there an understanding throughout the organization about the moral imperative to educate all students?
- Compelling Conceptualization- What is the focus of the school district? What are the expectations for schools regarding the increase of student achievement?
- Ongoing Learning- All members of the school district must be engaged in their own individual and collective professional development.
- Productive Conflict- Understanding what is tight and loose supports the negotiation that occurs to mitigate conflict between schools and district office staff.
- Demanding Culture- An expectation that all staff members are working diligently towards the common outcomes.
- External Partners- Individuals and organizations that support the school district's moral purpose and compelling conceptualization is critical to a district's success.
- Focused Financial Investments- Align resources with the vision including the use of the human resource of time.
- The Right Bus- How does a school district organize itself to maximize and align resources and efforts?
- Capacity Building- What structures are in place to increase the capacity of all staff that will impact instruction in the classroom?
- Lateral Capacity Building- What structures are in place across schools and departments to increase the staff capacity to increase student achievement?

Research about Effective School Districts

Until recently, little consideration was given to the effectiveness of school district systems. The educational reform movement throughout the latter part of the 20th century focused on what made a single school effective almost to the complete dismissal of the impact of school districts. Some national reform efforts actually ignored school districts and worked directly with individual schools (Ucelli & Foley, 2004). In the eyes of many reformers, districts are seen as the problem or, minimally, as contributing to underachievement. At the very least, school district systems are viewed as ineffective, bureaucratic and unresponsive to the educational reform efforts underway at the school level (Foley & Sigler, 2009; Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). These perspectives prompt the question, "Do school districts really matter to student achievement?" And "how does authentic student achievement matter to school districts?"

Research about effective school districts and their policies and structures is significantly less in scope and quantity compared to the research about effective schools. The lack of research is reflective of the complexity of district organizations and the unwieldy quagmire of policies, mandates, size, and the maze of school district work, especially in urban settings. Added to the dearth of research is that little has been published involving school districts' efforts since the 2001 passage of No Child Left Behind.

To date, the majority of the studies have focused on large urban districts (Rothman, 2007). There are obvious differences in human and fiscal resources in between urban, rural and suburban districts as well as distinctly different local contexts. Every district has groups of marginalized students; sometimes, the only difference is the

sheer number and visibility. Therefore, studying the renewal efforts, challenges, and successes in districts of varying sizes and demographics is imperative to realize the dream of maximizing the potential of all students.

Why is it so difficult to organize a school district to support schools and increase student achievement? Quite frankly, superintendents have tremendous pressures, conflicting mandates, and narrow definitions of achievement to balance while pulling it all together into a coherent system that recognizes and supports the uniqueness's of schools. It is in the interconnectedness and alignment that coherence is achieved. Superintendents and district staff are responsible for compliance and implementation of federal and state policies, achievement of all students, and management of personnel and facilities within a local context of constituents and mores (Hightower, et al., 2002). The scope of a district's responsibilities and the accountability for the effectiveness of its efforts has changed dramatically over the past 50 years and most recently with No Child Left Behind (NCLB). As if this complexity weren't enough, school districts are recognized as organizations and also community entities (Emery, 2006). Community expectations are also political realities for superintendents and Boards of Education to address.

The three components of the research question, organizational constructs, policies, and structures, as well as, Fullan's (2004) ten components will serve as a scaffold for the literature review. Fullan's ten components are reiterated here:

- Collective Moral Purpose
- Compelling Conceptualization
- Ongoing Learning
- Productive Conflict
- Demanding Culture

- External Partners
- Focused Financial Investments
- The Right Bus
- Capacity Building
- Lateral Capacity Building

Organizational Constructs

Districts' organizational constructs are the components of the system put together to create an environment to make the vision come alive. These constructs are the foundation upon which all of other systems are built.

Collective Moral Purpose

Increased student achievement of all students, especially marginalized students, is at the core of this component. Picture Estéban, Esmeralda, and Karla and imagine their potential. Imagine their dreams. Who could they become and what could their contributions to this society and the global economy be in the future? They are cultural and linguistic ambassadors now. Could one of them become an Ambassador to the UN; a bi-literate CEO of an international company that employs hundreds?

To actualize this collective moral purpose requires that all adults engaged in the educational process (staff, parents, community members) understand their role in educating all students to high levels. This collective moral purpose also translates into a shared responsibility for all students and not just those for whom a person has direct responsibility. Parents become concerned about all children in their neighborhood and join other parents to supervise the bus stop. A collective moral purpose is actualized when principals understand the needs and successes of other schools in the district thus reducing competitiveness and divisiveness within the system. It is evident when there is a

willing sharing of resources and ideas to serve all of our children more effectively. Stanford-Blair and Dickmann (2005) share that leaders when interviewed about compelling purpose reflected that "they observed that if compelling purpose were to be adequately served, it would take a viable village to serve it. To that end, they described leadership behavior intended to build communities in which everyone was on the same page, supported, and ready and able to get the job done" (p. 84).

The sense of urgency to increase student achievement is articulated throughout the literature, opening day speeches, and campaign promises (Knapp, et al., 2003; Supovitz, 2006). Whether it is the untapped potential of students, global competiveness, or community demands, the sense of urgency and collective moral purpose serves as the foundation for district reform. A Superintendent's Cabinet member's comments express how a collective moral purpose plays out in the school district that is the focus of this case study:

> We were able to side-step political concerns and questions with the teachers' organization, with the classified organization, with our parents, with the students – because at the end of the day, we were so grounded in the mission that we could say, "We're not giving you what you should have. You deserve better than what we've given you.....It's the moral high ground, and when you have the moral high ground because you're so grounded in your mission, then all of the other pieces just – you can figure out. But we talked two years ago about embracing the ambiguity because there's no clear path to accomplishing some of these things (Mark, District administrator).

The collective moral purpose described above provides the rationale and the courage to move forward, to break new ground. In my experience, the urgency and the action do not always accompany the collective moral purpose. Oftentimes ideas are put off until the next year, the next election, or future budgets. What about now, with these children?

Compelling Conceptualization

To accomplish large-scale reform, superintendents must have teams of people at all levels of the organization that engage in the *daily* practice of the reform efforts in schools. This engagement across the district results in a shared commitment. It is imperative that district personnel internalize their active role in the support of schools' instructional renewal efforts. Describing the interconnectedness of reform efforts, Supovitz (2006) argues that leaders must 'build the rationale and commitment for change while [developing] the competence to enact change" (p. 64). For example, DuFour (2007) argues that superintendents and district office staff have the responsibility to ensure all leaders utilize the evidence of effective instruction and change practices for their context. For district office personnel, this translates into a clear purpose with concentrated time in schools, responsiveness to schools' needs, and internal pressure and support for continuous improvement. It is about understanding a school's students, teachers, data, and current practices. Too often, district staff is organized by programs or content areas they support and have difficulty understanding the totality of a school's needs and efforts. Regardless of the organizational structure, each district office staff should be compelled to understand a school's focus, their data, and their stakeholders. Berends, Bodilly and Kirby (2006) found that schools involved in the New American Schools comprehensive school reform efforts in the 1990s were most effective when school districts "created supportive environments with district level leadership support, regulatory policies, and coherent funding streams" (p. 107). Having a strong district conceptualization to increase the achievement of all students is no small task. Berends et al. (2006) go on to explain that many districts are increasingly resorting to more centralized responses in light of No

Child Left Behind mandates. These centralized responses may take the form of mandated reading and math curriculum or one-size-fits-all professional development. However, these actions are not supported by the comprehensive school reform research (Berends, et al., 2006). In contrast, the organizing principles in Community School District #2 in New York City provided school leaders with an instructional framework that was based on shared values and set forth clear expectations. Equally important was the schools' latitude to customize the work within this framework to match the needs of students and staff (Elmore & Burney, 1997). DuFour (2007) would describe this structure as 'tight' and 'loose'. The Community School District #2 framework was tight and non-negotiable. The flexibility granted to schools about the curriculum, resources, and programming was loose.

In another example, McLaughlin and Talbert (2002) paint a picture of reforming school districts that not only focus on individual school improvement but they focus on the district system as a unit of change. This attention to the district system has implications for system-wide alignment, communication, shared commitment to reform, and the attention to the professional growth of district office personnel. These examples illustrate the conscientious efforts of school districts to create a compelling conceptualization of their district capacity and structures to support schools.

Furthermore, designing and articulating a vision of instructional quality is a key responsibility for the Superintendent and district office staff (Supovitz, 2006) if educational transformation is to occur. If there is not a coherent, articulated vision of what quality instruction looks like in the classroom at all levels and content areas, the "consequences will be mediocrity at worst and far flung variation at best" (p. 27). Again,

when there is interconnectedness and coherence between this vision for instructional quality and the organizational constructs, structure, and polices, there will be synergy and supports in place for school staff to succeed.

Ongoing Learning

Successful school districts adopt an inquiry-based approach to their school improvement efforts. The district leaders are constantly engaged in conversations with schools about their successes, barriers, and the evolving needs. For example, Maria Ucelli, Annenberg Institute Director of District Redesign, describes the need for urban districts to utilize high-quality data in a timely fashion to influence instruction in the classroom and monitor instructional improvements (2004). As school teams refine their skills in analyzing student data and the implications for instructional strategies and interventions, new questions develop (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2002). Disaggregating student data by gender, class, ethnicity, and disability raises questions about effective instructional strategies. Teachers may ask themselves, "What would work to improve this group of students' fluency? How is that different for this other group in my classroom or grade level? Who is already doing this that could help me?"

Having consistent time designated for these conversations supports the culture of continuous improvement, whether it is labeled as common planning time or professional learning communities. The conversations cannot be left to chance. Ideally, this work is framed within the context of the specific students in the classroom and what works for them.

Productive Conflict

As the instructional renewal efforts evolve at the school level, inevitable conflicts will surface. Districts that have been successful in the delicate balancing act of resolving these conflicts approach the issues collaboratively with schools. Again, using DuFour's language of 'what is tight' or non-negotiable is an important step. Closing the achievement gap of underperforming student groups is non-negotiable. It's tight. The instructional programs and strategies may be an area of negotiation. Flexibility is loose and allows schools to design local frameworks for their specific students (DuFour, 2007).

A Demanding Culture

A high-trust culture is fundamental to continuous improvement. In order to develop an internal accountability for student achievement, all players must be highly effective and competent. Districts and schools with a demanding culture apply pressure throughout the system due to the shared, collective moral imperative. Little tolerance is afforded to those that are ineffective in this vision. Absent this component of a demanding culture, the effectiveness of the underlying organizational constructs, policies, and structures will be undermined and reform efforts will stall. Implementing a strong accountability system is on the list for every reform agenda from the White House to the local schoolhouse. Those that are held accountable are more likely to embody this 'mandate' if they are a part of creating it and that the accountability system in fact supports their classroom work and does not distract from it.

External Partners

District and school leaders need external partners as advocates, critical friends, cheerleaders, and/or experts. Partnerships with universities, parents, governmental

agencies, and business and civic organizations expand the responsibility and ownership of student achievement to where it belongs— with the entire community. These external partnerships must be aligned to maximize their impact on the ultimate goal. Otherwise, they can drain or sidetrack valuable energy and resources. There is an energy and commitment that is mutually beneficial when community members are engaged in the educational process and creating desired outcomes (Emery, 2006). The (re) vitalization of a community is oftentimes tied to the cohesiveness and effectiveness of the local school and school district. Authentic and continuous engagement of all stakeholders is essential to actualize the educational systems designed at the local level to meet the needs of the communities' children. "Active communities are powerful contexts for school districts infecting them with enthusiasm for change" (Rothman, 2007, p. 21). The learning opportunities inside and outside of school are often times inequitable across school districts and communities. Strong, focused external partners have the potential to effectively collaborate to address these needs at a school district and community level (Rothman, 2007).

Focused Financial Investments

District and school resources must align with the vision of increasing student achievement. How are district funds distributed? Are funds distributed equally or differentiated based on the needs of the school and/or the students? The alignment of resources and the vision is not limited to fiscal resources but also includes human resources. The mission of the district office personnel is to focus on the direct, explicit, and effective support of schools' efforts which requires time; one of the most valuable

resources available. How principals and district office personnel invest their time speaks volumes about the actualization of the district's vision and moral purpose.

Policies

'What is tight' and 'What is loose'?

School districts decide how to implement state and federal policies including how to adapt and interpret them within the local context or even to ignore them (Spillane, 2002). Not all federal policies have the tight, detailed procedures that are evident with No Child Left Behind. The implementation of content standards is an example of the considerable sense-making that is required at the local level to fully interpret and implement some federal and state policies. Honig (2006) clearly articulates the complexity of the current policy implementation climate. Contemporary educational policy implementation research recognizes the contextual nature of education and suggests the "essential implementation question becomes not simply 'what's implementable and works,' but 'what is implementable and what works for whom, where, when and why?'" (p. 2). However, districts are under pressure to quickly increase student achievement to meet or exceed the NCLB performance targets and look for policy recommendations that provide clear direction and consistent instructional practices (Honig, 2006). These federal or even state 'what works' policy recommendations, however, do not typically take into account the local context of a school community, its learners or teachers, and consequently may misinform local decision-makers.

The current reality for school district leaders is they are simultaneously implementing multiple policy changes, some imposed by federal and state mandates and

others locally designed. In order to realize a district culture of transformational renewal and change, many superintendents and district office personnel articulate a theory of education and theory of change and action that outlines how they will maneuver through and integrate these policy implementations. Fullan (1999) describes the need to have a strong, well-articulated theory of education that outlines pedagogical assumptions as well as a theory of change with implementation strategies that are contextually-based. DuFour (2007) also argues that clarity about 'what is tight' and 'what is loose' is essential to move a system forward. This language articulates what is non-negotiable and where flexibility exists. For example, Anthony Alvarado New York City's Community School District #2 Superintendent outlined a set of seven organizing principles about systemic change and emphasized professional development that resulted in aggregate increases in student achievement over time (Elmore & Burney, 1997). A school district's explicit or implicit theory of action can be predictive of the degree to which these principles are purposeful and will inform the district's practices. A thorough understanding and articulation of these processes is critical to ensure that the intended outcomes of increased student achievement for all students are realized.

Three urban school districts in Milwaukee, Chicago, and Seattle are chronicled in an expansive research project through Cross City Schools Campaign. Substantial resources and commitment were evident to implement well-designed systemic plans for improvement. However, the increases in student achievement were not realized because the efforts were not focused enough on changes in instructional practices at the classroom level (Fullan, et al., 2006).

Local policy is more than the standard operating procedures. It is about how an articulated vision is translated into expectations, mandates, processes, influence, and support that flow from the superintendent and district office out to schools. The degree to which the vision and accompanying policies connect and support the individual school renewal efforts will largely determine if the desired student achievement outcomes are realized. Recent research studies on district-level reforms are providing compelling frameworks to understand this complexity and these connections (Foley & Sigler, 2009; Hightower, et al., 2002; Marsh, et al., 2005).

Structures

Structures and processes within an organization can provide a means for moving through the changes and the capacity building needed to actualize an increase in student achievement. Spillane contends that "organizational context and structure have a huge bearing on individual sense-making and reaction to reform ideas" (Supovitz, 2006, p. 67). How these structures are interconnected with the organizational constructs and the compelling conceptualization and collective moral purpose to *serve* the school is at the heart of the issues of coherence and a realization of increased student achievement. Structures that serve purposes other than to meet the needs, goals, and requests of schools could be barriers and distractions to increased student achievement.

The Right Bus

Understanding Collins' (2001) metaphor about having the right people in the right seats on the bus is critical. The district needs to ensure that they have 'the right bus' in place which means that the district and school structures support the classroom focus on

quality teaching and learning. Having 'the right bus' is about how a district and school organizes itself to maximize and align its resources to advance student learning. Large districts may organize into smaller feeders to provide direct support to a smaller number of principals and to maximize vertical and horizontal articulation, professional learning, and capacity building. Teachers may develop collaborative professional learning communities at their grade level to discuss student data and the impact on their daily instructional decision-making (DuFour & Robert, 1998).

Capacity Building

It is this sense-making process that seems to be an important ingredient in successful reform efforts that result in a change in the instructional practices in the classroom; the only place that matters. Designing and embedding processes that provide people with the opportunities to make sense of their work and to build the overall intellectual capacity of district, school, and teacher leaders is integral to the advancement of all students' achievement. In an extensive study of three urban school districts' reform efforts, building the instructional leadership of principals was one of four key components to instructional renewal (Marsh, et al., 2005). The supervision of principals and their professional development had an instructional focus. This study also demonstrated the importance of the increased capacity of the district office staff to enhance their abilities to design, lead, and support renewal efforts with schools (Marsh, et al., 2005).

John Fryer, Superintendent in Duvall County School District in Jacksonville, Florida had a wide-angle view of the responsibility of developing the district and school leaders to think differently about their work.

> Fryer and his leadership team took a macro approach to capacity-building. Drawing on his military background, Fryer viewed his role as the strategic coordinator of resources in the battle for the advancement of learning. He used the analogy of how a general sees a battle field to distinguish between the strategic work of district leadership and the more tactical front line work of principals and teachers in schools. According to Fryer, schools were where the "close-in battle" was taking place, where teachers and principals were fighting against ignorance and advancing knowledge. His job, by contrast, was to marshal and provide resources in support of the work in schools. These could include the allocation of fiscal resources; community resources; and the district's levers of command and control; as well as flexible resources that could be allocated to areas of high need and the reserve resources of the local community, government, and businesses (Supovitz, 2006, p. 83).

With all of that said, the key ingredient is the capacity building of teachers (Hall & Simeral, 2008). Leaders have a tremendous responsibility to guarantee that all teachers have an extensive knowledge base and opportunity for continuous development. Teachers must be able to design lessons and make momentary adjustments based on a plethora of best practices research (Garner, 2007; Herrell & Jordan, 2004; Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001; Strong, Silver, & Perini, 2001). Woven into these quality instructional strategies is the background knowledge of effective strategies for a wide range of diverse learners like those whose first language is not English, read slowly, are advanced in math, or live in poverty, to name a few. The majority of the adult learning should occur within the context of classrooms and schools. Providing structures for daily job-embedded opportunities for dialogic interaction is strategic to building each teacher's capacity to address the needs of the actual students in the classroom. Increasing teachers' capacity must transfer into the refinement of their instructional practices with the students that they work with on a daily basis. Model classrooms and building level instructional coaches are two key structures utilized by districts to infuse instructional reform (Supovitz, 2006). Wenger (1998) also reminds us that communities of practice are

crucial to building teachers' capacity to continually learn and there is a need to create supportive social contexts to nurture teachers' development.

Emery (2006) expands the concept of capacity building to the larger community and the need to engage diverse stakeholders in dialogue about the future of schools and the community vitality. The scenario at the beginning of this chapter is one such example.

Lateral Capacity Building

School districts with a reform agenda set up structures and networks that connect schools within the district to learn from each other. Coburn and Stein (2006) indicate that while additional research is needed to demonstrate the impact of teachers' communities of practice and the influence between and among schools, the networking that occurs among teachers and principals builds a strong culture and honors the expertise within the district. This networking could be strengthened by proximity of a K-12 feeder system of schools in the same region. Those educators that have success with specific learners have a lot to contribute to the body of knowledge of their colleagues who have found those specific successes illusive. As student populations change, successful instructional and social strategies must be shared so no time is lost in working effectively with all students. Emery (2006) articulates design principles for systems where responsibility is located with the people who are doing the work, the learning, or the planning. Merging Fullan (2004) and Emery's (2006) theories, teachers, parents, and school administrators would be responsible for the design of their work utilizing lateral capacity building strategies.

A vibrant example is Duvall County School District in Jacksonville, Florida that utilized cohesive cross-visitations of principals and teachers visiting other principals and

teacher leaders who were implementing the America's Choice framework. For a set of educators to witness how their peers are creating the instructional change in their building is a powerful tool (Supovitz, 2006) for their own sense-making and reflection.

The threads of interconnectedness and obvious urgency continue to be woven throughout this study with the three components of the research question and Michael Fullan's (2004) ten integrated components to realize large-scale systemic improvement serving as a scaffold for the literature review about how school districts support schools to increase student achievement. What follows in Chapter Three is the methodology utilized for this specific case study about how one school district's organizational constructs, policies, and structures support schools to increase student achievement.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

> It was a clear, crisp December day in Colorado. The kind of day between Christmas and New Year's that is perfect for dreaming, ideating, and walking the dog in the snow; the kind of day when you can think clearly.
>
> As two dear friends and I were doing just that, the conversation turned to our work as educators and my research interest in district level support for schools. I asked each of them what school district support to schools looks like to them. And they answered and answered and answered. "I'll tell you what....I'll tell you what is does NOT look like!" As we continued our brisk walk, our conversations meandered to other topics, but it always came back to the topic of district support. "What if we could...?" "Why couldn't we...?" "If only I were able to.....then achievement would change!"
>
> I knew that I had hit a nerve.

This was a topic of interest to educators because, simply, people have not figured it out. As my experiences have shown me, educators were interested in this discourse about what was and what wasn't working, the interconnectedness of all of the components of the system, and an obvious urgency to figure it out. These conversations, coupled with my constructivist beliefs about the social co-construction of knowledge, led to this methodological outline.

Throughout my doctoral studies, friends and colleagues told me to pick a topic that I was very interested in because I would be spending a lot of time with it. That really wasn't my worry. The subject matter has been chosen for years. What I was actually concerned about was finding a school district that would capture my heart, push my

thinking, and cause me to have sleepless nights due to the synergistic nature of the research questions, my engagement, and their pursuit of increased student achievement.

During this same brisk December walk, one of my friends asked, "Why don't you study Birchwood? They are doing amazing things there." (Birchwood is a pseudonym that I chose). That suggestion led to a series of conversations that resulted in this study. I knew that my worry about finding a school district that would capture my heart was unfounded when during my first interview with the superintendent she described the reform efforts underway in the district like cleaning out the garage!

> We kind of thought about our work from the beginning as like cleaning out your garage...it's like when you start cleaning out your garage, it gets actually worse before it gets better. You know, when you start putting all that stuff out on your driveway and start realizing this job is much bigger than you anticipated it was going to be.
>
> And you're pretty vulnerable when everything you own from your garage is now sitting on your driveway and all your neighbors can see it. And people can make decisions about you and your lifestyle and they can interpret who you must be based on what they see in your driveway. And some of that's true and some of it's really not. And you find things that are pests and that you didn't know were there, and you find things that are treasures that you had forgotten you had, and it's very much like that in school reform. You're very vulnerable for a short period of time (Superintendent).

The Superintendent's passion for the work underway in the school district, did, in fact, capture my heart and peak my curiosity about their efforts. The methodology of this case study was designed to begin to understand one school district's story about their school improvement efforts; specifically how the organizational constructs, policies, and structures influence the achievement of marginalized student populations. The focus is on the school district as a unit of analysis (Yin, 2003) and its relationship with schools.

The next section outlines the specific research design and methodology implemented to begin to answer the issue and topical research questions. The threads of this study are again evident here as the hopes and dreams as well as the experiences of the participants are the key to understanding this school district. Also, the intent was to design a study that would, by the nature of the design as well as the findings, compel the participants, the researcher, and the readers to action.

Research Design and Methodology

The nature of the issue (research) question, the epistemological framework and the focus on qualitative inquiry lend themselves to a case study of a school district. A case study is the "study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances" (Stake, 1995, p. xi). "How" and "why" questions are frequently addressed in case study methodology, especially when the researcher does not control the events and the study takes place within a contemporary context (Yin, 2003). Case studies arise out of the need to "understand complex social phenomena" (Yin, 2003, p. 2) which aligns with understanding how school districts support schools so the individual schools at the classroom level can effect positive change in student achievement.

Robert Stake (2005) utilizes a qualitative lens when constructing a case study design. He prompts us to ask the epistemological question, "What will be learned from this case?" It is my intent to learn how one school district with its many voices and perspectives is, in fact, supporting schools' efforts.

Units of Analysis

This case study's unit of analysis is a school district. The selection of the actual case was largely influenced by the opportunity to learn (Stake, 2005) about how one school district is supporting its schools. There are embedded units of analysis including the district administrators, principals, some teachers, and the Superintendent's Cabinet. While embedded units of analysis exist, they are only for the purpose of understanding the larger district perspective and context.

Epistemological Framework

This case study is grounded within the constructivist paradigm; a paradigm that embodies a framework of beliefs that could influence the actualization of increased student achievement. Constructivism's relativist ontology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) embodies multiple realities which is naturally-occurring in organizations with such diverse stakeholders as students, parents, teachers, administrators, and community members. Lambert (2003) argues that organizations must engage in the co-construction of the patterns of learning of authentic work, relationships, and possibilities in order to construct meaning as individuals and as organizations. How this school district co-constructs its reality is evident in the coherence of 'what is tight' and 'what is loose'.

As a researcher, my worldview and collaborative style align with the constructivist subjectivist epistemology where the researcher and participants co-construct meaning within a natural setting (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The tenets of the constructivist paradigm not only influence my research design, they heavily influence what I want to see in schools. It is the co-construction of meaning between the actors to understand what is *really* happening in schools and what is *really* needed in order to

realize our dream of maximizing all students' potential...that is my passion and my dream.

The constructivist influence on the methodology is not to be understated. Co-constructing meaning with key participants is messy, sensitive, and dynamic work. Those involved in this inquiry are in the midst of living their stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The participants in the school district are living their story as this research started, as it unfolded, and as it drew to a close. Their stories have continued to evolve since the interviews. All of this is important to take into consideration as the meaning-making and sense-making between and among the participants and me had the potential to be transformational. The necessary authenticity had to be pervasive throughout the data collection, interpretation and dissertation writing process. My trustworthiness as a researcher and my rapport with the participants was paramount.

The issue and topical questions provided a beginning point for the case study. As the questions unfolded, the complexities became apparent. Stake (1995) predicted this when he articulated that the qualitative researcher discovers the complexities between all of the components and dynamics of the case. To understand how a district effectively supports schools' efforts to increase student achievement, methodological approaches were needed that were open-ended and adaptable to multiple perspectives. The structure of the research process included interviews, direct observations, document reviews, analysis, and interpretations. As the interviewees' responses unfolded, documents were reviewed, and direct observations made, more questions emerged as the rich description from the participants and the historical and social context of the inquiry unfolded. What

do the stories behind the answers to these questions tell about the organizational constructs, policies, and structures in the district?

Research Questions

Issue Question

Stake (1995) encourages qualitative researchers to address issue (research) questions which are those questions that define the context and complexity of the problem. The issue question for this case study is "What are the district organizational constructs, policies, and structures that influence student achievement especially for marginalized students?"

Topical Questions

The topical questions (Stake, 1995) that provide necessary information to describe the case are:

Topical Question 1: How do these district organizational constructs, policies, and structures provide support to schools to influence student achievement with a focused lens on marginalized student populations?

Topical Question 2: How do the theories about school improvement held by the school district leadership team influence the support to schools?

- 'What is tight' and 'what is loose'?

Topical Question 3: How do the explicit theories of education and action of the district leadership team materialize into organizational constructs, policies, and structures that influence teaching and learning at the school and classroom level?

Topical Question 4: How are the district office roles and focus supportive of the schools' efforts?

- How are these district office roles and focus communicated and understood throughout the system?

Topical Question 5: How do teachers change their instructional practices?

- How were these changes in instructional practices a result of district-supported efforts?
- Is it through formal structures or informal networks?

Topical Question 6: How is time structured to support professional learning communities, common planning time, and job-embedded professional development?

The topical questions influenced the guiding interviews questions. Identifying the topical questions that would engage participants in dialogue that would elicit reflections, vignettes, and insight to address the research question was instrumental in the research design.

Research Design and Conceptual Framework Intersect about School District Systems

With the issue and topical questions outlined, Fullan's (2006; Fullan, et al., 2004) framework of ten integrated components to realize large-scale systemic improvement were revisited. The purpose of this review was to explore propositions (Yin, 2003) or topics that are embedded in the questions to ensure that the needed data was collected. The following descriptions outline how an exploration of the issue and topical questions led to the propositions which focused the activities of the data

gathering. The purpose was to design data gathering activities that would explicitly make the organizational constructs, policies, and structures visible.

Organizational Constructs

Propositions of compelling conceptualization and collective moral purpose.

District staff including Superintendent and members of the Superintendent's Cabinet, district office directors, school principals, and teacher leaders with a variety of perspectives and responsibilities were asked about the district's theory of action to increase student achievement. How do they make a difference in the actions of educators that impact student achievement?

Propositions about on-going learning.

How is professional development linked to student achievement especially regarding marginalized students? What are the informal structures or social networks that staff utilizes? Who do they go to for support, assistance, or information? How do school staff utilize student achievement data and what is the influence on their instructional practices?

Propositions about productive conflict and a demanding culture.

How are conflicts or differences resolved between the direction of the school district and the interests and/or needs of an individual school? What is considered tight and loose? How does the district's demanding culture manifest itself? How is the district's accountability system supportive?

Propositions about external partners and focused financial investments.

How does the school district focus human and fiscal resources to maximize the impact to support schools and increase student achievement? How are various

stakeholders engaged in the district and school improvement efforts? How do principals and district office personnel invest their time to support schools' improvement efforts?

Policies and Structures

Propositions about 'the right bus'.

Determining the participants' shared understanding about 'what is tight' and 'what is loose' is instrumental in understanding the coherence in the district. How are district structures designed to support the schools' work? Exactly how do the organizational and instructional structures support improved student achievement? What are these structures, how do they work, and are they effective?

Propositions about capacity building and lateral capacity building.

How is the capacity of principals and teachers built? What are the formal and informal networks or systems that support staff's capacity building within their school or department and across the district? How do principals and teachers describe the role and focus of district office staff in support of their improvement efforts? How do these roles support capacity building? How does the structure of time support student achievement?

Methodology

Internal Review Board

An Internal Review Board (IRB) application was submitted prior to contacting any potential school district for participation. The response from the IRB department was that this research study did not warrant an IRB review. Clarification was provided to the department indicating the nature of the question and methodology. The final IRB response was that there was no need for an IRB review.

Case Selection

As described earlier, the suggestion to study Birchwood School District was suggested by a friend. After an initial inquiry was made, two pre-selection interviews occurred; one between the superintendent, me, and a Cabinet member and the second was with the entire Superintendent's Cabinet. The purpose was to determine the mutual fit and interest in this qualitative case study and research questions. The specific school district was not considered because of its unique student achievement results or alignment with a specific framework or theory of action for improvement.

The research proposal, with an emphasis on the specific questions as well as the constructivist methodology, was explored. The Superintendent joked, "We are an open book and have been studied intensively." In fact, a key understanding was that this study was not about the recent district reinvention, which is the focus of a soon-to-be published manuscript. Rather, it was about the current and planned organizational constructs, policies, and structures that support increased student achievement. This research focus aligned with the district's current emphasis on the discipline and execution of the implementation of the key initiatives.

Access and Permission.

The district office staff is small and each person has several roles and responsibilities. To this end, access to people and their ability to participate was also thoroughly discussed. The Superintendent made assurances that district office staff and needed documents would be accessible. I was welcome to attend and observe any meeting or event. So, the decision was collaboratively reached to proceed with the research study due to the mutual interest in the research questions and the interest in

determining how their work could be illustrative of the work underway in other school districts. In this manner, the inquiry is an instrumental case study whereby the case serves as a way to understand the phenomenon of how one school district supports schools (Stake, 1995). This school district will be referred to as Birchwood, a pseudonym selected by the researcher.

A member of the Superintendent's Cabinet was the primary contact and informed the principals that they may be contacted about this research study and their voluntary participation was encouraged. This individual served as the gatekeeper in gaining access and building background knowledge about the district and the historical context.

Confidentiality.

Confidentiality was addressed during the pre-selection interviews with the Superintendent and Cabinet and with each interviewee at the time of the interview. While their input into potential interviewees and direct observations would be sought, the actual participants would not be identified during the data gathering process or in subsequent writing. Participants were asked to select a pseudonym to be used in any final writing.

The School District in Social and Demographic Context

Local context. Birchwood School District is a small urban Colorado school district of approximately 6000 students. Sixty six percent of the district's families are eligible for free and reduced meal benefits. Forty seven percent of the students are English Language Learners. The ethnic diversity is represented in Figure 1.

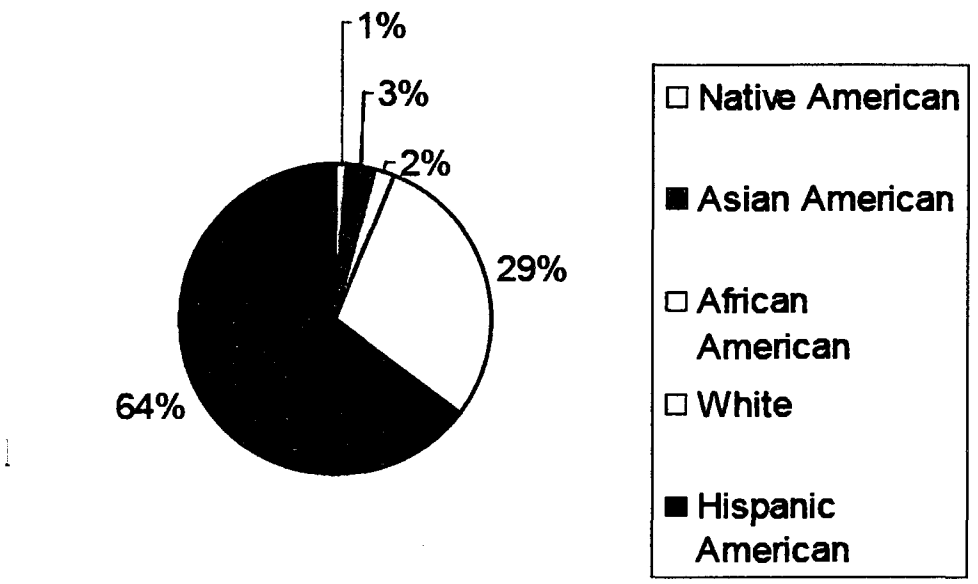

Figure 1. Ethnicity of Birchwood Student Population.

Historical Context.

The school district has engaged in a five year 'reinvention' of small schools whereby the comprehensive high school and alternative high school were redesigned into six smaller and uniquely different schools. Subsequently, the neighborhood elementary and middle schools were redesigned into an early childhood center, four K-6 schools and five K-8 schools. These schools are in addition to the original two K-12 and four secondary schools that were redesigned in the first phase.

The district's reinvention is a result of an intensive strategic planning process started in 2003. This strategic plan outlined a multi-year implementation of a district-wide redesign into small learning communities with a focus on rigor, relevance, and relationships. The plan articulated a belief in a "menu of enticing learning opportunities that allow students to pursue their interests and gifts" (Cuban, Lichtenstein, Tombari,

Pozzoboni, & Evenchik, in press, p. 13). The initial school redesign focused on the secondary schools from 2003-2006 with the K-6 and K-8 schools following in the last three years.

Timelines and Building Background Knowledge

School improvement processes are cyclical in that district and school personnel typically review goals in the winter and early spring. Recommendations are oftentimes made for the following year including action plans for district-wide work. Goals are reviewed when new state assessment results are received and analyzed in mid-August. School goals, while incorporating available end of the year data, are typically not finalized until the high stakes state assessment data is reviewed in August. This timeline is important to understanding district work.

Understanding context and building background knowledge of this specific case was important before initiating interviews. The document review and initial interviews with the Superintendent and Cabinet members occurred in August through mid-September with subsequent school leader and teacher interviews occurring September through December. Direct observations and document reviews occurred within this same timeframe. The data collection process concluded in early January.

Document reviews.

To build my own background knowledge and understanding of the context of this district's work, district improvement plans, annual reports, directories with school descriptions, and departmental memos were initially reviewed to grasp the instructional focus and plan of action. The district accreditation and community report included

student demographics, student achievement data, as well as, descriptions of the district initiatives.

A primary source to understand the context of the district's history was a recently written unpublished manuscript (Cuban, et al., in press). Permission from the authors to the Superintendent to share this manuscript with me was fortuitous as it laid the foundation of my understanding of the district's reform efforts for the past five years. Starting with the Superintendent's one-on-one interview forward, my initial understanding of this historical background served as a foundation to go into more depth in every setting and interview.

Public information on the state's Department of Education website provided district and school graduation rates, ACT scores, and state assessment results. These longitudinal results are aggregated and disaggregated by student sub groups and content areas. These data points provide information about the district and individual school performance results. In addition, the district annual report published during the research window offered additional results that painted a broader picture of achievement including the percentage of students that applied and were accepted into college, satisfaction survey results, and amount of scholarships offered to seniors. This broader, comprehensive definition about proficiency and achievement is incorporated into the findings and implications for further research.

Later in the process, principals provided their School Improvement Plans, School Support Team summaries, and other documents that provided additional data that augmented the interviews and direct observations.

Interviews.

The primary source of field texts were semi-structured and unstructured interviews of key participants (Fontana & Frey, 2005). The purpose of interviewing was to begin to understand the unique, multiple perspectives that exist regarding the issue and topical questions. Interviews are undoubtedly "historically, politically, and contextually bound" (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 693) which is exactly why they are primary data sources of multiple perspectives. Rubin and Rubin (2005) describe the use of interviews in elaborate case studies as beneficial when the purpose is to find out "what happened, why, and what it means more broadly" (p. 6) and to understand a phenomenon. Gubrium and Holstein (Fontana & Frey, 2005) describe the interview as a "contextually based, mutually accomplished story that is reached through collaboration between the researcher and the respondent" (p. 714). Given my background, ability to build rapport, and to identify with participants as a teacher, principal, and district office administrator, this description of the interview process and outcomes was comfortable and plausible.

Ruben and Ruben (2005) describe a model of responsive interviewing that aligns with the constructivist paradigm and my own style. The three tenets of the responsive interviewing models are that the interviewee and interviewer:

- are both human beings that form a relationship in this process
- the goal is to generate depth of understanding rather than breadth and
- this occurs in a flexible research design

Understanding key events, jargon, and processes described by the interviewees provided hooks to others' interviews and an opportunity to see how different participants viewed a similar structure or topic. My trustworthiness as a researcher was facilitated by

my ability to understand their vocabulary and processes based on my similar experiences. This common set of experiences and backgrounds served as a base of acceptance and also a potential source of bias to. Building my own background knowledge about the school district's recent history with the reinvention was pivotal so individuals could reference the reinvention without retelling the historical context. Oftentimes they referenced an aspect and their perception of the reinvention as it related to a district structure or construct.

In this case study, the interviews were an extremely important data source that contained rich descriptions that highlighted the multiple perspectives that describe how the school district supports schools. These descriptions when added to the interpretations of the direct observations and document review provided rich perspectives for analysis and interpretation.

Selection of Interviewees

Each person I met provided recommendations of district administrators, principals, teachers, and school board members to interview based on their diverse perspectives. I sought to have interviewees that represented a balance in gender, ethnicity, experience in their current role, and time in the district. Upon determining a list of potential interviewees, a letter of introduction was emailed to prospective participants that included key information about the case study, the purpose, and consent form. Anonymity was discussed as was how the information would be used throughout the process and in the final written format. Individuals then contacted me, typically through email, to set up an appointment. Throughout the interview arrangements, I placed an emphasis on the focus of the interviews which was to ascertain the interviewees'

firsthand experiences and vignettes about the school district influence on schools' efforts to increase student achievement.

Twenty-eight individuals were invited to participate. Seventeen people were interviewed including the Superintendent, four members of the Superintendent's Cabinet, two additional district office administrators, five principals representing elementary and secondary schools, and five teachers also representing elementary and secondary schools. In addition to the five interviewees that were current principals, three of the district administrators were principals in this district prior to their district responsibilities. While there was a balance of teachers, principals, and district administrators who were interviewed, the inquiries to Board of Education members did not result in interviews. A balance of interviewee attributes was achieved regarding gender and years experience in their current position, the district, and education. The number of total years in education ranged from less than one year to more than sixteen years. The number of years in their current position and in the Birchwood School District was distributed across a range from less than one year to more than eight years. The diversity among the interviewees adds to the richness of the findings.

Fourteen interviews were conducted in person and three via the telephone. The teacher interviews ranged from 45-60 minutes. The principal and district administrator interviews ranged from 45-90 minutes. Individuals chose the location of the interview to ensure their comfort, privacy, and to accommodate their schedule. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by an independent company.

The following key guiding questions set the stage for each interview.

- What is the theory of action to increase the achievement of Birchwood students?

- What structures are in place from the district level that support schools' improvement efforts?
- What are the roles of the district office staff that specifically support schools?
- 'What is tight' and 'what is loose'?
- Describe the Birchwood theory of structured curriculum. What are some of the feelings about the structured curriculum?
- What are the structures in place to support teachers in these efforts? (How are these supports different than in the recent past?)
- Describe the articulated level of autonomy afforded at the school level. How do they know?
- How do you know that what you perceive is being implemented is actually happening at the school and classroom level? (How do you monitor the implementation?)

Specific questions about the district's four key initiatives were asked of the lead person in the district administration.

Additional questions were asked that were unique to the interviewee's role (i.e. district office administrator, principal, or teacher). The following questions were asked of principals and teachers.

- What is missing? (What support is not in place that would impact student achievement?)
- Do you and your teachers have what you need to increase student achievement?
- In this district, how is time structured so that teachers can learn and change their instructional practices?
- How has instruction changed in Birchwood? How do you know that these changes have made a difference?

Direct observation.

"Qualitative researchers have strong expectations that the reality perceived by people inside and outside the case will be social, cultural, situational, and contextual, and they want the interactivity of functions and contexts as well described as possible" (Stake, 2005, p. 452). Understanding the context of this case, the district context, is

paramount to trustworthy interpretations. Witnessing key events, systemic structures, interactions between district office and school staff, and listening to key participants' perspectives, for example, is critical to grasping the local context.

Observing the Superintendent's Back to School staff meeting that included every district staff member was a key observation especially when reflecting upon the tone of the meeting. There was fine balance of celebrating the start of a school year and the Olympics in China coupled with the mixed state assessment results. In the sequence of data gathering events, this was early in the process. It built the foundation of my understanding about the balance that this Superintendent strives to achieve with the staff. Also, when participants described how the Superintendent outlines the clear expectations and 'what is tight' in the organization, I can literally hear the words in that auditorium on that August day.

> It's clear that we've got the spirit and the energy to move us forward . . . now we need to assure that we have the discipline to execute the next phase of this important journey. We've identified 4 specific areas /initiatives that will define our work for the 2008-2009 academic year. These should all sound familiar – 2 are being carried forward from last year and 2 will assure that we drill down with our instructional practices. I'm going to attempt to connect the dots [so that] hopefully you will see how these initiatives are interconnected and how a disciplined application will accelerate student learning.
>
> Let's start with our Literacy Initiative . . . over the past several years we have been working within a balanced literacy framework . . . the feedback we've heard is that teachers need and want a more articulated understanding of the scope and sequence of the skills and content they (you) need when teaching reading and writing. Every Child a Reader™ does that . . . it is not a shift from a balanced literacy philosophy – rather a clarification of the daily lessons and activities that students need to master reading. All elementary teachers and all 6-12 literacy teachers are expected to follow the scope and sequence for this approach to teaching reading. This will require that you are disciplined in your practice. Your disciplined execution is essential to the success of the students. This is a non-negotiable.

Understanding mathematics has been and continues to evade our students. Everyday Math™ was introduced last year with varied results - primarily dependent on the fidelity to which the model was implemented. The schools that had the most improved results also had the most precise implementation. This year, we must all be disciplined in our execution when using these materials. There is no room for interpretation – faithfully following the curriculum maps will improve achievement. This is also a non-negotiable.

At the 7^{th} – 12^{th} grade levels, a team of teachers worked with [district and school leaders] this summer to assure a consistent and deep program of study. The curriculum maps for mathematics lay out the expected course sequences, assessments and instructional materials. There is no room for interpretation here either . . . this too is a non-negotiable instructional plan.

Last year, many of you participated in classes and took coursework to better understand the needs of our second language learners through our partnership with The Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning – otherwise referred to as McRel. This nationally recognized group will continue to work with us to hone the skills of our teachers to assure that our second language population can access the curriculum. You are expected to employ the best practice strategies from McRel

Lastly, Colorado law – in addition to best practice research – demands the integration of a process called "Response to Intervention" or RtI . . . the process monitors how quickly and how well students are learning the required curriculum and intervenes quickly with a research-based intervention. The intention is to catch kids before they fall behind their peers – quickly and with precision. Every Child a Reader™, Everyday Math™, and the secondary level math work all include intervention support – the work with McRel could also be considered a component of RtI – so this is initiative really a subcomponent of the other three – but too important not to call out. The processes of RtI will fill in the pyramids of intervention that we started a couple years ago. You are expected to monitor student learning every day and employ the strategies that will bolster student success.

With that said . . . we are all in this together and our intention and commitment is to assure that everyone has the skills necessary to execute the plan. You will continue to see the School Support Teams (SST) in your classrooms – you will continue to find opportunities to participate in professional learning communities to hone your practice – you will continue to receive data that gives you feedback on your student's progress. We will continue to administer common assessments for the district focus areas including MAPS - three times again this year.

Your professional practice will inspire your colleagues – not by talking about proven practices – but through modeling for one another – getting into one another's classrooms.

> We have an obligation to leave this year's group of students better than we found them (Superintendent's *Back to School Address*).

The Superintendent's *Back to School Address* set the tone and the expectations for the year and for this case study. It was part pep rally and part rallying call. Seeking the multiple perspectives and viewpoints about these expectations and how the district supports the schools to accomplish the expectations is the focus of this case study.

In addition to the Back to School staff meeting, I also participated in a half day School Support Team (SST) visit at a K-8 school. The interest in this observation came from the first interviews conducted and the frequent mention of the monthly School Support Team visit as a key structure in the district.

Overall, the direct observations provided rich data to understand the tone and context for the interviews and document reviews.

Field Texts

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) capture the intent of the field work for this case study when they define field text as "the text of which we ask questions of meaning and social significance" (2000, p. 130). The social significance of this case study is the effective support of schools by the organizing school district. The phrase 'field text' will be utilized in lieu of data records or data gathering to reflect the focus on the case itself.

Reflexivity and field texts.

Field texts about the interviews, events, and observations describe the three dimensional space of time, place, and personal/social perspectives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The field texts captured the descriptive richness of being there in the

field. Diligence in keeping rich field text, reviewing and re-reading them throughout the fieldwork phase proved to be an important step in being reflective and continuing to view the data from a variety of perspectives. Field text served as a record of the experience and as a journal for my reflections: reflections about impressions, reactions, and behaviors immediately following interviews and observations were written. These journal entries were an important step in the analysis. The reflections provided guidance about the next steps and further clarification that was needed. Richards (2005) describes guidelines about these reflections that include attention to accuracy, context, thick description, and the useful and reflexive nature of the records. Key stories, vignettes, and examples that revealed something unique or telling about the case were highlighted.

Field Text Log

An electronic spreadsheet was created to log all gathered field texts including field notes, memos, reflections, observations, documents received, and interviews (Richards, 2005). Whenever possible, electronic versions of reviewed documents were obtained. A contact log was kept to record data on all initial interview contacts, follow up requests, dates of interviews and direct observations. In addition, a daily log of my activities was kept which recorded the sequence of events.

Analysis

Analysis occurred throughout the research process from the reflections following an interview to the elevation of a vignette from the transcribed page to a key storyline. The following section makes explicit the analysis process starting with the primary intent to 'seek first to understand.' The process of coding the extensive amount of field texts and coalesce the data to see the themes is also described.

Seek First to Understand

Understanding the context, concepts, and ideas that were being discussed in the interviews was facilitated by the social and responsive nature of the interviews. The guiding questions served as the foundation for dialogic interviews. A natural flow of ideas, bantering back and forth with examples, vignettes, reflections, and shared experiences happened throughout each interview. My understanding of this school district's stories was socially co-constructed with each interviewee. As a collaborative researcher, educator, and human being, I think and process out loud as a way to make sense of what I am experiencing. By making my thinking visible, the interviewees were able to interject their agreement, clarify, expand upon an idea, and/or share their own reflections. I was constantly engaged in a process where I was seeking first to understand; to understand, not a single *truth*, but rather this person's meaning of the concept we were discussing. Frequently, a follow up question and response helped to rectify a misunderstanding or strengthen a new understanding that was forming. On more than one occasion, an interviewee would ask if it was OK with me if they followed up with the Superintendent about our conversation and an idea that was generated. Laughing each time, I responded that of course it was OK.....isn't that the purpose of constructivist research? It was abundantly evident in the repeated audio reviews of the interviews that not only were participants sharing their insights and experiences, they were engaged in genuine reflection during the interview.

Throughout the five month period when I was heavily engaged in interviewing, I was keenly aware of Clandinin and Connelly (2000) four directions of inquiry. Utilizing these four directions influenced the questions and the 'check for comprehension' follow-

up questions during the interview. *Inward* directions caused reflection on the internal conditions of hopes, feelings, dreams, and moral disposition where *outward* direction focused on the environment that the participants were in. A temporal lens was used to view experiences in a *backward* and *forward* direction of the past, present, and future perspectives. The temporal (backward and forward) and personal/social (inward and outward) dimensions were augmented with the dimension of place to create a three dimensional space to view the inquiry experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). These four directions were also prevalent throughout the analysis process as the findings were synthesized.

Correspondence and patterns.

Patterns began to emerge as documents were reviewed, observations made, and dialogue with participants ensued. Finding common threads in the field texts led to consistency in the patterns. These common threads or themes are the key to trustworthiness as a qualitative case study researcher. Stake (1995) reminds us that we seek the patterns from categorical aggregation or direct interpretation. Patterns are sometimes known in advance as they influence or were drawn from the research questions. Given the lens of Fullan's conceptual framework, the ten components would be an initial set of patterns where I expected to find data. The evidence of meaning and consistency was the correspondence that I sought. However, I was open to the unexpected patterns that could emerge from the data especially, when the patterns suggested alternative explanations.

Qualitative researchers particularly those with a constructivist paradigm are relativists. This plays into the analysis and interpretation of the data because not all

observations, interviews, document reviews, and interpretations are the same. They are all relative. Relative to the case, connection to other data, and relative based on authenticity and credibility (Stake, 1995).

Coding by category.

An MP3 recording of each interview was transcribed. Following the receipt of the electronic transcription, the interview was coded using NVivo8. Attributes were created for each interviewee:

- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Number of years experience in education
- Number of years in Birchwood School District
- Current responsibilities and title in the school district
- Number of years in the current position

The first stage of coding started with the creation of nodes that related to the issue and topical questions as well as Fullan's ten components:

- Capacity Building
- Collective Moral Purpose
- Compelling Conceptualization
- Demanding Culture
- External Partners
- Focused Financial Investments
- Lateral Capacity Building
- Ongoing Learning
- Organizational Constructs
- Policy
- Productive Conflict
- Structures
- The Right Bus

Each interview was simultaneously read and auditorially reviewed while coding. The topic coding (Richards, 2005) listed above served as an initial review of the data.

Utilizing NVivo8™ software, over 1560 references were coded to the research questions and Fullan's components or other categories. The subsequent analytic coding was the result of the interpretations, reflections, and interconnections on the meaning of the data patterns. A second read of all of the data resulted in seventy-four (74) additional nodes. A sampling of those nodes include coherence of theories of action throughout the system, capacity building, staff turnover, changes in instructional practices, fragility, leadership, rigor, relevance, and relationships, autonomy, and small school design, to name a few. This type of purposeful coding resulted in an understanding about how a category fits with other data by gathering information across the case and multiple data sources (Richards, 2005). All data sources were coded to demonstrate which nodes warranted additional coding up due to the sheer frequency of the references.

Seek First to Understand: From Field Text to Research Texts

A primary purpose of qualitative research is to gain understanding. Throughout the work in the school district and creating field texts, I sought to understand what was happening at many levels of the system that influenced student achievement. The next steps were to create narrative text that would allow the reader to gain experiential understanding (Stake, 1995) about this school district's work.

Richards (2005) provides an extensive array of strategies for working up from the data to unearth the themes and patterns. It was at this point that the nodes were grouped and put in a hierarchical tree with a 'parent node' serving to label the theme. As the themes emerged from the coded references, each reference for the theme was re-read and additional coding was done to fully understand the breadth and depth of the theme.

Re-reading and reflecting on the field text allowed me to move from the text to patterns and back to other data sources. Borrowing from grounded theory methodologies, open coding or 'opening up the data' expanded the inquiry. As patterns emerged, visual models of the relationships and concepts were explored and proved helpful in the analysis.

Interpretation of the Field Texts: From Field Texts to Research Texts

The written format of this case study was designed with the intent to educate the reader and prompt the reader's thinking about school district's support of schools. Three of my personal archetypes are teacher, student, and advocate. The importance of portraying this case study in a manner that is illustrative to others and provides a context and framework for the reader to potentially apply to his/her own work is a worthy challenge. I look forward to advancing these ideas to the next level of development and analysis for eventual implementation and distribution. No doubt, there is a degree of advocacy within the summary, pushing the reader to consider, postulate, and reflect upon key concepts and themes. Ultimately. . . to be compelled to act.

The research design and methodology described resulted in four themes that are outlined in Chapter Four. Through the interviews, direct observations and document reviews, the school district's organizational constructs, policies, and structures were explored to uncover how the district supports schools to increase student achievement.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

> It is so easy to get caught up in the excitement and imagine how we might influence the future of public education. And then I talk with a student and remember that our work is really about influencing their lives – influencing the future for our students. Our students probably don't care who visits our classrooms or interviews our staff . . . or how we talk about our work.... they are watching what we do, they are noticing what we expect of ourselves and what we expect from them. They see how well prepared we are for class and understand how well prepared they must be . . . they watch how we handle ourselves as learners and translate that to how they should participate as learners. We have the power and the possibility everyday - to inspire students to achieve their dreams (Superintendent).

It's a warm August morning and the Superintendent passionately lays out the urgency and moral purpose that is before the school district staff during the annual Back to School district gathering. The former comprehensive high school auditorium is packed with every staff member, bus driver, classroom teacher, and principal. Amazingly, they all fit in one place! An Olympic theme sets the tone. Each school and department performs a song judged by Board Members in true Olympic tradition. Like an Olympic coach, the Superintendent gives an opening address that is simultaneously upbeat and urgent, hopeful and realistic, and clear about the expectations for each staff member. The coherence begins; the interconnectedness made explicit. The district's four initiatives are reiterated in this setting and the expectations are clear:

1. Literacy and the disciplined implementation of Every Child a Reader™.
2. Math and the disciplined implementation of Everyday Math™ and secondary math curriculum maps
3. Incorporating best instructional strategies for English Language Learners
4. Integration of the Response to Intervention (RtI) processes to monitor student progress in the implementation of the curricula

Now the threads that have been woven throughout this study will pop out in rich colors with the organizational constructs and the hopes and dreams of the staff members of Birchwood School District; the interconnectedness of the district structures and schools. It is my intent that these findings will connect with each reader in some way because the voices sound like his/her own, the conditions ring familiar, or one is prompted to think about his/her own setting with a new lens. My intent is to compel each reader to action based on the theories, stories, and the urgency to create coherent educational systems for the children.

Juxtapositioned next to a large, thriving city in Colorado, Birchwood's challenges are evident before you leave the interstate highway that dissects this sprawling metropolis. The strip malls and 'mom and pop' shops line up, end to end, next to newly built fast food restaurants and drive-through Starbucks™. The contrast between new and old; local and corporate; singular and networked, serves as a backdrop to this small school district of approximately 6000 students.

Why study this place, this school district? The statistics provide obvious yet superficial answers. Sixty six (66) percent of the district's families are eligible for free and reduced meal benefits and 64% of the students are Hispanic and 29% are White. Birchwood's academic achievement is below the state median on Colorado reading, writing and math assessments (Colorado Department of Education Unit of Research and Evaluation, 2008d). It is a unique, small district.....But deeper than all of that is the energy and the current that is palatable when people talk about Birchwood School District. What are they doing over there? Are they reinventing themselves? Why small schools of 400? They are breaking up the high school?

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's contribution of millions of dollars jumpstarted this district's reinvention plans, but the real story lies beneath the grants, external partners, and national attention. The story plays out when one sees the interactions between a Latina mom and her new best friend, the school secretary; the interaction between a street savvy teenager and his principal as he gets money for lunch; stories that are shared with insight, reflection, and urgency by principals, teachers, and district administrators working diligently to reform a school district. The reason to study this district is summed up by a beginning teacher who said:

> And I think they did the reinvention because it just wasn't working before. And I think some [school design] models have proven more successful than others, but I think that it feels like they are really changing at the school that I'm at and they really strive to really make each school unique (Claire, teacher).

And the needs are daunting.

A core component of the research question is the actualization of increased student achievement. What is this school district doing to support schools that *results in increased student achievement?* The whole point is that all of these efforts result in a positive change for students. However, there is no consensus on what 'increased student achievement' means. In Colorado, where this school district is located, the state assessment results are one public and high-stakes measure of student achievement, but are these results all there is to student achievement?

The Achievement Context

Achievement as defined by state assessments.

Defining achievement or proficiency is a complex endeavor that envelopes multiple paradigms and constructs. Student achievement in Colorado is defined largely

by the performance and growth on the state's assessments in reading, writing, and mathematics. In August, 2008, the Colorado Department of Education introduced a new student achievement growth model that "measures student progress from one year to the next in the context of a student's 'academic peers'" (Colorado Department of Education Unit of Research and Evaluation, 2008e). The new growth model answers three questions about individual student growth:

- How much growth did a child make in one year? What is?
- How much growth is enough to reach proficient? What should be?
- How much growth have similar students made, i.e. those with the same score history? What could be?

The growth model provides data to school districts and individual schools about the growth students are making from year to year compared with similar academic peers. This model provides a longitudinal perspective that recognizes that not all students start in the same academic place.

The Birchwood achievement context.

The Birchwood Superintendent explains the state's new growth model to the district staff at the Back to School address and connects this model to the district's focus.

> Becoming a disciplined system requires the monitoring of the things we think are important. So how will we know if we've been successful in our disciplined execution of these [four] initiatives? . . . [The Colorado Department of Education] rolled out a new method to monitor student learning and utilize the results of [the state assessment] to help us understand growth ....We are now able to look at student achievement and growth – by district– by school – by teacher and by student. We will be able to correlate the implementation of our curriculum with student achievement through this growth model (Superintendent's *Back to School Address*).

The results that the Superintendent referenced were a mixed bag from a snapshot of 2008 performance levels or the growth between the 2007 and the 2008 school years. From the single perspective of the 2008 state assessment results, Birchwood's reading and math results are well below the state results in reading and mathematics (Colorado Department of Education Unit of Research and Evaluation, 2008a), as seen in Table one.

Table 1

2008 State Assessment Percent Proficient and Advance Results

	Reading			
	3rd Grade	5th Grade	8th Grade	10th Grade
State	70	70	67	66
Birchwood	45	43	37	35
	Mathematics			
	3rd Grade	5th Grade	8th Grade	10th Grade
State	70	65	47	30
Birchwood	41	39	18	5

The state's growth model, intended to provide a more accurate picture of student progress and steady school improvement, shows mixed results. Individual student growth was measured in twenty one (21) areas in reading, writing, and mathematics between 2007 and 2008. Birchwood School District, as a whole, did not meet or exceed the state results in any of the twenty one areas (Colorado Department of Education Unit of Research and Evaluation, 2008c). Six individual schools within the district did meet or exceed the state medians on reading, writing, or mathematics. Only 18.9% of the

elementary students who scored unsatisfactory or partially proficient on the state reading assessment in 2007 made enough growth in 2008 to be considered 'on track to catch up' within three years (Colorado Department of Education Unit of Research and Evaluation, 2008e) . The middle school and high school reading growth results are similar with 19.4% and 14.9% respectively. Annual individual student growth across the district is not a given. The same growth data was utilized to determine which schools across the state were making adequate growth with 'academic peers' in reading, writing, and mathematics. Table 2 shows the number of Birchwood schools that are labeled as 'underperforming' by the Department of Education (Colorado Department of Education Unit of Research and Evaluation, 2008f) based on the median student growth and the percentage of students who scored proficient or advanced on the state assessments. It should be noted that more schools are improving in mathematics than any content area. Last year, mathematics was a district-wide elementary focus with the introduction of Everyday Math™.

Table 2

2008 School Achievement and Growth

Colorado Department of Education

School Rating based on 2008 School Achievement and Growth

	Reading	Writing	Mathematics
Excelling	1	1	1
Sustaining	2	2	1
Improving	2	4	7
Underperforming	20	18	16

Note. K-8 schools are reported as two schools (K-6, 7-8)
K-12 schools are reported as three schools (K-6, 7-8, 9-12)

A broader context of achievement.

Without taking away the importance of students being proficient in literacy and math as defined by a common assessment, achievement can encompass other perspectives. In fact, a broader definition of student achievement and proficiency is supported in this study, not only as short term indicators to measure the reform efforts, but also to espouse a comprehensive view of what it means to be successful as a student, teacher, school and district. This comprehensive view encompasses multiple measures of literacy and math (Ardovino, Hollingsworth, & Ybarra, 2000) as well as a definition of achievement that is expanded to envelope what it means to be successful outside of school (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2006). The Birchwood School District also takes a comprehensive view of their accomplishments and achievement as described in the district's 2008 Annual Report.

> Our dedication to creating personalized learning communities led to one of Birchwood's most successful school years on record. The Class of 2008 received the highest ACT results in six years. Almost 100% of Birchwood seniors applied to college. Of those seniors, 90% were accepted into the college of their choice. More than $2,600,000 in scholarships were awarded to Birchwood students, and the District celebrated the achievement of our first Boettcher scholar. Student registration in Birchwood is up, and our parent satisfaction rating is at 80%. It comes as no surprise that on top of our many achievements, Birchwood is noticing the highest teacher retention rate yet, and teachers are applying to become a part of our District in record numbers. .....Last year, an unprecedented 100% of [a school's] seniors were accepted into four-year colleges.

Certainly all students should be prepared for any post-secondary option they choose. That goal involves more than the finite scores on the state assessments. Proficiency and achievement is more comprehensive and this district is expanding the definition of achievement, in part, to include an increased graduation rate from high school, increased application and acceptance into college, increased number of scholarships awarded, and overall satisfaction from parent, student, and staff stakeholders.

When asked about the lack of student achievement growth measured from 2007 to the 2008 spring state assessments, one Superintendent's Cabinet member outlined the expectations around growth at this point in the district's reform efforts. Wouldn't you have expected more consistent growth across the district, I asked?

> Not yet. No, really I wouldn't because the other thing that happens is the people who do well in the old systems leave when you start doing new things. The teachers leave who did well in the old system, so everyone of our 25 year teachers have gone and it's drawn in all these new teachers. Even the students who have done well in the old system opt out of a system that is reforming. And then it draws in people more like the people you were worried about to begin with.
>
> And so what happens is that you have the kinds of kids coming in here are the ones that have not been successful in a traditional academic environment. And they hear from their friends, and they hear from the media that this is a new way

of doing things, where the teachers and the faculty care and connect with the kids. And it's driven by relevance in terms of the instructional quality. That interests people who may have an interest in being successful in a different kind of way.

That requires a whole amount of scaffolding, and bringing skills up because that group of people coming in I just described are usually not the best students in the traditional academic sense of where they're coming from.

So the point of the matter is, is that the system itself probably is not going to produce academic changes until it could a) stabilize around its vision, and then b) start to get some procedures, and processes, and structures in place that allow business as usual to start to run. And then once you have business as usual starting to run, you can start going after what's keeping academic achievement from going where it needs to go. And that partly is helping the kids remediate skills that they don't have, and partly helping teachers figure out how to provide high quality instructional practice in this brand new model.
...[The] notion that we've had all along is, "How do we keep the [reinvention] implementation dip as shallow and as short as it possibly can be?" We have naively hoped that we might be able to find a way to do that, and we haven't found a way to do that. We are in the middle of an implementation dip. Although, I see evidence that things are starting to turnaround even academically. I mean, there's already some evidence that we are seeing satisfaction scores increase [and] attendance rates are starting to look up.

.....Our scholarship rates, our acceptances to college. I mean, there are a lot of soft signs that things are going right. We don't yet have the graduation rate up in terms of the way [the Colorado Department of Education] is defining it, and we also don't have our academics up.

I don't explain it away. No one's happy with it, but it's also unfortunately not surprising. It just takes time for a system to reorganize, and then bring its students and its teachers up to capacity within that new system (Stephen, District Administrator).

As we talked through the myriad of indicators, he summarized the early indicators of increased student success and included indicators related to district and school processes:

> [Teacher, student, and parent] satisfaction, attendance, discipline, college acceptance, and scholarship funding....those are the soft indicators we're seeing right now of change. You could look deeper and look at the number of kids that are engaged in internships and that sort of thing. I don't have that data. You're

> looking at our entire Research Department right here, and all the other things. I mean, that's like a third of my job, and so there's a point where we just can't tease all that out.
>
> Those are the things that come to my mind as examples . . . I would say also process. Evidence that the models are being implemented with fidelity in my mind is another indicator that we're headed in the right direction. Whenever you do evaluation, you can look at product, you can look at process. Right now, products are some of the things we just talked about, early indicators, but processes indicators are always better predictors of future success early in a reform than are product indicators. And those are the things we pull up through the [School Support Team] SST visits and things like that. And I can't say I have any data on all of that. That's all anecdotal. It's just making sure that school models....It's just eyeballs going out, and ears listening, and seeing if schools are staying true to their models. And that's kind of the soft role of Central Ad. It's just making sure that people don't forget that while we're doing Every Child a Reader™, we're still doing unique learning communities (Stephen, District Administrator).

It is evident that the quantitative results of the state assessments are only one data point to examine when reflecting upon this school district's efforts. Other indicators provide a more comprehensive perspective. And sometimes all of the data and processes can be captured by the blunt, yet optimistic, comments of a student. A principal described how she started to understand her school's needs. She knew the school was in trouble by most traditional perspectives. However, it was a poignant statement by a young student that brought it all home:

> I had a student tell me when I was leaving [the former school], and it's interesting because she's actually a student here now, but she said to me, "Man, Miss, we're really gonna miss you, but let me tell you, that school REALLY needs you over there."
>
> Even the kids know.

The context has been set: national, state, and school district. The high stakes assessment results plus other, more comprehensive indicators of student success have been described. Let's now look at the four themes that surfaced from this case study.

Thematic Analysis and Findings

The following four themes were pervasive throughout the case study. Each theme will be linked to the overarching research question and the related topical research question. The topical questions guided the research process and provided clarity and depth to the overarching research question. The rich descriptions, vignettes, and insights from the interviewees will bring these four themes alive. Table 3 provides an overview of the connection between the issue and topical research questions and the four themes.

1. There is a resounding coherence of a collective moral purpose (Fullan, et al., 2004) and compelling conceptualization regarding the theory of action and 'what is tight' and 'what is loose' (DuFour, 2007).
2. The alignment and interconnectedness of the organizational constructs and structures with the compelling conceptualization provides a framework of support to schools.
3. Building capacity is a core function throughout the district and there are intentional efforts to increase the capacity of teachers and building leaders.
4. There is an emerging understanding of the 'defined autonomy' (Marzano & Waters, 2009) between the district expectations and each school's unique flexibility.

Table 3

Research Questions and Themes

Research Question: What are the district organizational constructs, policies, and structures that influence student achievement especially for marginalized students?	
Topical Question 1: How do these district organizational constructs, policies, and structures provide support to schools to influence student achievement with a focused lens on marginalized student populations?	Theme 2: The alignment and interconnectedness of the organizational constructs and structures with the compelling conceptualization provides a framework of support to schools.
Topical Question 2: How do the theories about school improvement held by the school district leadership team influence the support to schools? • 'What is tight' and 'what is loose'?	Theme 1: There is a resounding coherence of a collective moral purpose (Fullan, et al., 2004) and compelling conceptualization regarding the theory of action and 'what is tight' and 'what is loose' (DuFour, 2007).
Topical Question 3: How do the explicit theories of education and action of the district leadership team materialize into organizational constructs, policies, and structures that influence teaching and learning at the school and classroom level?	Theme 2: The alignment and interconnectedness of the organizational constructs and structures with the compelling conceptualization provides a framework of support to schools.
Topical Question 4: How are the district office roles and focus supportive of the schools' efforts? • How are these district office roles and focus communicated and understood throughout the system?	Theme 4: There is an emerging understanding of the 'defined autonomy' (Marzano & Waters, 2009) between the district expectations and each school's unique flexibility.
Topical Question 5: How do teachers change their instructional practices? • How were these changes in instructional practices a result of district-supported efforts? • Is it through formal structures or informal networks?	Theme 3: Building capacity is a core function throughout the district and there are intentional efforts to increase the capacity of teachers and building leaders.
Topical Question 6: How is time structured to support professional learning communities, common planning time, and job-embedded professional development?	Theme 2: The alignment and interconnectedness of the organizational constructs and structures with the compelling conceptualization provides a framework of support to schools. Theme 3: Building capacity is a core function throughout the district and there are intentional efforts to increase the capacity of teachers and building leaders.

The research question grounds our reflection of the four themes from this case study. The first theme and corresponding topical question are highlighted in Table 4. Each of the themes and topical questions will be highlighted at the beginning of the narrative description of the theme.

Policies

Table 4

Research Question, Topical Question 2, and Theme 1

Research Question: What are the district organizational constructs, policies, and structures that influence student achievement especially for marginalized students?
Topical Question 2: How do the theories about school improvement held by the school district leadership team influence the support to schools?
Theme 1: There is a resounding coherence about a collective moral purpose and compelling conceptualization regarding the theory of action and 'what is tight' and 'what is loose'.

There is a resounding coherence throughout the school district.

The coherence throughout Birchwood School District is unlike anything that I have experienced. Coherence is the prevailing theme throughout this study. This Superintendent's ability to craft a plan, build understanding, and implement this plan with a pervasiveness that reaches all the way to a first year teacher's classroom.....it is nothing less than extraordinary. While the specifics of the plan are contextually-based and should not be replicated in mass, what should be reflected upon are the multitude of ways that the educators know the vision, common direction and the steps that are being taken to get

to the expected outcomes. They all know what is expected of them and why. The compelling conceptualization, the plan...it is articulated in every venue. It is understood from the Superintendent to principals to classroom teachers. And most importantly, it is being implemented and practiced.

Creating coherence in this context means that the structures, constructs, action plans, district initiatives, expectations, and the instructional practices in the classroom align with district vision to increase student achievement. *Everything fits together.* Knapp, Copland, and Talbert (2003) describe coherence as the action to "bring student, professional, and system learning into relationship with one another and with learning goals" (p. 13). There is intentionality and alignment of the entire system including resources to focus on teaching and learning. What was also striking in this case study is how resounding the coherence was with all seventeen interviewees.

There is coherence throughout the system about a collective moral purpose.

A collective moral purpose as it applies to public education is the fundamental belief that all students can and will learn given the opportunity. In the Birchwood School District, the academic bar is set high and there is a belief on the part of the adults and the students that all students can achieve the goals. A strong collective moral purpose was evident in the words, vignettes, and examples given by the Birchwood interviewees. As the seventeen interviews unfolded, I was struck by the lack of reference to the obvious economic and ethnic student diversity and needs. In fact, not a single comment was made about the student demographics. My interpretation of the lack of reference to the student demographics is that there are no excuses made. The challenges of this district are not blamed on the student demographics. In fact there was no evidence of blaming at all. *It*

just is. Many educators use the phrase "all means all", however, that axiom is alive and well in Birchwood School District. In fact, the collective moral purpose to educate all students to a high level is so profoundly grounded in the urgency to put these structures in place and build teachers' capacity. These kids couldn't wait any longer.

One teacher leader, with distinct passion in her voice, articulates the challenge this way:

> This is like a civil rights type of thing. It's like – it's a rights issue. It's like every student at this school should have the right to get an education to be able to go to college. So, to be able to get teachers to really buy into that philosophy – it's not always easy because working in this school, for me – and this is [the principal's] vision, which it's like, oh, my gosh, I've never heard anybody like him. But he's so right – it's like to work to give students of color the same opportunities to graduate from high school and to go to college. It's a right for them to get that, but to be able to find teachers to work and to understand that it's – it is critical. I think we're getting there, but the work is hard. I'm gonna tell you the work is hard, and not everybody is cut out to do the work, and they leave the district after a time, for whatever reasons. And even teachers that work really hard, I mean, you just burn out because the work is so hard (Wendy, Teacher).

One Cabinet member talks about who is coming to the school district and the underlying belief that all students are welcome.

> What we have generally come to grips with is the idea that our commitment is to our kids and our commitment is that once they leave us, they go into post-secondary options where they can be successful. Our commitment is not that we rush around, and play the game of exiting them by the time they're 18. [Now] in the category of discipline, we also had to work with principals about how are we going to deal with kids who come to us for the wrong reasons, and still be an open system (Stephen, District Administrator).

You mean those that are not as success-oriented?

> Well, but even more importantly, they come to be a part of the gang, but – so it's not around – the wrong reasons aren't that they failed someplace else, we'll take them. Give us your tired, your poor, but in fact, we celebrate your tired and your poor. We want to make that group work because we think that's the core of that, but these are the kids that come here because they want to do bad things, and they don't want to be held accountable the way they were held accountable before.

> We've had to work with the principals because understandably, they don't want these bad apples within their system.
>
> They want all the kids who have failed. They want all the kids who are struggling socially and even who are acting bad and gotten in trouble, but they want all of those. They don't want the kids that are going to come, make threats, recruit for gangs, or sell drugs on the campus. We've had to deal with that, and we've had to revise policy because of the reform effort to take into account things that have happened in other districts (Stephen, District Administrator).

All students are welcome who come to the school district for the purpose of getting an education. It is really that simple. To a person involved in this study, all truly means all. It struck me on several occasions that no one that I interviewed referenced the high percentage of students living in poverty in his/her school or the growing number of English Language Learners. No one. The District Improvement Plan does not detail the efforts specific to one group of students with the exception of English Language Learners. With the pervasiveness of the economic need and language acquisition challenges within this district, the absence of these conversations perplexed me. During my last interview with a Cabinet member, I asked about this observation. Why isn't there more explicit focus on the marginalized student groups? His answer surprised me in its simplicity.

With a chuckle, he said,

> Brenda, if we focused on each subgroup within each content area, within each grade level, we would have improvement plans that are a hundred pages long! The majority of the students here ARE the marginalized student groups that you are talking about! That is why we are focusing on quality classroom instruction in literacy and math. All of our students need that universal first instruction (Stephen, District Administrator).

The needs are truly daunting. The following example illustrates how those that have chosen to teach and lead in this school district understand the needs and are

committed to making a difference with their group of students. The collective moral purpose is evident from a principal who described how things are taken care of in this district.

> Yeah, a good school should have all that in it anyways, just like mission statements. I want every child to succeed. My God, that's some revelation. But to really practice that and have it become so engrained that it's just a given. It's not a classroom engagement, or on-task isn't this, [idea that] hey, everybody's being good. It just becomes so much of that's how we do things here. It's not even an option. Failure's not even an option here. This is the way we do it and this is what we do, so do it (Lee, Principal).

There is an acceptance for all students. The coherence of the collective moral purpose that is seen, heard, and felt in this school district sets the foundation for the work. Everything is built upon the collective moral purpose and the purpose is believed throughout the school district. With the collective moral purpose as the foundation, the framework for the compelling conceptualization is realized in a theory of action and is articulated into expectations of 'what is tight' and 'what is loose' (DuFour, 2007).

There is coherence throughout the system about a compelling conceptualization and a theory of action.

Throughout the interviews, observations, and documents, there was a common and pervasive message that a reinvention of schools was needed five years ago. The reinvention created schools that were smaller learning communities and gave families choices that met their children's learning styles and needs. Added to the choice and district's small size was the belief that strong relationships with students and families and making learning relevant and more rigorous (Littky & Grabelle, 2004) was also necessary. This plan would be recognizable to most educators and understood by parents and community members. However, to convert a comprehensive student high school and

the alternative high school into six smaller schools; redesign ALL other schools into K-8 or K-6 schools of approximately 400 students, and provide complete choice with transportation has been a sizeable undertaking. While that reinvention is not the focus of this case study, it is the core of the compelling conceptualization that is at the heart of this district's plan to increase student achievement. An understanding of the historical context as well as how interviewees described the reinvention and the current initiatives is paramount to comprehending the current state of this district's work.

The superintendent, with a hint of humor, describes the theory of action and how it started with the reinvention:

> Just do it. Is that a theory? It took us a long time. Now, I think we figured it out. So that's been with the help of Stanford and some other groups. And really around several pieces of it, that when students are actively engaged in their learning, then your achievement results increase. When the learning is relevant to what it is they care about and how they see their future, then again, their learning increases and their achievement results are improved.
>
> But when they are part of constructing the learning, so we are constructivist as the environment – for the most part, we do have some that are constructivist school designs, that's a big piece of our theory. And then another component of that is around choice. We believe that when people choose into the environments in which they are learning, that their buy-in is increased, and therefore, their learning increases. So I think those are the main components of it.
>
> We started with the relationship part of that. Birchwood, historically, is a very relational community. You'll hear people talk about Birchwood as – they'll say things like, "We're a family." You hear that a lot here. So we have always been pretty deep in the relational piece, so I don't think that we articulated that in our theory, but it's always just a value we hold. And then as we learned more about our work and we started getting connected with them, the Gates Foundation – they used rigor, relevance, and relationships as their kind of groundwork (Superintendent).

The prevalence of the theory of action is evident from the most senior staff member all the way through the system to one of the district's newest members, a first

year teacher, who describes the theory of action in Birchwood to increase student achievement.

> Well, I think the theory to increase student achievement is what they've done with their specialized schools. So, each school has a different sort of template of learning, so there's expeditionary learning. At [my school], there's a student teacher in many classrooms. They're a partnership school, so it's that extra attention. So, I feel like what they've done to increase student achievement is offer different ways that kids can experience their education and find one that really fits with them. They have a back to basics. There's a lot of different choices that they offer for students to receive their education.
>
> And I think they did the reinvention because it just wasn't working before. And I think some models have proven more successful than others, but I think that it feels like things are really changing at the school that I'm at and they really strive to really make each school unique....[And] there have been two curriculum changes. Last year they implemented Everyday Math™, and this year, they have implemented Every Child a Reader™, and so that has really changed the instruction of both of those areas, and for me, it's extremely helpful. And Every Child a Reader™ has – I mean I have kids who weren't reading at the beginning of the year who are actually reading and learning how to decode. And they have helped provide for the framework for lesson planning, and that's been huge (Claire, Teacher).

For the past five years, the reinvention was the exclusive focus. Every system, practice, assumption, allocation, and process had to be redesigned, scrapped and rewritten, or created and hopefully not missed. What about high school athletics? Choir? Communicating to families about their new options? This work is well documented in the forthcoming publication *Beating the Odd* (Cuban, et al., in press). The reinvention commanded extraordinary energy and diligence; it was not the final destination rather its purpose was to serve as a foundation for the current work of discipline and execution of quality instruction.

> The work is changing a little bit. Now we're not so focused on school design, although that still continues at the site level. It's more about improving student

> achievement through improving classroom practices. And so, we are really focused on that this year in a different way than we've been in the past. And we're also trying to bring more, I guess I'd say, structured curriculum to our teachers. Not prescribed where on this day you do this, but structured. So we're really trying to make it so they don't have to spend all of their time thinking about how to put together curriculum. But if they are looking at a constructivist model then they have the framework available, and then they can build upon that framework. We haven't had that in the past. And we haven't been able to focus on that because we've been doing the structural reform. So now we're looking at the practice within the classroom and providing the frameworks, so that teachers can really think about their practice rather than, "What am I gonna do tomorrow?" and "What's the curriculum?" and "What should I be teaching" (Jody, District Administrator)?

A member of the Superintendent's Cabinet expanded upon the theory of action to include having the right people on the bus (Collins, 2001). When asked to expand upon the idea of discipline and execution and how to achieve quality instruction in the classrooms, he outlined the explicit decision-making about school leadership.

> We collectively decided that the first step in that process was going to be in ensuring that we had adequate leadership at the building level because that was going to be the link we at central ad had to the classrooms. We [district office administrators] can't reach the classrooms, but principals can reach the classrooms. [L]ast year we spent a fair amount of time focusing on building-level leadership. Building-level leadership focus included a piece of all of our administrator meetings that we have. There was always a piece around leadership. We had three leadership topics that were strands that we covered all year long" (Stephen, District Administrator).

A common understanding about the theory of action was pervasive in all of the interviews. Everyone knew why they were doing what they were doing and exactly what the expectations were.

'What is tight' and 'what is loose' (DuFour, 2007)?

The research question sought to determine the district policies that contributed to the increase in student achievement. Birchwood School District is a policy governance system. The influence of school district policies in a traditional sense is less evident in

this case. Board policies were seldom mentioned. Instead, the superintendent's 'means' to the Board's End Statements are the critical component including the crystal clear expectations set forth by the superintendent and cabinet. It is a school district of action and less a school district governed by policy.

Throughout the interviews there was coherence about the theory of action and 'what is tight' and 'what is loose'. Every interviewee articulated the same responses about the four district initiatives and the rationale behind the reinvention including small learning communities, choice, relationships, rigor, and relevance. This coherence, to me, illustrated the system-wide understanding of this set of background, foundation, and the expectations. The superintendent describes the evolution of what is considered 'tight' and 'loose' and her expectations.

> So it [expectations, curriculum implementation] moved to being from being very, very rigid to being very, very loose and now being a little tighter again. And part of that is intentionality with that, and I don't do very many things that are just kind of off the cuff. I really try to be very intentional and we've intentionally tried to be tight than super loose, and now tighter so that some of what happened when it was very, very loose is people got really nervous because of boundaries. They didn't know what to do without boundaries and they didn't meet deadlines.
>
> And they didn't know things. They didn't know they didn't know. And so it got really fun to have them be just a little bit stirred and say," Oh my gosh, I didn't even know I was supposed to do that." So that now when we bring it back a little tighter, they are saying "Oh, this is just exactly the structure we needed." So it's kind of letting people realize that there are rules and things on purpose. They are not just because people want to make your life miserable.
>
> They [structured curriculum] are really to support the learning goals and there is a different kind of appreciation for that now than we had before. I think before people wanted to be independent because they thought that being independent was a good idea. But they had no idea what to do with that independence. While the expectations for the implementation of structured curriculum and the district initiatives are tight there is flexibility.
>
> [T]he curriculum is tighter but not as tight as it was, so there is still some give and

> take in that. I really honestly, I think it's going to be dependent on the school and what's tight and what's loose. .... There are several things I look at. One is the experience as an administrator. One is the heart and the ability to learn, so it's kind of that competence and confident leader, I need to look. They need to not just be confident because I got a lot of those but they have to be competent. So that blend, looking at the results, that's a big component of that. And really, I think that the last piece is their willingness to learn, their results that they're getting and then their ability to gain or develop the trust among their staff. So where are they – where is their whole staff? Because they can't lead in isolation of their team (Superintendent).

It is evident that the structured curriculum is tight with some flexibility based on the school and school leadership. The coherence of what is considered 'tight' and 'loose' was evident in the myriad of communication formats from curriculum administrator memos, Superintendent's Back to School address, and stated expectations at principal and teacher trainings. The expectations are articulated during the School Support Team (SST) visits and administrator meetings. However, the evidence of this coherence is the fact that every single interviewee identified the same 'tight' components. Teachers, principals, coaches, regardless of amount of time in the district responded in the same way to the question about 'what is tight' which are the four district initiatives of the implementation of Everyday Math™, Every Child a Reader™, McRel's English Language Learner (ELL) Strategies, and the implementation of a Response to Intervention (RtI) process. It is communicated from the Superintendent and throughout the district administration, articulated at curriculum and ELL trainings, Learning Services written updates and during the monthly school visits. It is systemic. As one district administrator said, "Other things that are tight and loose, hmmmm.....well, anything that's not an initiative, is loose" (Roxie, District Administrator).

While formal Board of Education policies did not surface as an influential impact to student achievement, the concept of what is 'tight', expected, and non-negotiable did emerge as if there was the weight of policy.

The resounding coherence about the collective moral purpose to educate every student to a high degree and the compelling conceptualization regarding the theory of action is the first theme. The second theme is that there are organizational constructs and structures that provide a framework to support schools.

Organizational Constructs

The organizational constructs and structures provide a framework of support

Table 5 highlights the second theme and the three topical research questions that this theme addresses.

Table 5

Research Question, Topical Questions 1,3 and 6, and Theme 2

Research Question: What are the district organizational constructs, policies, and structures that influence student achievement especially for marginalized students?
Topical Question 1: How do these district organizational constructs, policies, and structures provide support to schools to influence student achievement with a focused lens on marginalized student populations?
Topical Question 3: How do the explicit theories of education and action of the district leadership team materialize into organizational constructs, policies, and structures that influence teaching and learning at the school and classroom level?
Topical Question 6: How is time structured to support professional learning communities, common planning time, and job-embedded professional development?
Theme 2: The alignment and interconnectedness of the organizational constructs and structures with the compelling conceptualization provides a framework of support to schools.

The organizational constructs within the Birchwood School District provide a framework that makes up the components of the system that when put together create an environment where the vision comes alive. These constructs have been radically redesigned and augmented throughout the reinvention phase and are currently still in development. While specific organizational constructs and structures were consistently identified, there is no compelling data to suggest that any one of the components could

stand alone or is necessarily transferable to another setting. However, it is the coherence, alignment and interconnectedness of these constructs and structures with the compelling conceptualization that could be generalized.

The identified constructs are:

- choice permeates the organization
- relationships and familiarity are facilitated by the small size of the school district
- focus provided by the district goals and initiatives.

Specific structures include:

- the School Support Teams (SST) that provide monitoring and support functions and
- the structured curricula that is 'tight'

Choice permeates the organization.

A component of Birchwood's theory of action, choice is seen as a fundamental aspect to increase student achievement. It is believed that when students choose a school design that meets their needs and interests there is increased motivation. As a result, parents and their children can choose from a menu of school designs regardless of where they live. This boundary-less system provides transportation for a student to attend any school within the district.

A district administrator described the constant alignment and articulation of expectations in this example about student choices.

> Also, part of [the theory of action] is the models or the designs of the schools, really trying to find a good fit for kids, a good learning style fit for all kids and offering lots of choices. Doing the bussing – it's so commonplace to us now, it just seems like that's just the way it is, but when you really think about that in perspective of other school districts, that is huge, saying in a full public system

that kids have choice to wherever they want to go.

> We just finished a directors' meeting. The superintendent had to again reiterate the importance of that the [principals] don't get to choose who comes in and out of the school. If there's availability, it's a full choice system. That happens every year. The message is very strong from there, so I think it's all around that. It's just the big thing that the traditional schooling wasn't working here, and it needs to change (Linda, District Administrator).

Another interviewee eloquently stated that "choice isn't choice without access" (Roxie, District Administrator). The access may refer to the transportation options or the expectations that principals will enroll any eligible student who is interested. Choice is not a halfhearted idea in Birchwood; it is a reality for any family interested in exercising it.

Choice existed for the schools' unique designs.

During the reinvention, school communities literally reorganized themselves into smaller 400 student campuses and chose among a myriad of school design models from early childhood, International Baccalaureate, Big Picture concept, Expeditionary Learning, Coalition of Essential School designs, Montessori, back to basics, partnership schools, technology, and internship/apprenticeship-based models. After two to four years depending on the school, the initial work of the school design has evolved into the current refinement stage. While most of the heavy redesign work is completed, understanding this construct is pivotal to understanding this school district. The refinement of each school's unique model is a continuous process. Consider that some redesigns have only existed for two years, there is obvious refinement needed from the initial implementation. Added to that are new staff each year as the school grows in enrollment or there is staff turnover. Plus there are the expectations of the faithful implementation of the structured

curriculum. The choice about each school's redesign was very deliberate and instructional in the reinvention phase and, at times, is up against the current expectations and definition of 'what is tight' and 'what is loose'. Throughout the interviews when this topic surfaced, there was a comfortable level expressed that the interviewee could talk about this with the Superintendent and other district administrators. It was also equally apparent that there is a healthy tension and that the unique school models and the district implementation of structured curriculum have not been completely resolved.

Schools have choices about time.

Choice is also visible in the creative and flexible use of time. While a common district calendar has recently been created, the use of time in a school day, week, and year is an intentional variable. Schools creatively use a late start schedule for embedded professional development, data reviews, and/or student problem-solving team meetings.

One principal describes the autonomy given to schools in how they use their time.

> So we have professional development every Wednesday the entire year, from 7:30 to 10:00 late start. So our teachers spend two hours together every Wednesday in service to their own professional development. It looks like all [staff] looking at student work groups that are built around content areas. So the math team works together and we do a four-week cycle.
>
> With the beginning of a four week session like this, they set learning targets based on these [achievement] targets. Talk about some instructional strategies they're going to use to teach those. The first week, we'll do building capacity with teachers around delivery, so if we're looking at formative assessment methods, and that will be really building background knowledge. A new reading workshop that we lead on strategies they can use – sometimes teachers will co-lead those.
>
> Week two – we do a check-in on progress. They'll bring a formative assessment sample of student work. Look at it with a group of teachers, look at what the strengths are in that sample, what the weaknesses are, and how we're going to teach towards alleviating those weaknesses by the time that four-week window's up.

> Week three we do a video study where we video one of the teachers in the group that's working on one of the strategies we're working on. All the teachers watch the video together, give teacher feedback, talk about practices they saw, and talk about what implications it has for their own practice.
>
> Week four we do the summative assessment – bring that summative assessment back. Break down student achievement by learning target to see what targets kids did great on, what targets they didn't do well on. And then to go a layer beneath that to look at what were the strategies we used in service of these targets, and which were the strategies that really became – that had high yield impact, and which ones didn't?
>
> And then we document those practices that were successful. We bank them, so we literally have our own research-based best practices materials we're generating. And then we take the best practices of, say, the group of all five of our math teachers, and then myself, as a math teacher, would look at those other four or five practices that were really high yield and effective, and I choose one of those as my strategy to intervene and go back and re-teach the targets my kids are lowest on through this process we have called Math Seminar, which is an after school support block.
>
> So then we're re-teaching targets to the kids that didn't master them for the next four weeks while we're going on to the other targets with all of the kids.
>
> It's all content teachers – so math, language arts, etc. Except for week one – the building new background knowledge is a different heterogeneous group of grade levels, contents, everything. So that building new information is a different grouping . . . [It is] one hundred percent designed by us (Thomas, Principal).

Thomas' choices, his intention, and the depth of thinking that has gone into this embedded professional development at this specific school are so clear. The conscientious insertion of choices throughout the system provides latitude for school leaders and staff to inclusively design internal structures like those described above to address the capacity building of teachers to change instructional practices. The choice construct is balanced with the articulation of 'what is tight' and 'what is loose' and is described in the fourth theme about 'defined autonomy'.

Relationships and informality among staff members at all levels of the organization are facilitated by the small size of the school district.

The construct of relationship-oriented culture and climate in Birchwood is significant. The small school and small school district size and culture lends itself to greater informality. More than one person commented that, "The Superintendent just knows how things are going." The small size of the district creates an intimacy that makes it possible for principals to pick up the phone and call the superintendent, who is their direct supervisor. One Superintendent Cabinet member believes that, "Well, size certainly supports a lot of informal structures that probably couldn't go anywhere in a larger district, and didn't seem to go as far as they go here" (Jody, District Administrator). While the small size of the district is referenced by several interviewees as a component of the family-like feeling in the district, Margaret Wheatley reminds us that "In organizations, real power and energy is generated through relationships. The patterns of relationships and the capacities to form them are more important than tasks, functions, roles, and positions" (Wheatley, 1999, p. 39). I would suggest adding "or the size of the organization." The point here is that many interviewees referenced the small size of the district or the school as an important factor to implementing these changes. What may be embedded in these comments is the belief that *relationships* are easier to form and maintain in small settings. Smaller learning communities were created to position schools to take advantage of the size to form meaningful relationships. This small school district made itself even smaller to facilitate this key construct. The Superintendent, district staff, and building leaders did not leave the development of relationships with each other and with students and families to chance. It was a

deliberate construct that was instrumental in the theory of action. As one teacher leader indicated, "So I think the whole community thing with the small school is critical from the staff to the parents to the students to the district as a whole" (Wendy, Teacher).

When asked about monitoring the progress of the Response to Intervention (RtI) implementation or how principals know how to get support for their literacy achievement efforts, one district administrator responded that,

> You know, I've worked in a couple of other districts that were bigger, and I think in those districts, that kind of conversation that you're describing is more formal. There is more of a – you know exactly who to call for science curriculum. There's a channel to have that happen. I have to say that at Birchwood, that's more informal. The School Support Team (SST) and the SST lead is one place to have that conversation, and sometimes, I think the [principals] use that process to ask for help and to ask questions and to get a conversation started and to get a way to talk about that with staff. It probably happens more with a [principal] calling the [Learning Services Director] directly. I think it does happen all the time, but it's a little less formal that is what I've experienced in other districts (Daniel, District Administrator).

A similar perspective was shared by a district administrator when talking about the implementation of each school's model, "We anticipate [principals] owning that implementation. If we see things in the School Support Teams (SST) or if there are concerns, we know, because we are a small district. If we hear things that say a school is not adhering to its model, we'll deal with those as they come up" (Stephen, District Administrator). The informality is facilitated by the small size of the district and the core value of the relationships.

A focus is provided by the district goals and initiatives.

A fundamental organizational construct is that the district's work is focused based on the district goals and four initiatives. Starting with the strategic plan that launched the

reinvention five years ago, the Superintendent outlined a plan for improvement that addresses the needs for instructional changes.

> This year's district improvement plan continues and extends a focus on classrooms that characterized last year's district improvement plan. Birchwood's small schools of choice offer opportunities not possible in traditionally organized schools, but realization of this potential can be achieved only through consistent, disciplined execution of best practice in our classrooms (Birchwood School District Improvement Plan).

The district initiatives align with the stated goals, objectives, improvement actions, and identified needs within the 2008-09 District Improvement Plan. Every interviewee readily identified the focus of the district by articulating the implementation of Every Child a Reader™, Everyday Math™, the Response to Intervention (RtI) process, and the training and infusion of effective strategies for English Language Learners as the district four initiatives.

Choice, relationships and informality facilitated by the small district size, and a focus provided by the goals and initiatives set the framework for the schools' work with students. District, department, and school decisions are made with these fundamental organizational constructs as guideposts. With the constructs as the framework, the interconnected and aligned structures provided additional supports to schools.

Structures

The organizational constructs and structures provide a framework of support

The organizational constructs described above are coupled with at least two structures to create a framework to support schools. The Birchwood structures are formal and informal, intentional and fluid. In yet another example of the coherence within the

system, the following structures have specific origins to the district needs and initiatives. The two specific structures identified throughout the study were School Support Teams (SST) and the two structured curricula of Every Child a Reader™ and Everyday Math™.

School Support Teams (SST) provide monitoring and support functions. Each person interviewed identified the monthly School Support Teams (SSTs) as a structure that supports schools to increase student achievement.

> There [are] specific goals that we have as a system. Then, the support teams come back and we talk about, "What did you learn? What did you see? What are the common things you saw? What are the outliers?" So if they are common, we address them as a system. If they are outliers, we address them as individuals (Superintendent).

My participation in a half day School Support Team (SST) visit at a K-8 school provided a firsthand account of this structure, the flow of the dialogue about this specific school, and the implications for the next steps by the school and district. Co-facilitating the SST was a member of the Superintendent's Cabinet and a member of Learning Services, plus two teachers, a parent, the principal of the school and another principal. After a short overview of the process and discussion about the school's progress with the implementation on the four district initiatives, the team visited each classroom. The principal designed a common observation tool for the classroom walkthroughs, to collect data on the district initiatives as well as school discipline and student engagement goals.

This SST observation supported information that surfaced from interviews, the district office memos, and the district plans about achievement. From the beginning to the end of the SST visit, alignment was evident with the Superintendent's expectations outlined at the Back To School meeting and the four district initiatives.

I observed a genuine exchange of what is working and what support is needed. The interactions of the co-facilitators with each other and team members demonstrated the authenticity of this process. Comments were solicited from each team member and a healthy discussion followed about the challenges of integrating the English Language Learner strategies into daily practice along with the new implementation of Every Child a Reader™.

The SST team's debrief provided direct feedback about the school's progress on the implementation of the two curricula, challenges, and student engagement and behavior. The facilitator asked what next steps the principal would take. In addition, there were recommendations from the school leadership and staff for next steps for the Learning Services department. The school staff as well as the visiting principal had the opportunity to articulate their needs to the district office.

My observation of the School Support Team process showed the interconnection between the district vision, the theory of action, the school visits, and the instruction in many classrooms. This was another demonstration of the coherence throughout the system and demonstrated how the plans are being implemented. An aspect of the School Support Team visits is the strength of the information flow and the interconnection among key members of the organization. There is top/down and bottom/up flow of information that provides a feedback and correction loop that increases the nimbleness of the organization to adapt.

> After each monthly SST visit, the data from the reviews is analyzed. We bring all 16 of those [Collaborative Log] sheets to a Learning Service meeting that follows the week after our SSTs. We debrief as the Learning Services team what's working. We listen for patterns. What are the challenges? Again, listening for patterns and trying to determine if that's an outlier that really is an issue district

wide (Roxie, District Administrator).

An example of listening for patterns and determining what is a district wide issue was the expressed need for Spanish literacy materials during some SST visits last year. This surfaced during the Learning Services SST debrief resulting in the purchase of Spanish literacy materials at specific schools this year. A month later while interviewing a district office administrator, the need for Spanish Literacy materials was brought up as an example of hearing the needs from the schools and taking appropriate action. The structure of the SST as well as the informal communication networks provides many opportunities for dialogue, response, and nimbleness. The SST structure is intended to be a deliberate and timely structure for monitoring and adjusting.

In more detail, a district administrator described how the criteria is set to describe successful implementation of the structured curriculum as observed during the monthly SST visits. This criteria, while established after the first set of SST observations, aligns with the principals' recommendation made at the SST observation. The recommendation was to benchmark exactly where each school needs to be in the implementation process of the district's four initiatives.

> [We outlined criteria] that we'd measure all the schools against for success of the goal we set. So, in this case, we were looking for just pure implementation of Every Child a Reader™. And our four criteria were if they had directed reading, demonstrated reading up and running, directed reading – you could see evidence of those two pieces, that they were starting to talk about assessments and the validation plans and the number of teachers that were trained. Those were the four criteria we set down. Then, there were four schools that kind of were at that stellar level. Then, we would look at what were the schools that we're concerned about. There was a gray area, but we identified for the cabinet [those areas]. Eventually, I think it'd be good to start doing that in the pre-visit. It was more like kind of after we went [on the SST visits], but getting that going earlier on.

The synthesis of schools' progress, as monitored during the SST visits, is brought forth to the Superintendent's cabinet for further analysis. This example typifies the top/down and bottom/up flow within this district. The expectations and district initiatives are established by the superintendent and are manifested in the organizational constructs, expectations about 'what is tight', and the structures. Information and feedback flows from the school leadership to the Superintendent's Cabinet through structures like the School Support Teams and the informal culture of communication. This description of an SST visit and the connections and feedback to the Superintendent's Cabinet about the monitoring of the implementation of the four district initiatives is a specific example of how coherence is developed in Birchwood School District. The same focus areas permeate everything.

However, with the constant focus on the four initiatives, there is less of an overt emphasis on the unique school models or specific school goals. School principals conveyed that they understood the intent of the SST which was a monitoring function to ascertain the progress of the district initiatives implementation. Some also addressed how the SST can be leveraged to apply pressure or support the work underway at a school.

> First year.....first dilemma was how do you go after long-term results with your short-term's starting point? We weren't all that the first year either, and so SST was really helpful, and a balance of really acknowledging what was working, and being a sounding board for what wasn't. It was helpful to have some qualitative data, as to what we were doing that didn't, six months into our life as a school, yet show quantitatively, so I really, really benefited that first year.
>
> Last year was really helpful getting to this level of detail around, "Okay, so we know what's working with Tier 1. We have a lot of room on XYZ. But we're starting to pull that together, and it is now time." Like, I can't turn 33 percent of kids who are unsatisfactory, and showing the growth rate that is the lowest without really treating this as what it is, that this isn't just about best first

instruction. Maybe it was if we opened six years ago, but it's not anymore.

> [S]o that was really helpful, that's just a good example of it. I hear mixed results [about the SST], and I also got some feedback because I was pushing back on the team, actually, on not being hard enough on us last year. And some feedback was, "Lot of teams will come in and run the show. We show up at <u>your</u> school, and you're like, "Here's what we're doing."" And I was like, "Oh, is that inappropriate? I have a good rapport with them and I am not worried about being in trouble. They were like, "No. Actually, I wonder if that's really helpful for people to know. Like, this is your chance to really share with us." I got that maybe not everyone's doing that. Maybe that is feeling like a little bit more of like it's evaluative. It's just really nice to just have the trust to be able to say, "This is what we're working on. We chose multi-age for this reason, I'm not sure it is rigorous enough, I need you to pull portfolios and cipher it out for me."
>
> But really, when I found it to be most productive – and I love it, and I was actually worried we would abandon it – is when we've been really clear. "Here's what we've been working on." So [the SST visit on] Monday, I will start the meeting by saying, "So, we finally had a little bit of results. Here's my dilemma. How much do I push people because last year, people said they were going to die. And how much do I not – results to just give them an excuse to become mediocre."
>
> I'm looking forward to it. I actually missed the September one. I don't know if all [principals] would say that. I think it's great, and I think it's a good example of what I was worried would happen this year and hasn't, is, most often you abandon something right before it's about to make a difference because we are most aware of the challenges. I was a little nervous about that reinvention was, we had been overall staying the course, but with SST, just if there was any talk of changing, not that it can't be refined, it was just like, oh no, this is probably just about to make a difference, don't give it up (Allen, Principal).

The systemic nature of the School Support Teams is impressive. There is a top/down/bottom/up flow that includes a monitoring function of the progress of the implementation of the district initiatives. Equally vital are the recommendations from the schools about what is needed. An additional benefit is the lateral capacity building and reciprocity between principals during the SST that is intentional and evident.

Three staff members' observations demonstrate the benefit of the SST structure. First a new principal comments on the benefits.

> I think that I'm still trying to figure that out. For us, I think that it creates transparency and accountability. [The team leader] has certainly let me know if there's any agenda items that you want me to put on, you let me know ahead of time, even if that's not what your staff wants. It's a way that we can heighten awareness. So I think that that's just supporting me in trying to figure out what I feel are the issues that we need to focus on. But I think that people are very fearful of SST, and really, what I was going to say [to the SST team] (Tony, Principal).

Another principal echoes the SST benefit to the principal to have leverage for the reform efforts underway.

> So, that team was able to give me the leverage. They would come in and then we would sit down and draft, "here's what we saw". We would never use names, but we would do the whole out of 35 classrooms – that's when it was the huge school. We saw eight teachers sitting at their desks. We would do some next steps. That was very helpful. In hindsight, it was very nerve-wracking and scary, but then it wasn't just me for the teachers to attack with things. It put me in a different place versus just being the heavy hand all the time (Linda, District Administrator).

One classroom teacher summed up how the School Support Team helps the school increase student achievement.

> So, it helps us focus on one thing that we're doing in the classroom, and I think it comes back to that precision piece, like how are we implementing a certain part of our instruction or a school model. And I think that mission and that, that all goes back to just what the district has put in place, so how is Every Child a Reader™ being implemented, how is Everyday Math™ being implemented, their research based curriculum and our tier 1 intervention for all our students? So, that goes back to how are we using those programs to support student achievement throughout the building (Claire, Teacher).

A district administrator described SSTs in this way, "It's an important structure here for having central ad interface with schools and give feedback and also learn what the struggles are out there. We bring back homework to work on from the schools" (Daniel, District Administrator).

The current SST structure and process has beneficial components for the school and the larger system. Interviewees articulate possibilities to maximize this process.

> I think we struggle a little bit, we go back and forth on whether it's good to stay with a school all year. The whole process was really built around continuous growth, and so there are times I feel like, as the instructional leader, I should be in more than four schools a year. I know those four schools well when I'm done, but I have to count on [SST leaders] and some of the others, to really have a handle on [the other schools]. Sometimes you care about your own department, and so that could be one, although when we don't believe that shifting every – it takes one or two visits to really get to know the school and the teaching staff, and to have the teaching staff open up to us.
>
> By my fourth or fifth visit when I go in, "how's it going, you know, what are you struggling with", [teachers] will tell me, "this pace is killing us. It's killing our kids and you know, I'm trying, but I can't keep it up." It takes awhile for them to get to that level of discussion, so we're not sure that switching those [SST teams and] schools [around] and to follow upon the things they said they were going to do next. That's one of our first discussions when they go back. "Last month you said you were going to talk about these things with your staff, and figure out some action plans, did you do that?" The other piece of this is that [principals] also, you know we leave them with a copy of the document. Some of them put it in teacher mailboxes. Some of them will very thoroughly discuss it with their staff at each faculty meeting. The feedback's only as good as the [principals] who give it to teachers (Roxie, District Administrator).

The feedback from the SST to the principals that is communicated to the school staff is intended to reinforce the staff efforts and to provide direct feedback and emphasis on the expectations about the district initiatives. It is very systemic.

The tension between the monitoring function and an evaluative tone is evident in this Superintendent Cabinet member's observation.

> The other gap, I think is that we've said it's not evaluative but it's really hard to go back month after month and see the same issues and not somehow share that with [the Superintendent], which then becomes evaluative. It is. It's the whole support versus evaluation. It's push and support, and push and support, push and support. Some of our schools feel more like it's push, push, push (Roxie, District Administrator).

Another district administrator describes the tension of the monitoring and supportive function versus the evaluative role of the SSTs.

> I think this is our third year doing it [SST]. The first year, it felt very evaluative, and I can tell you as a building principal, it did feel evaluative. I think that is a huge hurdle that we have to get over in this district. Being up here now, I really – it really is intended to be supportive, even though from the building principal's standpoint, and maybe not all of this – maybe it was just mine – but it did feel a little evaluative. Out of that, sometimes, some things do come. You would hear of things that would be evaluative. It's just like when we as a principal say we're going to go into the teacher's classroom and just observe. You see something and you're like we've got to address this. We can't just – it's a weird fine line for us that we have.
>
> I think that the central administration, we've got to figure out how to make that more of a genuine look with that dynamic going on. Do we need to start all of us ....just saying we'll get out to the schools twice a month on our own time and just do a quick walkthrough, just stuff like that? We've been throwing around conversations like that as well. I think that the reluctance is there because the schools do still have that feeling of when we enter the building – if someone's having a bad day, we can say, "we get it". We used to do that. I think they still get really worked up about it. That's a weird dynamic. I think it's a great process (Linda, District Administrator).

The SST structure provides a strong component of the framework of district support to schools. It also has tremendous potential. Monthly conversations at each school in the district to determine coherence with the district vision and initiatives is a powerful structure. Discourse among the member of the Learning Services department and Superintendent Cabinet each month about the common themes and activities evident in the SST visits is another example of how coherence, interconnectedness, and responsiveness is built. The continued evolution of this structure could result in a process that is the most responsive to the principals' needs for their unique school.

The SST members could be selected for their experience and background that is

relevant to the school and its goals. If a school is focusing on the needs of the ELL students, then people with a background in ELL would be on the team. This increases the likelihood that this lens will be utilized during walk throughs but also provide expertise to the principal and the team. Additionally the SST members would engage in individual and collective professional development about each school's design.

At this moment, it is not evident that the school's design is incorporated into the SST conversations. However, if the background and knowledge about the school's design were woven into the SST discussions, it would further integrate the powerful constructs namely the small school reinvention, district initiatives, professional development, and the School Support Teams. And finally, this integration would support the principals' translation of the SST recommendations into their daily work with staff and students.

For example, one school has a focus of climate and culture while almost putting a focus on curriculum and instruction on the back burner. The student behavior needs are widely known. Where is this explicitly planned as a focus in the SST process? One of the SST co-leaders described the follow up to this school after the first SST visit.

> We went to [the school], and they're having some huge problems. Me and [the SST co-leader] were talking about how we can kind of be the leverage for the new principal over there to get some things happening. Their scheduling is just a nightmare, so [the SST co-leader] was like, "We've got to get a team over there just to work with their scheduling right now and fish this out." The support can come that way. I think the support can also come as a fresh set of eyes (Linda, District Administrator).

A reflective question is, "Instead of a reactive response after the SST, how could this school's goal be incorporated into the visit?"

For new principals and/or those principals in schools that are struggling, a

thorough briefing about the intent and purpose of the SST would be beneficial. This pre-visit conference would ascertain the principal's perspective about the status of the school improvement efforts. One SST team member described how this conversation would go,

> "Let's sit down and talk about some things with this. What are you seeing? That is a hard place to be in when you're sitting in there as brand new principal with some teachers in there and parents in there. That's a tough one to bring up what you're really worried about. You just don't want to do it" (Linda, District Administrator).

Additionally, several principals described the benefit of a debrief with just the principal following the SST visit.

But perhaps an observation that a teacher made about the SST process also merits further exploration. When asked if the SST would be a logical place to build upon district staff understanding about the specific school design, the response was:

> No [because] the SST teams are coming in with some look-fors that they believe will increase student achievement, and I don't know because I haven't been on an SST team, if they differentiated those look-fors, based on the model....So it's like, okay, so how does that support the integrity of the model? I don't know (Wendy, Teacher).

When asked about building upon this structure, the same staff member expressed the concern about the nature of the brief walk throughs and the lack of engagement with the staff.

> I think that when they come into a classroom for five minutes, they just get a snapshot of really what's going on in that class. And so they can go around and look in a classroom and say, oh, yeah, they've got their standards or their learning targets posted. I see examples of student work, I come in – and for whatever that five-minute period they're in there – I can look around, oh, there are 10 kids that are engaged. Is that the norm or is that an anomaly? And they don't know that in those five-minute glimpses.
>
> And so for me, it's like, okay, so then what happens with that? There's no follow up to say, what was unique about walking into that classroom that you might've seen this stuff? I don't think that they – the SSTs don't get a chance to talk to the

teachers to see what's going on in my classroom, what's going on with my students, where am I in the delivery of this unit.

....I know that there's some relevance to going up – you can say [to a student], "What are you supposed to be learning?" and they [the students] should know. So you go up, you ask this kid and this kid, and these two kids don't have a clue, so that means nobody has a clue? I mean, can you make that – and I don't know what the research says on it. I don't know. So I think that's a key.

So, what would make it better? I don't know. I think having instructional leaders or a system set up that you have an opportunity to debrief about what's going on in your classes. I mean, that you work with your colleagues. I mean, we're all professionals and we're all really intelligent people. And to provide the time to actually do that kind of work is critical. And I think, we at [this school] are getting there with the work that we're doing with like common assessments and what's going on and what worked well ....And I can see it working with the – they can videotape themselves; they analyzed it for specific look-fors when they looked at their video. Then there's a discussion – what could we have done better? That is so critical to be able to work as colleagues and professionals to do that. And I think that it's so much more beneficial than having a team from the ad building coming in, walking in your room, going around, looking at the students and checking because accountability is good. And I think people need accountability.

I know that it says that if the students know what it is they're supposed to be learning, there's a correlation with higher achievement. So, I know that that's all good. Maybe there's different ways of accountability besides having the head shed come in (Wendy, Teacher).

When this teacher leader was asked if the members of the SST attends the school's professional development times or late start structures to see the collegial work in the natural setting, the response was, "For the three years that I've been here, I've never seen anybody from central ad at any of our professional development, but obviously, there's – nor have I seen other teachers from other schools come to our professional development. Because I think on the SST teams, you've got central ad, you've got administrators from different schools, and I think initially you had teachers from another school that would come around and look." This teacher leader values the

lateral capacity that would develop as a result of the engagement of other school teachers and district administration. There is potential for increased collaboration across roles and school buildings in this observation. As well, discussion about the integration of each school's model with the district initiatives would further increase an authentic infusion of the two contexts.

The School Support Team (SST) structure was identified throughout the cases study as being a key component to achieving an increase in student achievement. This structure is one method that brings about alignment and coherence within the system. A second pivotal structure in the district's theory or action and compelling conceptualization is that of tight implementation of key structured curriculum.

Structured curriculum is 'tight'.

Without exception every person interviewed indicated that the recent implementation of the structured curricula of Everyday Math™ and Every Child a Reader™ is an expectation from the Superintendent. "Our theory of action is getting clear about the structured curriculum" (Roxie, District Administrator). The district-wide structure of these curricula is pivotal to the theory of action to increase student achievement. The decision to go to structured curricula was made after an extensive period of time and effort to implement a balanced literacy approach.

> Our belief system all along was that even with the restructuring, what happens in the classroom every day, with every teacher and every kid, is what would make the difference. So, we have long used a balanced literacy approach, which included reader's and writer's workshop, and we had really done a lot of staff development for teachers around best practices in balance literacy in readers and writers workshop, a lot of modeling, and a lot of coaching, and with our turnover of staff –we found that that just was not enough to hold on to. There was a lot of from-the-ground-up curriculum development happening, and our teachers were struggling with that. They were struggling with it because it was so time

> intensive. They were struggling with it because they didn't have the expertise to gauge whether their planning was effective or not, and they were struggling with it because of the turnover of people, or whole teams, and when teachers develop their own curriculum, that curriculum walks out the door with them.
>
> In the last two years, we have gotten very structured with curriculum. We started with math, and last year we implemented Everyday Math™ K- 6. We are still using Connected Math 1 and we are using integrated math at our high school level. Those textbooks are fairly old, but again, we'll do some updating. Very focused on, within the math programming, a scope, and sequence that's structured. We use a document called *Standards of Practice*. We have them developed for some of our initiatives, and we're working on them for all of our initiatives, but our *Standards of Practice* tell our principals and our teachers what we expect to see when we walk into classrooms. It gives us a scope and sequence, and a pacing, and so this is one way that we are starting to drill down.
>
> [We have to be] clear about the non-negotiable at each grade level, clear about how we measure those — well, first of all, how we implement, especially around pacing, and scope and sequence. We're getting very clear about that, and then what are our formative assessment pieces, and then our summative assessment pieces. On the horizon, writing and science will be next, but that's not necessarily a year, it's when we have a handle on the math, and the reading. We've tried to break the cycle of, "We start something new every school year." We've tried to look at only when we're prepared to go into maintenance mode with that initiative do we start another, so, we're doing some of that (Roxie, District Administrator).

Within this interview segment the structures and the constructs are clearly outlined. The structured curriculum is intended to bring coherence to the instructional practices being taught every day by a teaching staff that is less experienced due to a significant staff turnover over the past five years. It is also intended to provide the structure for monitoring effective instructional practices and increase student achievement through the delivery of a structured curriculum.

The expectations about the structured curriculum implementation are outlined in *Standards of Practice* documents that define the criteria about the implementation. A *Standards of Practice* document is written for each of the four district initiatives and is

utilized during the professional development, School Support Team visits, principal meetings, and work with teachers.

The question of how the school district supports the development of teachers that result in the use of the most effective instructional strategies every day with students is at the heart of the third theme that emerged during the case study. Two specific topical questions addressed this key component of any school improvement effort-the effectiveness of the instructional staff.

Table 6 highlights the third theme of the intentionality of building capacity among the Birchwood School District staff through a variety of formats and structures.

Table 6

Research Question, Topical Questions 5 and 6, and Theme 3

Research Question: What are the district organizational constructs, policies, and structures that influence student achievement especially for marginalized students?
Topical Question 5: How do teachers change their instructional practices? How were these changes in instructional practices a result of district-supported efforts? Is it through formal structures or informal networks?
Topical Question 6: How is time structured to support professional learning communities, common planning time, and job-embedded professional development?
Theme 3: Building capacity is a core function throughout the district and there are intentional efforts to increase the capacity of teachers and building leaders.

Capacity Building is an intentional component across the system.

One half of the school improvement coin is engaging all students in high quality, rigorous and relevant curricula every day. The other half of the coin is the engagement of educators at all levels in the same high quality, rigorous and relevant work every day. This engagement builds educators knowledge base, ability to facilitate processes, and problem solve about student progress in order to monitor and adjust instruction. Effective capacity building strategies and structures are job- embedded and contextual. Typically that engagement with peers is at the school or department. However, Fullan (2004) expands this concept to include lateral capacity building across departments or schools to involve others and their perspectives, experiences, and expertise. This is another opportunity for coherence and interconnectedness to be reinforced and expanded. When a school principal is an integral member of another school's School Support Team, lateral capacity building results. Both principals gain an understanding of each other's experiences and reality. This is an example of how coherence is built, relationships are formed, and capacity strengthened among all of the participants.

Another example of that lateral capacity building with far reaching implications is the conscientious decision by the Superintendent to "bring more folks that have actually had executive leadership positions at the building level [to central office positions] to keep that perspective alive at the district level" (Jody, District Administrator). The constant infusion of the school perspective into the district level discourse strengthens the understanding about the realities of implementing school reform especially regarding the reinvention that has occurred in this school district.

Jody went on to describe the very intentional strategies to build leadership capacity within the teachers. Strategies included Aspiring Administrator sessions and compensating teachers for additional assignments to facilitate specific district efforts like the spelling bee or services for advanced learners. Given the small size of the district, these additional responsibilities are doable coupled with a teaching assignment.

Building the capacity of teachers to improve instructional practices.

A critical mass of teachers was engaged in curriculum-specific training. After the initial training, external coaches modeled lessons at each school and provided direct feedback during the initial fall implementation. Despite tight financial restraints, there is an understanding that a successful implementation is contingent upon these differentiated professional development components. The training for the structured curriculum was also differentiated for some groups. For example, instructional guides had a specific training; special education staff was involved in training to more specifically meet the needs of their students; and principals participated in the full training plus additional sessions that addressed their unique roles as instructional leaders.

Increasing the daily use of instructional best practices for English Language Learners is at the core of the capacity building efforts for school staff. Working with McREL (Mid-Continental Research Educational Laboratory) to provide the initial extensive training using a Trainer of Trainers team model and follow up support for school teams is another example of supporting teachers' ability to differentiate instruction.

The structured curriculum and McREL training are district-supported efforts to build capacity. There are also explicit, articulated linkages between the four district

initiatives. There is an explicit interconnectedness between Every Child A Reader™ and the English Language Learner instructional strategies coupled with the Response to Intervention efforts. The *Standards of Practice* documents support building the capacity of staff to make connections between the initiatives and how it influences their instructional practices on a daily basis.

Additional school-based efforts have been addressed throughout these findings; from the weekly late start to job-embedded professional development structures. Many schools also have certified instructional guides or coaches who work directly with staff members about their daily instructional practices. These structures interconnect with the constructs of choice, the use of time, and 'defined autonomy; all based on the collective moral purpose to provide all students with a quality education.

Building the capacity of principals.

Extensive professional development is embedded into the principals' bimonthly meetings and separate trainings that focus on their role as building leaders responsible for the implementation of the district initiatives.

> Our school directors went through the [Every Child a Reader™] three-day training, and then they'll have another full two days of how do you supervise the implementation. They actually have more training than the teachers have. They do the full training with the teachers, and then two more days on what do the reflective questions sound like when you're not seeing it, they'll watch a lot of videotapes of it being done, they'll use the *Standards of Practice* documents to verify whether or not they're seeing that in the videotaped presentations (Roxie, District Administrator).

Utilizing the monitoring documents during training, differentiating training for the unique roles, and providing job embedded coaching are structures that this school district has chosen to increase the success of quality instructional practices.

The connection between the third and fourth theme is the emerging 'defined autonomy' (Marzano & Waters, 2009) of each unique school and the district level expectations. Professional development and the capacity building of teachers and principals is one area where the district expectations about specific professional development can hit up against a school's design model. The dynamic tension that results is constructively and collaboratively addressed due to the relationships between principals and district administrators, including the Superintendent.

Table 7

Research Question, Topical Questions 4 and Theme 4

Research Question: What are the district organizational constructs, policies, and structures that influence student achievement especially for marginalized students?
Topical Question 4: How are the district office roles and focus supportive of the schools' efforts?
How are these district office roles and focus communicated and understood throughout the system?
Theme 4: There is a more clearly articulated and understood sense of the 'defined autonomy' (Marzano & Waters, 2009) between the district expectations and each school's unique flexibility.

'Defined Autonomy' is emerging between district expectations and school needs

Principals were asked about the structures that existed to increase student achievement. They articulated the School Support Team (SST) and the structured

curricula of Everyday Math™ and Every Child a Reader™. There was also an expressed need to build their capacity beyond the newly implemented curriculum. A secondary principal articulated a possible adaptation of the principals' bi-monthly meetings. "[I would like to see] more focus on driving achievement through supporting instructional practices, holding principals accountable to looking at student work type protocol – they were bringing work or data from their schools, comparing them, and putting in to place action steps and the rest" (Thomas, Principal). In lieu of the heavy emphasis on curriculum or initiative updates there would be an increased focus on building principals' instructional leadership capacity. There was a distinction made between the professional development provided to principals about the structured curriculum and the broader concept of instructional leadership capacity. The same principal goes on to say,

> That [idea] is separate from the program-based work, [that is so] focused on implementing the initiative. There's not as much focus on what does it mean to be a good instructional leader, and how do we help you support that?...Yeah, how are you getting descriptive feedback from teachers when you're in their classrooms, and what are some ways you can do that? What are our expectations? When you find a teacher that's at a plateau in their development and they're stuck here and not making progress, what can you do to help them improve that practice? What are ways that you're designing effective structures for peer observations, and teachers are using and giving feedback on that are driving change in teacher practices (Thomas, Principal).

Our conversation continued about his perceptions about why he thought this was occurring and he framed it in an important historical perspective.

> I think part of it is a very fair response to our drive for autonomy when we created the small schools, that I think before I got here, it was much more of a centrally command and controlled operation where everyone's doing this professional development. Here's how it goes, and here's how you do it, and we'll make sure you do it this way, and we'll find you support in exactly how to do guided reading because everyone's doing it the same way.

> Then we had this explosion of 17 different schools and 17 different models. They don't even have school on the same day or study the same content, not to mention do the same professional development.
>
> There was an over response to schools who were all doing whatever they want, however they want to, and we won't purport to get in the way because that's interfering with their model.
>
> And then now, I think the Every Child a Reader™., Everyday Math™, McRel, RtI stuff all signals a swing a little bit back to the middle, there has to be some autonomy, and there has to be some common expectations at the same time. So I think that's coming back, but I think it's coming back in terms of programs instead of in terms of common philosophical approach or common understanding. And that makes sense because it's easier to train, implement, and deliver a program than philosophy (Thomas, Principal).

This is quite insightful and reflective. This principal sees the historical context of the tight structure, followed by the loose structure in the midst of the reinvention, and now an adjustment that brings the structure back to a middle point. The response in the middle is a focus on the district initiatives and less of a focus on instructional leadership that goes beyond the purchased curriculum or the unique school designs.

Another principal indicated that he would not want to see anymore district training. Rather there is a need to integrate the district initiatives with the school models. This excerpt articulates the dynamic tension between the 'tightness' of the district initiatives and the intentional unique school designs created during the reinvention. In every instance where this dynamic tension was mentioned, the interviewees indicated that they were engaged in conversations with the Superintendent and district administrators about their ideas.

> [W]e do pretty good professional development at [this school]..... [W]here I've seen the biggest gains is when those things match [school design and structured curriculum]. So I have my teachers trained in expeditionary learning in terms of really practicing what does it mean to really change the way you do practice, and

> that I get a structured support like Everyday Math™, that happens to match it, and I didn't really need that much training.
>
> I don't know, if those things didn't come together, I personally am not a strong enough instructional leader to facilitate all that....But it's also third year, and we're in a stronger place. It's a stronger team. So, it's not like doom and gloom. It's just not quite the level – like last year was just so fun to just watch this team go from pretty low implementation to pretty high. Things are still improving. It's just not the same rate, and maybe that just happens I don't know (Allen, Principal).

A principal used an interesting metaphor about needing surgical precision with regard to some next steps about district support to schools and increasing his capacity as a leader.

> I feel like what I want is, I want the district to be, essentially, my hired consultant to come in and I say, "Here's what we're doing. Here's all the ways we're trying to do it. Here's the program we have running on the ground. What do you see that's not working that we have to fix?"
>
> Because I don't want them to come in and say, "We gave you autonomy and it didn't work. Do Every Child a Reader™." I want them to say – to have this conversation to say, "Here are the practices we know you have really thought out a long time and are in place and are on the ground. And these look like these are practices that ought to be successful, and ought to lead to results, so let's look underneath the hood and figure out what – where the tubes are not connected to the engines not working, so we can help you – we can help diagnose that and fix it."
>
> Because I feel like, absolutely, they've given me the autonomy I need to build a successful place, and they've held accountable people that haven't made the efforts that we've made, but in places where you have really well intentioned people who are thoughtful are working really hard to get results and still aren't getting the kind of results we want – I think that's where we need the real surgical support to come in and diagnose the problem and fix it (Thomas, Principal).

These principal excerpts describe the dynamic tension that often occurs between district-level expectations and the needs of the individual schools. In Birchwood, there is an emerging understanding of what Bob Marzano and Tim Waters from McREL call 'defined autonomy' (2009). There is autonomy at the school level however the autonomy

does not include dismissing district non-negotiable goals. The structured curriculum is tight and by extension the professional development that accompanies the structured curriculum implementation would be considered tight. It is inevitable that the structured curriculum is going to hit up against one or more of the unique school models. The ability of the district administrative staff to navigate these issues are at the core of Fullan's (2004) productive conflict component.

Flexibility in the adaptation of the required professional development is one thing. There are also principals that are requesting flexibility about the actual implementation of one of the tightly held expectations: the structured curriculum. The components of the structured curriculum are expected to be implemented. However the following example illustrates that with a plan and some explicit dialogue and negotiation, there is flexibility.

> For the most part our schools have said thank you for finally buying us something that we can look at, so we're not building everything when we're expecting them to differentiate reading groups and there are four groups in most classrooms, to create plans for all four of those groups is hard on teachers. Then to go to book rooms and find appropriate books that match the target that you're wanting to teach each of those groups, it's very time consuming. Every Child a Reader™ has really done that, even as far as demonstrated reading, which gives the teachers not only the target, "Here's all the grade-two, quarter two. Here's the book, the big book, and here's the lesson." Now, you'll see it's not scripted, it just says that you need to do some schema building, some predictions, some reading fluency practice with the big book. Most of our schools have even said thank you for even buying the big books, and thank you for giving us this.
>
> We have a couple of schools that came in and had a conversation with me. They're [school models] are very integrated in their curriculum and are struggling with the poem or the big book, and so what I've basically done with those schools, who are very thoughtful and very purposeful, is I've said, you have to do demonstrated reading, and it has to attend to the schema building and vocabulary and fluency.
>
> It has to model for kids. You can pick your own poems or big books. They have to have the criteria, they need to be rhythmic, they need to have Tier 2 vocabulary, which is vocabulary that's not sight based, or these really weird

> words that kids will never use. They've got to have Tier 2 vocabulary, they have to be engaging for kids, and so we've given them the specs for why these texts and these poems where chosen and we've said, if you want to pick your own, pick your own (Roxie, District Administrator).

The utilization of the 'defined autonomy' is not limited to the negotiation that occurs between the district administrators and principals. It also occurs with the implementation of the structured curriculum and teachers that can be heard in the following excerpts describing how one teacher leader is navigating the waters with teachers.

> What I'm doing right now and what I worked really hard with the [Every Child a Reader™] people is I'm framing it with the teachers as this is a structure and it is a structure that you agree that we need, that you agree that we were missing these learning targets with these kids. And so, the structure is small group instruction. The structure is a cohesive K through 12 scope and sequence of learning targets in reading. The structure is daily fluency practice, daily vocabulary practice. It is a continuous cycle of whole group shared reading, guided reading, and independent reading, that is the structure.
>
> Those are the non-negotiables of the program. And within that structure, you can use what you need to use. So that's how I've been framing it and that's how I've been doing my coaching and my observations, saying we need to see shared reading, guided reading, and independent reading. So, the independent reading, we need to see in the centers. Guided reading, we need to see in here. We need to see the shared reading and the demonstrated reading.
>
> If you want to use a different poem for the demonstrating reading, awesome, do that. If you want to take a look at a news article that came out on Barack Obama last week in guided reading, that's fine too. We're not even looking at being so snarky on the exact level of the text, and more of the comprehension targets that we are teaching. So, I'm trying to, at this point in time, here's the non-negotiable with the structure, and they all agree that those are important non-negotiable (Melinda, Teacher).

Negotiation. This teacher leader is negotiating with classroom teachers to engage them and get them started in the implementation process of one of the district initiatives. The expectations are clear to all. The expectation to implement the four district

initiatives sets the parameters for the day to day work that happens in schools and in each classroom. That is how coherence is built.

Coherence and interconnectedness permeate this study. Staff members know what is expect and why. The collective moral purpose and compelling conceptualization are understood and embodied in the daily actions and behaviors of the staff.

In Chapter Four the four themes that emerged from this case study of Birchwood School District were evident in the threads interwoven between excerpts, vignettes, and voices of the district administrators, principals, and teachers.

1. There is a resounding coherence of a collective moral purpose (Fullan, et al., 2004) and compelling conceptualization regarding the theory of action and 'what is tight' and 'what is loose' (DuFour, 2007).
2. The alignment and interconnectedness of the organizational constructs and structures with the compelling conceptualization provides a framework of support to schools.
3. Building capacity is a core function throughout the district and there are intentional efforts to increase the capacity of teachers and building leaders.
4. There is an emerging understanding of the 'defined autonomy' (Marzano & Waters, 2009) between the district expectations and each school's unique flexibility.

What do these four themes, the original research question, and the many voices mean to this school district and to others interested in the school district influence on schools to increase student achievement? Chapter Five outlines an analytic summary,

practical implications, conceptual implications, future research possibilities, and finally, a call to action.

CHAPTER FIVE: ANALYTIC SUMMARY

"Saving the world with just a Blackberry"

It is only recently that the impact of school district structures on student achievement has been studied. Previously, the focus has been on the effective classroom teacher and what happens within the walls of the school. The literature review in Chapter Two outlines the challenges facing every school district, every school, and every teacher from the gaps in achievement to the very definition of 'proficiency.' Michael Fullan (2004) provides a conceptual framework that supports our understanding of what is needed within a school district system to realize the vision of increased student achievement.

This case study illustrates how one school district is positively influencing schools. The resounding coherence that was evident throughout the system is impressive. In this district with a diverse student population, the collective moral purpose and urgency was evident in the courageous actions of the recent reinvention, the daily examples in schools of actualizing the vision, and an eye on the next steps. There is a subtly about the urgency....it isn't panic or despair. It is dedication and commitment. As one district administrator told me as we were talking about the district's challenges and his phone rang, "You know, we are trying to save the world with just a Blackberry" (Mark, District Administrator). The fiscal resources are few and the challenges are numerous, however, their collective moral purpose sets the foundation for the structure

and constructs that give life to the compelling conceptualization that has become their theory of action.

Teachers, principals, and district administrators in Birchwood School District are living out their strategic plan and theory of action designed to increase student achievement for all students. Everyone is clear about what is expected and the discipline needed to fully implement the district's four initiatives that are designed to increase achievement. The coherence throughout the system is evident in each interview and observation and most importantly the coherence is evident all the way to the classrooms. Principals understand 'what is tight' and 'what is loose.' The expectations are clear and are being implemented.

This school district has organizational constructs and structures that are supporting schools. For this small school district, what makes sense for them are:

- system-wide choice
- relationships and familiarity that is facilitated by the small size of the school district
- focus provided by district goals and initiatives
- School Support Teams that provide monitoring and support functions and
- structured curricula that are 'tight.'

These organizational constructs and structures work for Birchwood School District. If they would be effective in any other school district is unknown. It doesn't seem advisable to automatically transfer these constructs and structures to another school district. This work is all contextually based in the geographic, political, and temporal constructs. However, the lesson to be learned here is that coherence and

interconnectedness is possible. When accomplished, it can create a school district system that supports schools that are poised to increase student achievement.

Practical Implications

It is unknown at this time whether or not this theory of action or these structures, constructs, and collective efforts will result in the desired student outcomes. The upheaval of the reinvention is just now settling down. It has only been in the past year that the district and school leadership could expect disciplined implementation of instructional goals to be a focus. However what is clear is that the Superintendent and the leadership team have outlined a compelling conceptualization and a theory of action that has permeated the system. There is coherence that was made possible through a well thought out and comprehensive theory of action that is ultimately focused on the change in instruction at the classroom level. The coherence is not only the articulation and comprehension of the plan from the superintendent to the classroom teacher; it is also about the interconnectedness of the components of the system. The plan is based on a moral purpose to alter the path of students' achievement and an understanding of who is teaching these kids- a large percentage of relatively new teachers who will benefit from a structured curriculum and strong capacity building strategies.

Conceptual Implications....So What?

School Districts Do Matter

What does all of this mean for this school district and other school districts that educate students like Estéban, Esmeralda, and Karla? How can we mesh the emerging research about the influence of school districts, this case study, and consider the implications for others and for ourselves?

You could not walk away from an interview with any one of the participants in this case study without realizing how a school district matters to student achievement. Principals need support from district leadership and support staff to actualize their school improvement efforts. When the support is systemic, pervasive, and continuous, the school principal can leverage it for the benefit of their school community. There is momentum, coherence, and focus. To fully maximize this leveraging, an environment of trust and collegiality is needed to have crucial two-way conversations about what is needed. All must 'seek first to understand' (Covey, 1989). When the support is absent or counterproductive to the school efforts, the results could be lost opportunities to leverage energy or, to an extreme, energy expended to fight the system.

School districts do matter. A question I pose to those who are engaged in this work is "do school districts matter positively?" The following implications are intended to outline a set of actions or considerations for district level work regardless of the position within the organization.

Be courageous

The Superintendent and the entire staff of Birchwood School District have demonstrated very courageous behavior in the reinvention. Despite the overwhelming challenges, barriers, fear of failure, fiscal restraints, and political context, this system turned itself completely upside down and rebuilt.....all the while they were educating students. The strategic plan that outlined these actions could not possibly capture the courage, leap of faith, and tenacity needed to start this process and the energy and perseverance required to see it through. The reinvention is the backdrop of this case

study. It drops in at the beginning of the next phase of the reform efforts—a focus on the instructional practices in the classroom.

Being courageous looks different in every setting. At the core of this implication is that it means each organization, each leader, each teacher needs to ask him/herself, "What needs to be done to maximize student achievement in my setting?" How does the system, department, school, organizational structure, and classroom function so that every student has access to what is needed to maximize his/her potential? Consider the courage in Birchwood to completely reinvent a secondary system into six smaller, separate, and unique schools. To reinvent within five years, every other school and allow for complete parental choice. It might be easy to think, well, of course they can do it, they are a small district. It is never easy. . . anywhere.

Consider, who are the students in your local schools that are like Estéban, Esmeralda, and Karla? If there was greater flexibility to do what needed to be done, what would you do?

What would you do?

Then, be courageous and make it happen.

Margaret Wheatley asks us to consider, "During this time of uncertainly and dire needs, how can we freely bring our experiences, knowledge, and expertise to bear?" (2009, p. 44). What would you do?

Be reflective

Whether your system is made up of 70 schools or six; a team of 8 or 18, we must be reflective individually and collectively. This reflection has the potential to help us all

be clearer about our focus, our systems' coherence, and the integration and interconnectedness of the school district, school, and classroom teachers' work. The Birchwood School District has reflection embedded in the School Support Team structure from the school visits to the Learning Services and Cabinet debriefs. Several school examples described the structures in place for educators to be reflective on their own instructional practices.

Betty Garner (2007) invites educators to become reflective researchers as a part of their "ongoing, self-directed professional development" (p. 156). Whether our focus is on a group of fifth graders or the perplexing lack of growth in math among students with disabilities in our school district, reflective practices promote thoughtful, comprehensive problem-solving practices. In *Leading Coherently: Reflections from Leaders Around the World* (Nancy Stanford-Blair & Dickmann, 2005), the authors interviewed thirty-six global leaders and one of the common traits of these leaders is their contemplative nature. "They also described themselves as characteristically contemplative about purpose and how best to achieve it. They were, in a word, thinkers. It was their manner to ponder what was necessary and possible to do. They were given to reflective analysis of the way things were, as well as what might be" (p. 74).

Be nimble and responsive

Being nimble and responsive looks different in every setting. How does the organization create systems, structures, and processes that are adaptable....are nimble. Consider if the principals and decision makers in your system had this mindset:

> ...by creating small communities, where teachers and students and [principals] have a real sense of ownership, and they're able to be nimble in modifying their practices, that those schools will generate better relationships, better rigor, better results. This part of the theory" (Thomas, Principal).

What would it look like if every principal and school community believed and then actually had the flexibility to make that happen? How can bureaucratic-heavy systems redesign themselves to *focus and serve schools and their needs?* Does that mean smaller units within big districts? The small size of the Birchwood School District was identified as an organizational construct that supported their reform efforts. The small size can create conditions that provide opportunities to know individual schools better so that the district responsiveness is personalized and targeted. How could larger systems be organized into smaller units to create the same opportunities for a grouping of schools? This isn't an "anything goes mindset. Instead, given the collective moral purpose, compelling conceptualization including 'what is tight' and 'what is loose', what would you to maximize students' potential?

What would you do? Now, how can systems be nimble and responsive to make these ideas happen with the kids that are currently in the schools? Responsiveness is a key to a level of support for schools that will manifest to actions on the schools part.

Create coherence and interconnectedness across the system

Whatever a district's theory of action is, everyone should know it. A core component of Fullan's (Fullan, et al., 2004) framework is a compelling conceptualization. That conceptualization or theory of action should be known to all throughout the organization. Coherence provides the glue that holds all of the parts and

pieces together to form a solidified whole. When there is coherence throughout a system, all stakeholders have a mental mindset about the overall district focus and direction. They know the action steps and what their part is in the implementation. With this mindset, stakeholders tap into this understanding when they make local decisions in their schools, classrooms, and departments. Utilizing this mindset for local decisions further builds coherence in the organization, because more and more actions and outcomes are tied together. The Birchwood system has tremendous coherence about the district focus that manifests itself in the actions and decisions made by building leaders, School Support Teams, and classroom teachers.

In the Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy report, *Leading for Learning: Reflective Tools for School and District Leaders* (Knapp, et al., 2003), creating coherence is one of five action steps for "defining a learning improvement agenda" for a school or district (p. 6). Specifically the authors describe three steps to create coherence that also align with this case study findings:

- Utilize pathways that intentionally address student, professional, and system learning around a focused improvement agenda (Knapp, et al., 2003, p. 26). Birchwood utilizes structures like the School Support Teams (SST) to focus the system on the four district initiatives. That is their improvement agenda.
- Align activities with resources, with each other, and with compelling vision for the improvement of learning and teaching (Knapp, et al., 2003, p. 26). Birchwood's four district initiatives (Everyday Math™, Every Child a Reader™, English Language Learner strategies, and Response to Intervention) are the framework for the professional development, the SST visits, the

principal meetings, and the communications from the district administrators. This aligned effort is the compelling conceptualization to increase student achievement.

- Create structures and incentives for learning around a common improvement agenda at all levels of the system (Knapp, et al., 2003, p. 26). Birchwood's reinvention plan to create smaller learning communities set the stage for additional structures to focus on a common improvement agenda. The structured curricula implementation in Birchwood is another example of a structure based on a common improvement agenda.

The theme of resounding coherence throughout the Birchwood School District is also linked to the interconnectedness between the organizational constructs and structures; the interconnectedness of the people and the strong relationships they have with each other and with the Superintendent; and the interconnectedness with the educators' hopes and dreams for the students. School districts are complex and dynamic systems. The more explicit and intentional the discourse about the interconnected nature of learning, of the district and school work, the greater the trust in the system and individuals during times of uncertainty and change. When all of this comes together, there is synergy and momentum. That is what is happening in the Birchwood School District. There is synergy and momentum. They are poised as a school district to realize their vision.

To gauge your school or district coherence, ask these simple questions:

- What is tight and non-negotiable? What is loose where we can be creative?
- How are we closing the achievement gap?

Then listen to the answers. Remember, seek first to understand (Covey, 1989).

'Define Autonomy'

What was evident in Birchwood School District was that everyone understands 'what is tight' and 'what is loose.' When the expectations are clear for 'what is tight', there is alignment throughout the system and there is accountability. When it is clear about 'what is loose', creativity can flourish. Everyone would understand what is in their purview to modify, abandon, or create. The excuses that sound like;"the district won't allow me to..." or "the district wouldn't approve..." would not be heard as frequently. If something is not identified as tight, then there is flexibility and the opportunity for creativity to meet the needs of the specific students within a school. What is 'tight' and what is 'loose' in your educational setting? How could the autonomy become more clearly defined to promote focus on what is non-negotiable and encourage creativity? What current structures exist for this discourse?

Be inclusive

Being inclusive of key stakeholders can be an elusive process, in my experience. What structures and processes are in place for the ongoing discourse about instructional practices, building capacity, and system discussions? Oftentimes these structures already exist but are consumed with other topics that distract the focus from teaching and learning. Consider the number of hours spent in principal or administrative meetings that have little focus on student achievement and instruction. How many parents have attended parent conferences or PTO meetings to be presented to rather than to be

included in a conversation? More concerted efforts are needed to bring parents and community members into our schools and partners with us. Too often meetings are called and committees are established but the same few parents participate. How can we all re-think these processes so that more parents, especially our marginalized parents, are engaged in these efforts with us? Littky prompts us to consider how to "involve parents in the real decisions we make every day about the school" (Littky & Grabelle, 2004, p. 140). Consider the available opportunities to build coherence and understanding if discursive processes were incorporated into those existing structures and processes. Wheatley reminds us that "unknown situations require people to access their maximum intelligence, to be able to think well in the moment and alongside their colleagues. And that intelligence needs to be widely distributed throughout the community" (2009, p. 45).

These questions stem from a constructivist perspective that guides the social co-construction of knowledge between all of the participants. Further, the questions are intended to prompt the reader's thinking about existing structures that can be revisited and redesigned. The answers to these questions could imply more than revisiting and tweaking existing structures, it may mean a possible reinvention of a system like that in Birchwood. No matter the degree of change, it all takes courage and perseverance.

Implications for Future Research

The lack of research, from any epistemological lens, regarding the influence of school districts on student achievement is concerning. School districts do impact schools. The influence can fall anywhere on the continuum of a positive, neutral, or destructive impact. Even a neutral impact is fraught with missed opportunities. School leaders and

teachers cannot do this work in isolation. If an individual school is successful with students who typically do not experience success those experiences must be systemically shared so that others can benefit from that success. It is also likely that the school leader that has had this success has been helped by the district organization or has had to fight the district organization to reach these heightened levels of achievement. What can be learned from this relationship?

The implications for future research include:

- How is coherence built across a school district system?
- How are school districts co-constructing 'what is tight' and 'what is loose'?
- How is the use a structured curricula increasing literacy or mathematical achievement?
- How can a broader definition of student achievement be employed to fully determine student success?

How is coherence built across a school district system?

The first future research topic would expand upon the understanding of how to build coherence across an educational system. The coherence in the Birchwood School District was achieved because there was a compelling conceptualization and theory of action that was repeatedly articulated in many venues, in multiple forms of communication, and infused in every structure. Professional development opportunities for teachers and principals were set within the context of the four district initiatives. Letters from the Superintendent to staff and district-wide Back to School meetings were forums to articulate the focus and the expectations. Structures like the monthly School

Support Teams (SST) and the structured curricula brought the district initiatives and focus to life. This is how it is working in this school district. How are other school districts bringing coherence across their system of schools?

The coherent implementation of a district's compelling conceptualization, as described in this case study, is one aspect of coherence. Madda, Halverson, and Gomez (2007) present a case study of a district addressing instructional program coherence and the challenges of the successful school-level implementation. If district-wide reform efforts are going to take hold and be sustained over time, understanding the concept of creating coherence is imperative for school and district leaders.

A call to action: Conduct action research to determine if the key initiatives and goals of your school or district are understood by all stakeholders. How was this coherence created and maintained? Be explicit about the theory of action, compelling conceptualization, and strategies that led to this coherence. If coherence is not evident, engage in inclusive processes to create an understanding about the compelling conceptualization of the school district initiatives and defined autonomy.

How are school districts co-constructing 'what is tight' and 'what is loose'?

The second future research topic aligns with the first topic about coherence, with the difference being the content of what is coherent. What structures and processes are being utilized to determine 'what is tight' and 'what is loose'? A subset of this question pertains to the way in which the coherence was built inclusively with the stakeholders. It is possible to achieve top/down coherence that may not result in an internalization of the efforts or an influence on local decisions. The variety of processes and structures that school districts incorporate could be informative to others.

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform has developed a Smart District framework with six key functions (Foley & Sigler, 2009). One of the functions is to 'lead for results and equity' and encourages district leaders to "establish a collaborative organizational culture that balances the prescription and guidance from central office with flexibility and autonomy for schools" (p. 2).

A call to action: Conduct action research in your school or district to determine if there are agreements about 'what is tight' and 'what is loose' (DuFour, 2007). Conduct further case study research to gain understanding about how schools and school districts are engaged in the discourse about these agreements.

How is the use a structured curricula increasing literacy or mathematical achievement?

The third research topic relates to a specific structure within the Birchwood School District plan: structured curriculum. The Birchwood School District, like many others across the country, is incorporating structured curricula for literacy and mathematics into their theory of action. When implemented with fidelity and support, what is the impact of increased literacy or math achievement especially for marginalized students? How does this component of a theory of action impact teachers?

A call to action: Beyond program evaluation research conducted by the publishers of the specific curriculum, conduct action research within a classroom, grade, school or student population to determine longitudinal gains made in literacy and mathematics. To understand the capacity building of a new teacher, conduct ethnographic or case study research that explores the process for a new teacher to implement a structured curriculum from hiring, program training, available coaching experiences, day to day

implementation, adjustments to instruction, interim assessment, to include reflection about the professional and student growth made.

How can a broader definition of student achievement be employed to fully determine student success?

An incomplete picture is painted about the student achievement levels of Birchwood students when only state assessment measures are reported. The story is deeper than those numerical data points. A comprehensive understanding of the progress being made to advance student achievement and success using the *Results that Matter* (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2006) criteria could be an instrumental undertaking for urban school districts such as Birchwood School District.

A call to action: Conduct case study or phenomenological research involving school districts that outline and aggressively articulate their schools and district successes within a broader achievement context and definition. What is the impact on the morale of educators and students? What is the evidence that the parent and broader community understand the breadth of the districts' achievement? Research of this nature could inform others about how to tell the bigger story about our students' successes and areas for improvement. It would tell the human story about Estéban, Esmeralda, and Karla and what they are learning, achieving, and capable of becoming.

Conclusion

The lives of three children, Estéban, Esmeralda, and Karla, have focused the attention on students who are not always successful in schools. The perspectives and experiences of teachers, principals, and district administrators from Birchwood School District, as well as my own perspectives, have become intertwined and added to the literature to expand the body of knowledge about district support for schools to increase student achievement. The messages from this case study have implications for all of the work to advocate for children in public schools.

The resounding coherence of a collective moral purpose (Fullan, et al., 2004) and compelling conceptualization regarding the theory of action and 'what is tight' and 'what is loose' (DuFour, 2007) has meaning all educators. How did this Superintendent and staff accomplish this and how might those concepts apply to my organization? Certainly, the alignment and interconnectedness of the organizational constructs and structures with the compelling conceptualization provided a framework of support to schools. Reflecting on the structures and constructs created within this school district may provide insight to other organizations. Thirdly, the building of capacity within the teacher and principal groups is a core function throughout the district and the intentionality has implications. Lastly, the emerging understanding of the 'defined autonomy' (Marzano & Waters, 2009) between the district expectations and each school's unique flexibility calls all of us to engage in conversations with building principals and district administrators about the autonomy within our own organizations.

I will close this study with a final letter to friends and colleagues; a letter that expresses my own hopes and dreams for our educational future.

To my DOS friends and the wonderful principals in my feeder,

I am on the final leg of my dissertation journey and I want to share with you some of what I have learned. I also want to make a commitment to each one of you.

As you know I have had the privilege of interviewing other principals, teachers, and district administrators in a nearby district. Our focus has been on the district level support to schools to increase student achievement. This amazing district is different in many ways from our own however there are so many implications for us. DOS, this district is the size of one of our feeders.....the implications are apparent.

First of all, here is a resounding coherence of a collective moral purpose and 'what is tight' and 'what is loose'. Every single person that I interviewed knew what the district vision was, the four district initiatives, how they were implementing them, and why they were on this path. EVERY SINGLE ONE. You would expect district administrators to know and most principals. But the coherence is all the way to the classroom! A first year teacher, without hesitation, described the four initiatives and why they were needed in her school and classroom. And so did the next teacher and the next one. Imagine asking 17 people in our feeder about 'what is tight' and 'what is loose' in the school, feeder, or district. What would their response be? If it isn't clear to each one of them, how could we improve that?

The implication for us is really simple. FOCUS.

The sky could, in fact, be falling around us and we must stay focused on students, schools, and the support that they need to be successful with every student. FOCUS

In this case study, there is an alignment and interconnectedness of the organizational constructs and structures with 'what is tight' and 'what is loose' that provides a framework of support to schools. Because the staff in this district is very clear about 'what is tight' and 'what is loose' the structures and constructs are designed about those points. The implications for me include the use of time with principals and other school leaders during any administrative, feeder, and school meetings. Is every agenda item connected to student learning; provide an opportunity to dialogue with each other?

Building the capacity of each teacher and principal is a core function throughout the district and there is intentionality about the capacity building. The implications for us include the actualization of this theme. What current structures are supporting the

capacity building of our leaders and teachers? What structures are needed that are not currently in place?

And lastly, in this school district, there is an emerging understanding of the 'defined autonomy' between the district expectations and each school's unique flexibility. 'What is tight and loose' is known and there is still a considerable amount of dialogue and negotiation about the flexibility available to schools. What is our agreed upon definition of defined autonomy?

Here is my commitment to you and what I would ask that you consider as well:

I believe that school districts and feeder systems DO matter. What is needed in our school district, feeders, and schools to realize our hopes and dreams for each student? What is getting in your way to actualize your hopes and dreams for your students? How can we collectively eradicate those barriers? What is needed?

My commitment to you is to be courageous in the pursuit of these ideas. In that pursuit, I will be inclusive of others to bring together divergent perspectives that will benefit the creative, action-oriented, problem-solving process. Who needs to join us in our efforts that are not currently a part of our work? What beliefs or attitudes exist in our system that are harmful to educating ALL students to their highest potential? Do we know exactly what our struggling readers need and are not receiving? What is getting in the way of making that possible? Do we know exactly what has supported our successful mathematicians so we can continue to do it...everywhere?

My commitment to you is to be self-reflective and engage our teams in reflective practices. The times that we come together to work, to think, to plan, and to celebrate will have opportunities for dialogue and reflection with your colleagues.

My commitment to you is to be nimble and responsive. Meg Wheatley reminds us that we have to work and be in the present. So much of what we do is about planning for the future. She reminds me that it is in our everyday interactions with each other, with parents, teachers, and especially with our students, that our hopes and dreams are actualized. Each time we engage or respond, or don't, we are actualizing our hopes and dreams. What does that look like with our team?

My commitment to you is to work with all of you to create coherence across our district and feeder system so that we have collectively defined autonomy and defined 'what is tight' and 'what is loose'. What do we each need to take responsibility for any

incoherence within the system? What is our commitment to each other to create coherence?

These are my commitments to you. Please help me to stick to them and become a better educator and leader.

I am so grateful to work with each of you. Thank you for all that you bring into my life.

Brenda

Epilogue

Throughout this case study, I have been in awe of the educators in Birchwood School District that have allowed me into their world, into their hopes and dreams for their students, themselves, and their school district. As I have co-constructed my understanding of this school district with each one of them, I have seen district-level reform through new lens; the lens of school principals, teachers, and district administrators that have a different set of challenges and opportunities than I have experienced. I have enveloped this new understanding into my own ever-changing understanding of school reform. I have been humbled by these educators collective moral purpose to genuinely educate all students.

From the perspective of a principal and district administrator, I am amazed at the level of coherence they have achieved in the past few years. This level of coherence, in my experience and reading of the literature, has eluded many throughout our country. My own hopes and dreams for the educators in Birchwood School District are the realization of all that they aspire to in their own professional journey and the actualization of the increased student achievement for their students.

Thank you, Birchwood staff. I am so appreciative of the hours that you spent engaged in this discourse with me. I look forward with optimism to your future student successes.

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Appendix A
Introduction Letter

September 30, 2008

Dear,

You are invited to participate in a research study that focuses on the influence that a school district has on schools to support student achievement especially for marginalized students. Your participation in this study is essential to understand how the school district policies, structures, and organizational constructs support schools to improve student achievement. This is a qualitative case study that focuses only on Birchwood School District. While the reorganization of the past few years is an important backdrop, it is not the focus of this research. Rather, the current and future state of Birchwood School district is the focus. The experiences, perceptions, and stories that you have as a school director are at the heart of this research.

My name is Brenda Gifford and I am a doctoral candidate at Colorado State University. I am the co-investigator of this research study along with Dr. Rod Lucero, professor in the School of Education at CSU. My combined experience of 25 years as public school teacher, elementary principal, and central office administrator provides a unique opportunity to tell the stories from the perspectives of teachers, school directors, community members, and central office leaders.

This research will be conducted primarily through one-on-one interviews utilizing a responsive interview format that is more about garnering your stories, perceptions, and experiences rather than a "right answer." In addition to the 60-90 minute interview, I will ask you for some time following the interview to explore the themes or key concepts that are emerging to gain your insight and seek clarification or feedback. This secondary component may be in another face-to-face interview or through phone or email dialogue.

I appreciate your consideration of this request. As a fellow school district colleague, I understand the time constraints that we are under. I hope that you can envision the value of this research to our professional understanding of how school districts can support schools.

Sincerely, Brenda Gifford

Appendix B

Interview Protocol Example

Date of interview(s):

Interviewee:

Contact information:

Telephone:

Email:

Current Position:

Number of years in current position:

Number of years in Birchwood School District:

Number of years in education:

Signed Informed Consent form:

Confidentiality:

Determined a pseudonym for research purposes:

Guided questions:

What is your theory of action to increase the achievement of Birchwood students?

What structures are in place from the district level that support schools' improvement efforts?

Specifically, how does the district support the schools' efforts to increase the achievement of marginalized students?

What are the roles of the central office staff that specifically support schools?

What is tight and what is loose?

Describe the Birchwood theory of structured curriculum.

What are the structures in place to support teachers in these efforts? (How are these supports different then in the recent past?)

Describe the articulated level of autonomy afforded at the school level. How do they know?

How do you know that what you perceive is being implemented is actually happening at the school and classroom level? (How do you monitor the implementation??)

How are you planning to systematically move this district forward?