

DISSERTATION

CASE STUDY ON THE ROLE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS IN
INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP AND STUDENT ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Submitted by

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Fort Collins, Colorado

Summer, 2009

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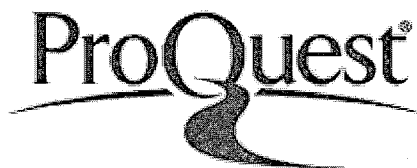
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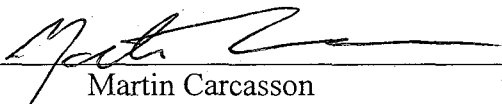
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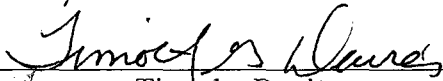
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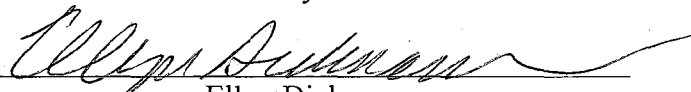
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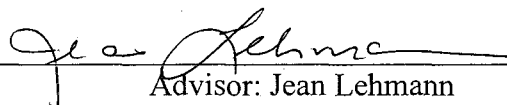
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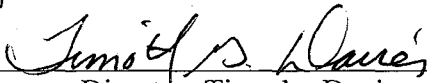
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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

CASE STUDY ON THE ROLE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS IN INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP AND STUDENT ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

The purpose of this case study was to observe a superintendent at work in order to develop insight and understanding of the superintendent's role as instructional leader and the decision making process regarding student academic achievement. This case study examined and explored the context of instructional leadership and student academic achievement through the superintendent's personal and professional interactions with intact cultural groups such as the leadership team, the school board, district staff, parents, and community members in their natural settings. Through first-hand observation and personal interviews I observed the lived realities of the superintendent and the leadership responses to the realities he encountered, thus accumulating a written record of these observations of his experiences. These accumulated observations described, explored and examined the decisions made by the superintendent that pertain to instructional leadership and student academic achievement.

The role of the superintendent of schools has evolved over time since it was first conceived in the mid 19th Century. While the specifics of the role have changed, a constant is that the role of superintendent of schools has grown increasingly complex. This complexity has been exacerbated by the intense and highly public focus on student

academic achievement that accompanied the passage of the federal legislation, *No Child Left Behind*.

This case study looks at the actual life of a superintendent as he operates in the context of a school district. The school district has 2,800 students and is located in the intermountain west of the United States. The participants in this study were the superintendent and selected members of the superintendent leadership team, and district administrators, as well as the president of the board of education.

As an emergent study, it examined those issues that arose from the superintendent's role in instructional leadership and the decisions made surrounding student academic achievement in the midst of the complexity of a position with numerous, often equally demanding roles.

The key findings that emerged from this study are that the core beliefs of the superintendent of schools regarding honesty, integrity, openness and transparency, and a personal ethic of caring deeply for students and staff members is at the heart of all behaviors and decisions made as superintendent of schools, particularly those regarding instructional leadership and student academic achievement.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people I need to thank. This dissertation would not have been completed without the help, support and guidance of all of these people.

Dr. Jean Lehmann has known me and been a supportive committee member for the entire ten years of my doctoral work. Always a friend and valued colleague, she has also always been there for me when I needed her most.

Dr. Ellyn Dickmann has also been a colleague and friend for many years. Her invaluable service, insight and advice contributed tremendously to the completion of this work.

My grandmother, Edna Hay, was a high school science teacher in the 1920's in Iowa. Her intelligence and calm, steady demeanor were always an inspiration to me. I take great pride in her example, and in being a third-generation public educator.

My mother, Marie Karbula, and my father, Roy Karbula, were the best parents anyone could ever have. Both served many years in public education. My only regret is that my father, who died in 2002, did not live to see me complete this degree, but I know that my mom represents them both with all the love and support I have had from them my entire life.

My two children, Caitlin and Lauren, often had to do without dad during the ten years I worked on this degree. I am deeply proud of both of my intelligent, beautiful daughters and hope I somehow managed to be a good dad during this time, when being a student took so much work.

Finally, the love of my life, my wife of 25 years, Julie. Her love, support and enduring patience with me are all that anyone could ever ask for. Life without her would be unimaginable. I love you Julie, with all my heart.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background

The superintendent of schools is an extremely multifaceted position.

Superintendents must be certain that they pay attention to the big picture and to the details as well. Because they are asked to play many roles – community leader, district manager, financial manager, supervisor, instructional leader, among others – the balance of finding time to give to each role in terms of importance is very difficult.

Historically, the superintendent position began as an instructional leader. It has changed many times since the inception of the role in the mid-19th century but has constantly become more and more complicated. In 2001, as superintendents nationally grappled with the landmark federal legislation *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) they began to realize that accepting the role of instructional leader was not negotiable. The highly public testing of student achievement created a situation for all superintendents where they had no choice but to emphasize instructional leadership and student academic achievement.

This case study involved the first-hand observation of a superintendent at work in order to develop insight and understanding of the superintendent's role as instructional leader and the decision making process regarding student academic achievement.

Superintendents are constantly making decisions. The world and work of a superintendent is very demanding and the role of the superintendent often changes.

There have been periods of historic change, but the circumstances and context within which superintendents make decisions can also change from day to day or week to week. Every decision a superintendent makes sends some sort of a message and moves a school district in a direction. Cumulatively, over the course of their tenure, a superintendent creates patterns with these choices and decisions that define the emphasis for their school district (Andero, 2000; Brunner, Grogan, & Bjork, 2002; Callahan, 1966).

Over time in the history of American public education, the essential functions of the superintendent have changed, and therefore the emphasis they placed on different elements of their work, and the focus, energies and purpose of their district also have changed. With the advent of high-stakes accountability in the early 1990s, the focus for school districts and superintendents nationally became student academic achievement and educational accountability for student academic performance (Bredeson & Kose, 2007; Callahan, 1966; Clore, 1991; Cruz, 1985; J. Kowalski & Oates, 1993).

Superintendents, amidst many important responsibilities and intricate organizational structures, had to somehow keep themselves and their districts focused on instruction, learning, and demonstration of success on high-stakes accountability tests. The entire structure of teaching and learning, for adults and students, became of the utmost importance in ensuring this focus and producing consistent and improved results on these standardized tests (Bredeson & Kose, 2007; Cohn, 2005; Cudeiro, 2005; T. J. Kowalski, 2005; Vaughan, 2002; Waters & Marzano, 2006).

While student achievement and instructional leadership have a long history in the superintendency – indeed they were the primary responsibility of the first superintendents in the 1830s and 1840s (Callahan, 1966), it was with the passage of NCLB in 2001 that

these two elements of the multifaceted roles superintendents are required to play became paramount (Anthes & Education Commission of the States, 2002; Cohn, 2005; Lane, 2006; , "No Child Left Behind Act of 2001", 2001; Sherman, 2008).

NCLB places a very specific and vital importance on both overall student achievement and on achievement of a wide variety of student sub-groups, which are categorized both economically (free and reduced lunch) and by race and or ethnic background: Hispanic, Black, Asian or American Indian students are all subgroups ("No Child Left Behind Act of 2001", 2001). In the legislation, all students and all sub-groups must perform at 100% proficiency by the 2013-2014 school year. Schools must meet "Annual Yearly Progress," (AYP) every year between the passage of the law in 2001 and the 2013-2014 school year (Kim, 2005).

Meeting these goals will be particularly challenging for any school with significant populations of students of color or students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, as these students have historically lagged significantly behind their White and non-disadvantaged peers (Cohn, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Kim, 2005; Lane, 2006; Linn, Baker, & Betebenner, 2002; Novak, 2003).

This shift toward very public accountability, based upon annual high-stakes testing, has meant that the superintendents have no real choice in terms of placing their role as instructional leaders front and center, despite the fact that they have demanding professional lives, with high stakes demands upon their time, efforts, focus and energy in such areas as school safety, time with school boards and school board members, fiscal and property management, and increasingly public roles in federal, state, and local politics. None of these other vital roles, all of which come with public accountability,

have diminished in the least as the high-stakes demands for instructional leadership and raising student achievement scores have risen dramatically in the past decade, most particularly since the passage of NCLB. Given the difficult and demanding task of raising student achievement across the board as well as for every individual sub-group, superintendents have no choice but to give significant time and energy to the role of instructional leadership and work to raise student achievement in their districts (Bredeson & Kose, 2007; Goldring, Crowson, & Laird, 2003; Kim, 2005; Lane, 2006; Linn, Baker, & Betebenner, 2002; Smolek, 2005; Vaughan, 2002; Waters & Marzano, 2006).

Instructional leadership and student achievement in terms of the superintendent of schools are linked in the research literature as well as in the perspectives of the position voiced by superintendents themselves. Waters and Marzano (2006), identify five specific instructional leadership behaviors with a statistically significant ($p < .05$) correlation to average student achievement: the goal setting process, non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction, board alignment with and support of district goals, monitoring goals for achievement and instruction and the use of resources to support goals for achievement and instruction (p 11). Similarly, Cudeiro (2005) finds that superintendents demonstrate instructional leadership and positively impact student achievement through promoting and supporting principals, setting clear expectations for instructional leadership and by building organizational capacity through the support of building instructional leadership.

Bredeson and Kose (2007) in a survey of 426 mid-western superintendents, report that, "Our data indicate that superintendents are responding to new external demands for

accountability though various curriculum and instructional priorities and budget increases to support these priorities...” (p.15).

In this same survey, Bredson and Kose remark upon the fact that the daily work of superintendents also has changed: “...the shift from educational inputs...to educational outputs has already affected where superintendents pay attention, even if other tasks often frustrate their attempts to focus on instruction, curriculum and student learning outcomes” (2007, p. 17). These findings are similar to Goldring et al. (2003) and Fullan (2005) in calling for superintendent support of principals and the restructuring of school district purpose to focus on instructional leadership and student achievement.

Similar findings are found in the research literature conducted since the passage of NCLB. There is consistent research that points to the fact that the role of the superintendent, while remaining very complex, must focus on instructional leadership and student achievement, despite many other demands upon their time, energy and resources (Andero, 2000; Anthes & Education Commission of the States, 2002; Bredson & Kose, 2007; Brunner et al., 2002; Cohn, 2005; Cudeiro, 2005).

While student achievement can be measured in multiple ways, the purpose of this case study is to observe a superintendent at work in order to develop insight and understanding of the superintendent’s role as instructional leader and the decision making process regarding student academic achievement.

There are specific features to NCLB legislation concerning student achievement that will be important in this case study. The concept of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) is stipulated in the federal legislation, although the specifics of what this means is left to the states. In the state in which this study takes place AYP is measured by

longitudinal growth, as specified in HB 07-1048 (2007). The specifics of HB 07-1048 spell out that AYP will be determined by examining individual student progress and school district progress, taking into account where each individual student began and examining whether or not students then make one year of academic progress as measured by the state student assessment program. This addresses concerns about AYP in each sub-group: as noted above, schools and school districts are responsible for raising scores of all subgroups as well as overall achievement scores. The concept of longitudinal growth addresses potential unfairness in judging the progress of students who come to schools significantly behind their white or economically advantaged peers (Eisenberg & Serim, 2002; Kim, 2005; Linn, Baker, & Betebenner, 2002).

School districts in this state are scored in one of four quadrants: sustaining, excelling, underperforming, or improving (HB 07-1048, 2007). Sustaining indicates low growth, but high levels of achievement; excelling indicates high growth and high achievement; improving indicates high growth but low achievement and underperforming both low growth and low achievement. These are the realities of student achievement faced by all superintendents in this state. Therefore the focus on instructional leadership and student achievement in this case study will be within the definitions provided by NCLB and state legislative acts.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this case study was to observe a superintendent at work in order to develop insight and understanding of the superintendent's role as instructional leader and the decision making process regarding student academic achievement. This case study examined and explored the context of instructional leadership and student academic

achievement through the superintendent's personal and professional interactions with intact cultural groups such as the leadership team, the school board, district staff, parents, and community members in their natural settings. Through first-hand observation and personal interviews I observed the lived realities of the superintendent and the leadership responses to the realities he encountered, thus accumulating a written record of these observations of his experiences. These accumulated observations described, explored and examined the decisions made by the superintendent that pertain to instructional leadership and student academic achievement.

Research Questions

Central Question:

“What are the factors that influence a superintendent in his role as instructional leader and his decision-making process regarding student academic achievement?”

Additional Research Questions:

- 1) How are instructional leadership and student academic achievement addressed by the superintendent and how does this weigh in importance to other considerations and decisions?
- 2) How are resources allocated for the purpose of student academic achievement?
- 3) How is the district structured and what degree of autonomy or uniformity is expected from schools regarding student academic achievement?
- 4) What specific actions or behaviors does the superintendent engage in that have direct or implied impact upon student academic achievement?
- 5) What are the interactions of the superintendent with various intact cultural groups regarding the issue of student academic achievement?

Definitions of Terms

The following terms are those most relevant to the study purpose. Where appropriate, these terms are referenced. If not referenced, the terms are an amalgamation of my literature review stated in my own words.

Adequate Yearly Progress

A specific component of federal *No Child Left Behind* legislation that is more fully defined below under *longitudinal growth* (“No Child Left Behind Act, 2001,” 2001).

Instructional Leadership

Those specific actions on the part of a superintendent of schools which do or are intended to make a direct or implied impact upon student academic achievement in a school district.

Longitudinal Growth

The specific methodology employed by the Department of Education in the state in which the study takes place in calculating *Adequate Yearly Progress* (AYP) as stipulated in the Federal Legislation, *No Child Left Behind*. While the federal legislation requires AYP to be met by school districts with regard to overall population as well as the population of all sub-groups of students, the working definition of what constitutes AYP is left to individual states. This state employs a method of tracking individual student progress that looks at where the student started in any particular school year and then determines whether or not the student made one year’s growth in one year’s time, or made either more or less than one year’s growth. This methodology is defined in HB 07-1048. The student scores for the various sub-groups, for all students at a school and for

all students in a district are then examined to determine whether or not a school or a district is making AYP (HB 07-1048, 2007).

No Child Left Behind

Federal legislation passed in 2001 as a part of the reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* of 1965. This reauthorization, entitled *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) substantially increased high-stakes testing requirements for all 50 states and set demanding standards for states, school districts and schools. Student achievement is measured by yearly testing, which is examined to determine if schools, districts and states have made *Adequate Yearly Progress*. All students must meet the proficiency requirements of AYP, as well as subgroups of students defined by socio-economic background, race/ethnicity, English language proficiency and disability. All students and all student sub-groups are required, under the terms of the legislation, to reach 100% proficiency by the 2013-2014 school year ("No Child Left Behind Act, 2001," 2001).

Student Achievement

Student achievement for this study will be defined by student performance in meeting or not meeting AYP in accordance with NCLB and the State Department of Education in which the study takes place. This is the definition of student achievement that must be met by all school districts and schools in this state.

Study Delimitations

This study is a case study of a superintendent of schools in a school district located in a state in the intermountain west of the United States. Within the district, the

study population consisted of nine people; the superintendent of schools, two central office administrators, five principals, and one school board member.

Study Assumptions

1. The primary assumption of this study was that a superintendent of schools is aware the importance of the role of instructional leadership and addressing student achievement in the school district. In this case study, it was evident from the review of relevant literature that there is a well-understood and highly public imperative for a superintendent of schools to emphasize the role of instructional leader and to focus the school district on student achievement, particularly since the passage of *No Child Left Behind* in 2001.
2. It was also assumed that the participants in this study would candidly disclose information, including their individual and unique perspectives, on the role of the superintendent of schools as instructional leader and the specific focus that is given to student achievement in terms of emphasis, support and resources.

Significance of the Study

The review of relevant research indicated that superintendent instructional leadership and decision-making regarding student academic achievement are significant and vital elements of the demanding job of superintendent of schools (Andero, 2000; Bredeson & Kose, 2007; Cohn, 2005; Cudeiro, 2005; Deasy, 2004; Goldring et al., 2003; T. J. Kowalski, 2005; Lane, 2006; Mocek, 2002; Sherman, 2008; Smolek, 2005; Vaughan, 2002; Waters & Marzano, 2006). It also was apparent that further research is needed to give greater, in-depth understanding of the role of instructional leader, addressing student achievement and doing so in an environment where other vital elements of the superintendency such as fiscal management, political activism and

systems management vie for time, energy and focus in the daily life of a superintendent of schools (Bredeson & Kose, 2007; Byrd, 2001; Deasy, 2004; Husbands, 2005; Mocek, 2002; Vaughan, 2002). As specifically noted by Deasey, (2004) “No research has examined the behaviors of superintendents within the local context, especially as they translate standards-based reform initiatives into practice under public scrutiny” (p. 7).

It was the intention of this case study to do exactly that: to give a full, rich and intricate sense of empathy and insight into the behaviors of a superintendent of schools as he operated each day and navigate the complexities of his position, and what specific actions he pursued regarding the vital role of instructional leadership and student academic achievement.

Researcher's Perspective

I have a personal and professional background in public education. I am a third-generation public educator, and have a 22-year professional career in public education in the states of New Jersey and Colorado. I have been a high school English and theatre teacher, a drama and basketball coach, and served as a high school assistant principal, elementary principal and as superintendent of schools. Particularly in my roles as principal and superintendent, I have been extremely interested in the role of instructional leadership and in addressing issues related to student achievement.

Throughout my career in public education, I have, by choice, focused on minority and economically disadvantaged students. For me, this has been a deeply personal choice: my most important role model and mentor was my late father, who dedicated 40 years of his life to working with less fortunate students in the belief that no single factor is more important in giving opportunity to young people than a quality education. This is

a belief I am deeply proud to share. It is with a mixture of both personal and professional interest that I have pursued understanding the specifics of instructional leadership, student achievement and the performance of less-advantaged students, particularly since the passage of *No Child Left Behind* in 2001.

I have also come to believe that the most important person in setting the tone for a school district, establishing goals and giving focus to instructional leadership and student achievement is the superintendent of schools.

This case study provided me an opportunity to observe a superintendent at work in order to develop insight and understanding of the superintendent's role as instructional leader and the decision making process regarding student academic achievement.

Summary

I approached the task of case study research believing that I could produce a written record of a working superintendent as he grappled with instructional leadership and the decision making process regarding student academic achievement, gaining a real-life view of how he approached these particular aspects of his role and how he balanced them against the other multiple roles the position requires him to play. As is appropriate in case study research I approached this task with a desire to answer my central research question but also remaining open to whatever emerged from my study regarding what that answer or answers might be.

In the course of my fieldwork a few central themes emerged relatively early. It became apparent to me that ethical and principled leadership was the foundation upon which this superintendent constructed all his actions and was the central element of his leadership in every role he played.

As I became more involved in my fieldwork I began to believe that the best possible way to capture his approach to leadership was to literally, “show him in action.” This was behind my decision, in chapter four of this work to construct the narrative, “A day in the life.” In creating a narrative that structurally borrows from the fictional, short story concept I felt that I could best capture the personality and the lived reality of this particular superintendent.

I also felt that though this narrative device created a strong sense for the reader of who the superintendent is as a person and how he acts on a daily basis as a professional it was also incomplete if left to stand alone. I therefore combined a more traditional accounting of the themes that emerged in my fieldwork to give readers a detailed portrait of the superintendent, his closest colleagues and partners and the ways in which they work together to address the vital tasks of instructional leadership and decision making concerning student academic achievement.

It is my hope that this research made a contribution to the literature regarding the vital work for a superintendent of schools in instructional leadership and student academic achievement as well as provoked new and insightful questions concerning these two specific elements of the superintendent role as played out within the many demanding roles that comprise the position.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review for this study explores the superintendent's role as instructional leader and the decision making process regarding student academic achievement. This literature review begins with an examination of the historic role of the position of superintendent and the expectations, demands and structure of the position. This role has shifted and changed over time, and this research tracks those changes. Following sections of the research will look at the decision-making process with regard to the superintendency, which has changed and evolved over time, and these changes will be examined and explored. This chapter will also look specifically at the decision making process of superintendents since the advent of high-stakes testing and highly public accountability that began in the early 1990's and accelerated with the passage of the federal legislation, *No Child Left Behind*, exploring the impact of this legislation and the demands for full accountability in student learning, growth, the expectation of 100% proficiency for all students and student sub-groups by the 2013-2014 school year.

Historical Perspective of the Superintendency

The school district superintendency as a permanent, full-time administrative position began in 1837, as an element of standardizing educational practice for all students in the United States (Sharp, 1997). The position then continued to evolve through the 1800s. As school districts grew, particularly in urban areas, school systems

became increasingly complex. In rural, and even in many urban areas, schools were frequently one-room schoolhouses. This began changing, particularly after the American Civil War, and the role of the superintendent became increasingly important as schools divided students into separate grades and educating them in multiple buildings (T. Kowalski, 1999). This entire process led to the organization of school districts. Superintendents were now referred to as district superintendents and were responsible for day to day operations. They were also very involved in curriculum and many were required to write curriculum for their districts. This meant that the role of the superintendent was a teacher to the teachers and was the beginning of the evolution of the superintendent as instructional leader (Sharp, 1997).

As the role became more varied, more was expected of the superintendent. The superintendent became more than just a teacher of teachers and instructional leader: they were expected to take on managerial and political tasks in addition to continuing to be instructional leaders (Andero, 2000). Boards of education began to expect their superintendents to be capable of guiding teachers and principals as well as carry out administrative tasks that were assigned by the board of education. In terms of the political elements of their work they began to be expected to meet with business people, parents, politicians and others who might possibly support the business of the school district (Byrd, 2001).

Evolutionary Stages of the Superintendent's Role

As the nation continued to become more and more urban, school districts grew and with them the responsibilities of the superintendent. (Callahan, 1966) identifies four stages in the evolution of the position of superintendent, with each stage bringing new

roles and more responsibility. The first stage, beginning after the Civil War and continuing to approximately 1910, was the superintendent as scholarly leader. From this perspective the men in the position, (the position was exclusively for males) saw themselves as teachers of teachers and they discussed their jobs primarily in educational journals and at professional meetings. Their interests centered on educational needs and innovations of the day.

Superintendents as business managers constituted the second stage of the superintendency, which was prevalent in the 1920s.

The third stage, (1930 to 1954) was that of the superintendent as the educational leader in democratic schools. In part, critics who attacked the viewpoint that superintendents should primarily be managers engendered this shift. At least in formal discussions, professors and leading practitioners advocated that instructional leadership in democratic institutions was the most important responsibility of the superintendent.

Finally, the superintendent as an applied social scientist was prevalent between 1955 and 1966. Many believed that economic and political realities required superintendents to understand and apply social science principles to their work in school administration (Callahan, 1966).

Another historian of the superintendency, Griffiths, (1966) also saw stages in the historic development of the position. In his first stage, which he identifies as between 1837 and 1910, the superintendent was primarily concerned with instruction. During this period much of the time spent by superintendents in their daily lives was devoted to visiting schools and observing the work of teachers. Because they tended not to be burdened with many managerial responsibilities they also wrote often about education

and their position. They wrote about pedagogy, history and the philosophy of education. Their Boards of Education were primarily responsible for the management and business of the district.

Then, in a second stage that ran from 1910 to 1945, the superintendent became a business manager. This stage saw considerable effort on the part of superintendents going into elements of efficiency, mainly influenced by Fredrick Taylor's Scientific Management Theory. The population of the nation was continuing to move in ever greater numbers to urban areas and employment skills became increasingly important, as behind the move to urban centers was the desire to find work in industry. Critics increasingly lamented that schools were inefficient, and because increasing numbers of school board members were drawn from the business community, there was a common perception that the application of Taylor's theories would be beneficial to school districts.

The third phase began in 1945 and continued until the mid- 1960s. This was the dawn of the professional school administrator. This era was dominated by administrative theory.

It was during the second of these stages that a significant amount of control began to be transferred to superintendents from boards of education. This marked the beginning of the highly centralized structure of school districts, a structure that by and large has continued until today. Specialization and a division of labor became prevalent. School nurses, social workers, school psychologists and other professionals all were introduced during this period. It was also the beginning of specialization for teachers, who either taught grammar school, or specialized subjects in high school. This basic structure has prevailed even to today despite many educational researchers demonstrating that such

highly centralized and hierarchical structures are an obstacle to school improvement (Glass, et al., 2000).

As the nation entered the significant changes of the 1960s the call for reform began to grow. Schools were being asked to meet the challenges of far more diverse populations and extensive collaboration with the community was expected. The luxury of time seemed to have evaporated: schools found themselves under pressure on many fronts and the need for change echoed all around them. Superintendents no longer had the time for a deliberative approach. The schools they led were thrown into a constant state of rapid change (Shook, 2000).

The changes that American public schools began to experience in the 1960s signaled a new era for schools and for the superintendency. This was a new era of accountability. By the end of the decade a new U.S. cabinet level position, secretary of education, had been created to ensure that all students received appropriate instructional programs and met minimum standards. Hundreds of research studies undertook the task of identifying teaching strategies, factors such as class size and economic makeup of classes that impacted learning. The most well publicized report of this era came in 1983: the highly controversial *A Nation At Risk* (Goodlad, 1997).

The Role of the Superintendent Since *A Nation At Risk*

While *A Nation At Risk* (Education, 1983) generated considerable controversy and many researchers looked to the school and the principal, a surprising development was the lack of research done on the role of the superintendent of schools. It is reasonable to view the school site and the principal as central to school reform and to meeting the demands of standards, standardized testing and curriculum development.

This alone however does not explain the relative dearth of research on the role of the superintendent (Berg & Barnett, 1998). Berg goes on to suggest that the increased necessity of being a political player rather than an instructional leader has played a role in this lack of research.

While as early as 1985, (Cruz, 1985) was citing the importance of instructional leadership on the part of superintendents as a vital element in student achievement, as late as 1991, superintendents nationally were equally split 50% to 50% on whether their primary goal was leadership or management. While superintendents cited several major areas in which they had to be successful – politics, finances, organizational structure, and instructional leadership – there was not anything near a consensus that instructional leadership dominated a superintendent's responsibilities (Crowson & Glass, 1991).

Beginning in the early 1990s pressures continued to mount on superintendents to improve student achievement. The role of urban superintendents in school reform and raising student achievement is seen as crucial by 1992 – just one year after the Crowson and Glass report that only one-half of the nations superintendents saw instructional leadership as their most important role (Lunenberg, 1992). This expectation comes amidst higher expectations in many areas. Political pressures, an expectation of high public visibility, great instability in school finances, and far greater external demands from state and national departments of education all mean that in a time when expectations were rising for raising student achievement and closing achievement gaps, there was a corollary increase in the time superintendents must spend with other vital duties and responsibilities (Bredeson, 1995).

The ever increasing calls for accountability led to superintendents playing one of three distinct roles: change agent, instructional leader or maintainer of the status quo (Glass et al., 2000).

In the role of change agent, the superintendent confronts a great deal of apprehension toward change. Bringing change can bring conflict and pressure to employees through the entire system as well as to members of the board of education. But in their 2000 study, Glass et al., found that 28.9% of superintendents felt that being a change agent in the district was their primary role.

Their report found that between 1992 and 2000, the percentage of superintendents who defined instructional leadership as their primary role rose from 22% to 25%, an increase that demonstrates the continuing pressures on superintendents to focus on academics and student achievement. Bredeson & Kose (2007) report similar findings. The majority of superintendents surveyed in 1995 (Bredeson), ranked budget and finance as their major tasks and the responsibility that took up the majority of their time. By 2007 a more complex picture had emerged: superintendents understood the growing need to give time and attention to curriculum, instructional leadership, evaluation of student learning and professional staff development – all tasks focused and centered on student achievement. However, they increasingly expressed frustration that they lacked the ability to devote additional time to these tasks, because none of the other important tasks with which they were charged had lessened or abated (Bredeson & Kose, 2007).

The third role superintendents often found themselves in was maintaining the status quo. This role tends to be more important in districts where student achievement is

already seen as a positive and where the superintendent is an established figure, having worked seven or more years in the district (Glass et al., 2000).

The pressure to increase student achievement in response to *A Nation at Risk* continued through the 1990's while superintendents were still to maintain a focus on all other tasks. This meant that the role of the superintendent became increasingly difficult and demanding (Bredeson & Kose, 2007; Byrd, 2001).

The Complex Roles of the Superintendent

By 1999, superintendents were focusing on instructional leadership, despite the continued and increasing complexity of their roles. Studies by Owen (1998), Peterson, (1999) and Ragland, Asera & Johnson (1999) all focused on the changes in superintendent expectations, the continuing climate of change that faced superintendents and the specific skills and behaviors that would help superintendents deal with their many roles and keep a strong focus on instructional leadership. A consensus began to emerge on three broad or generalized roles, all of which must be successfully realized in order for a superintendent to be considered successful at their work: political leader; managerial leader and educational leader (Johnson, 1996; T. Kowalski, 1999; Owen, 1998). The superintendent, in order to be successful (and thus retain their position, allowing them the opportunity to be instructional leaders) had to balance all three of these factors (Byrd, 2001).

Political Role of the Superintendent

As parent participation in the active governing role of schools dramatically increased through the early 1990s, superintendents realized that they had to be equally involved. As more and more parents changed from inactive clients who trusted

educational professionals to educate their children to active and often vocal participants in the educational process, superintendents had no choice but to become increasingly involved in these efforts and where possible, demonstrate leadership in guiding them. Parents also become much more active politically and began to take a far more hands-on approach to their child's education. At the local level superintendents had no choice but to respond to the far more vocal approach that parents began to take. Superintendents began to realize that to accommodate parental demands for choice and for a far stronger role in the day to day activities of running a school district, they had to reach out to and regularly communicate with parent activists (Jackson, 1995).

The role of political leader has a negative connotation for many superintendents, but nevertheless, their success is often dependent upon their ability to serve as a political spokesperson and to take an active role in the political system at the local, state and often, federal level (Johnson, 1996).

Engagement in policy and political issues and the assumption of a leadership position in the political process began to go well beyond local school boards and local issues. Superintendents in the 1990s found themselves ever more involved in state and federal legislation, discovering that more and more of their time was taken in meeting political leaders, engaging in political activism and attempting to shape educational legislation through direct contact with legislators and their professional associations (Glass et al., 2000).

Superintendents began to feel the effects of such concerted political efforts on their ability to maintain balance in their everyday work. A study of Texas superintendents found that they estimated 45% of their time was spent on local, state or

federal political issues (Owen, 1998). Politics often carries a negative connotation with superintendents. However, it is also a vital part of their success. As state and federal demands grew through the 1990s, superintendents understood that it simply was not realistic to be above politics or fail to play an active role in political activities (Johnson, 1996).

Superintendents during this time frame also began to take a far more active role themselves in state and federal politics. As vital curriculum, accountability and policy issues were being debated in state legislatures and on Capitol Hill in Washington, superintendents found themselves with a stark choice: take political action or have politicians dictate their actions at the local level. This was a new demand on time, and it became clear to superintendents nationwide that, whether they liked it or not, their political role was becoming more and more important and that political work increasingly characterized the work of the superintendent (Bredeson, 1995).

This shift also called for a new set of skills for many superintendents. Long accustomed to playing important communications and community leadership roles at the local level, superintendents during this time frame found that they needed a new suite of communications skills and that the definition of community was rapidly expanding. The skills of political negotiation, persuasion, political compromise and public relations that had long been a part of local community efforts for most superintendents now took on more importance and a much broader scope. Increased levels of skill and sophistication in these areas began to be expected of superintendents from districts large and small across the nation (Jackson, 1995).

The political skill of superintendents now largely determined their ability to gain support for school improvement efforts, to negotiate with multiple groups (often advocating for conflicting demands) and the ability to quickly analyze and work within shifting political movements and power structures. Knowing who the major political players were in the community as well as at the state and federal levels and having the ability to influence these power brokers with regard to curriculum, instruction, and student achievement became a vital skill for all superintendents (Johnson, 1996).

Facing political opposition and countering educational arguments put forth in the political arena also became a vital survival skill. Faced, often for the first time, with truly hostile opposition to what had previously seemed to be educational issues but which were now hot-button political issues, superintendents had to learn to deal with resistance, attacks and people or groups who showed no deference or respect for their educational knowledge and experience (Maurer, 1996). As political demands grew, managerial demands did not diminish.

Role of Manager and District Management

The new accountability and pressure on the political front did nothing to diminish the managerial role of the superintendent. If, for some reason, a child was unaccounted for, the busses failed to run on schedule, or a high school graduation ceremony was somehow marred or simply incompetent, most community members turned to the superintendent to blame (Johnson, 1996). Despite the high profile and demanding political issues that superintendents had to devote considerable time and effort toward, there was no lowering of public expectations toward efficient and well run day-to-day operations at the local level. Budget concerns, exacerbated by tight budgets and

increased public scrutiny, also continued to play an important role in the superintendent's position. The balance of attending to these daily concerns while juggling new and demanding political concerns greatly increased the complexity of the position (Bredeson, 1995; T. Kowalski, 1999).

The survey conducted by Bredeson and Kose (2007) demonstrates the difficulties faced by the daily realities of superintendents. Attending to finances and school budgets rank at the top of their survey of 426 mid-western school superintendents, both in terms of time and what they considered to be important. While superintendents rated facilities management, personnel administration and school board relations/training as less important than Bredeson's (1995) survey from a decade before, there was a consistent discrepancy between those factors involving instructional leadership, such as curriculum development, evaluation of student learning outcomes and professional staff development in terms of how important they were rated and how much time was spent with them. Superintendents consistently rated these areas higher in important than in time, demonstrating that while they understood the pressures upon them to succeed in the areas of instructional leadership and student academic achievement, their positions were structured in such a way as to make it difficult to allocate the resource of time to instructional leadership.

Role of Educational and Instructional Leader

Meanwhile, the vital role of instructional leadership also continued down a path of becoming more public, more time consuming and more important as standards and accountability continued to raise the stakes with regard to student achievement. Competition, choice, new instructional strategies and an expanding research base all

meant that the superintendent was required to spend considerable time as instructional leader of the district (T. Kowalski, 1999). The role of instructional leader began to figure more importantly in superintendent evaluations (Ealy, 1999). It was also where many superintendents preferred to spend their time. The vast majority of superintendents come to the position with a history as teachers and building administrators, and have a strong desire to give the majority of their time to instructional issues (McAdams, 1995).

However, given the demands of politics and the functional reality of their jobs as district managers, Owen (1998) found that most superintendents devote 40% or less of their time to instructional issues echoing the findings of Bredeson and Kose (2007).

The fact that politics and management were creating a job description that made instructional leadership difficult to keep at the center of their time and energy was disconcerting and concerning to many superintendents (Anthes, 2002; Bredeson & Kose, 2007; Cudeiro, 2005; Weidmer, 1995). They began to feel that management and political concerns were crowding out their most important and vital role – that of instructional leadership. Finding time for leadership in the area of curriculum, professional development and the analysis of student achievement data was therefore a major concern for superintendents as they entered the 21st Century (Johnson, 1996; Williams, 1997). These concerns were quickly placed front and center by the passage of *No Child Left Behind*.

The Role of the Superintendent in the Age of *No Child Left Behind*

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was landmark federal legislation that was a renewal of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 2001 ("No Child Left Behind Act of 2001", 2001). This legislation was designed to create and promote

standards based education and relied almost entirely upon high stakes testing in order to measure student academic progress. In a timeline that stretched to 2014, it required that 100% of students reach proficiency. Failure to meet the standards in the legislation (which “ratcheted up” every year) in terms of students scores on mandated tests resulted in the reduction of financial aid to the school district as well as vastly increased governmental oversight, including the potential of state takeover of the entire school district. The federal and state pressure for students to perform on these required high stakes tests placed a new set of very profound pressures on superintendents of schools (Wasilewski, 2007).

Initial Support for NCLB

Initial support for NCLB was widespread among superintendents. They hailed the focus on student achievement. Many superintendents saw the law as a catalyst to really pay attention to underserved, minority and high poverty students. Many superintendents, long supporters of equity and diversity goals, believed that the focus of NCLB would help them to become better instructional leaders and give greater focus to previously underperforming groups (Bredeson & Kose, 2007).

They also believed that it would be a serious opportunity to create brighter futures for children who all too often had been neglected, even in high performing school systems. Urban superintendents in particular were pleased with the focus on all children. They saw the law’s powerful focus on individual student performance as an opportunity to move from equal access to equal opportunity. Many believed the law would help them to achieve difficult goals such as closing the achievement gap and raising student achievement across all ethnic, racial and economic groups (Cohn, 2005).

Of particular interest to superintendents was the focus on “sub-group” performance. NCLB marked the first time in the standards and accountability movement that all minority and economic sub-groups would be measured as well as overall performance. This focus, and the ability to get hard data on the performance of these groups, led many superintendents, particularly urban superintendents, to believe that the act represented the best opportunity to raise achievement and equality with these groups that they had ever experienced (Farkas, Johnson & Deffett, 2003; Novak, 2003).

This enthusiasm was fairly short-lived. The act was very long and multifarious, and as the realities of all aspects of NCLB began to be apparent, a large gap began to appear between what many superintendents referred to as the educational intentions of the legislation and the fiscal, institutional and practical difficulties of implementation (Cohn, 2005; Farkas et al., 2003; Lane, 2006; Novak, 2003; Sherman, 2008).

Superintendents also became nearly universal in criticizing the consequences to schools and school districts who did not meet the standards of the act, as well as the overt and underlying political positioning that the legislative critics of public education were seizing upon as the realities of being judged on test scores began to be apparent.

Renowned educational researcher Linda-Darling Hammond summed it up well for many superintendents when she stated, “The biggest problem with the NCLB Act is that it mistakes measuring schools for fixing them” (Darling-Hammond, 2007, p. 9).

A Shift Away From Supporting NCLB

Issues of implementation, the observation on the ground that there were huge differences between federal, state and local accountability systems (and having to meet all three despite their often conflicting requirements) and the relentless politicization of

NCLB began to significantly shift superintendent's initial support. There was a significant fiscal shortfall in the measure: the influence of the legislation in terms of expectations and requirements was huge, the accompanying federal funding for supporting these changes was miniscule (Cohn, 2005).

Superintendents increasingly spoke out about the weaknesses in the legislation, as well as the unfairness in how it treated schools and school districts. Close examination of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) which is a key component of the legislation requiring yearly growth in student achievement leading to 100% proficiency by 2014, revealed that missing even one performance target resulted in a school, and therefore the entire district, being classified as failing. This, to many superintendents and increasingly their school boards and parent populations, defied common sense and any meaningful use of the word fairness (Cohn, 2005).

A key component to understanding NCLB is the importance given to subgroups. No longer would schools be judged solely on overall performance gains. Rather, their entire student body was divided in a variety of subgroups, such as minority population (and even further subgroups based upon specific race such as Hispanic students or Black students) students with disabilities, English Language Learners (ELL or students for whom English is not their first language) and students on either free or free and reduced lunch. A vast difference emerged: schools with mainly White and/or mainly middle class or economically advantaged students would have very few subgroups – in some cases the numbers of subgroup students were so small they did not even count. By comparison, schools with large subgroup populations, particularly those who served students of multiple races and/or large compositions of students on free and reduced lunch would

have many subgroups. Under the law, failing to meet proficiency in even one subgroup constituted failure (Farkas et al., 2003; Sherman, 2008).

A study of this inherent unfairness by Farkas et al. (2003), reveals the difficulty for schools with high populations of economically disadvantaged students, with the odds getting even steeper for schools with high populations of both economically disadvantaged and racial or disability subgroups. Schools in California with 25% or less of their student population on free and reduced lunch and only one subgroup met AYP 86% of the time. Schools with 25% or fewer students on free and reduced lunch but with six subgroups met AYP only 55% of the time.

Schools with more than 75% of students on free and reduced lunch and only two subgroups met AYP 53% of the time. Schools with the same free and reduced lunch population but six subgroups met AYP only 16% of the time. This enormous disparity (70% difference between the least advantaged and the most advantaged populations in terms of meeting AYP) pointed out the inherent unfairness of a system where just one group failing to meet AYP would classify a school as failing. This is exactly what happened to Manzanita Elementary in downtown Oakland, California. Serving 745 inner city students, Manzanita had shown impressive gains in educating minority students, with scores rising 7% for Black students and 15% for Hispanic students over a four year period. However, Manzanita had to meet targets in 18 subgroups. It met AYP in 17 of those 18 subgroups. Their reward for what would appear to be outstanding work under demanding conditions: being listed as a failing school (Farkas et al., 2003).

These examples are at the heart of why superintendents changed perspective quickly concerning NCLB. They accepted the premise that all students should get equal

opportunity and not just equal access and initially applauded the focus on subgroups and achievement gaps. But as the realities of implementation and the lack of funding follow-through on the part of the federal government became apparent, superintendents quickly began to see that the law simply did not take into account the complexities of raising student achievement for minority students and students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Further disenchantment from superintendents came when it rapidly became apparent that political foes of public education would use the results of NCLB testing to simplistically bash public education and increase their calls for vouchers and shifts of public school funding to private schools (Sherman, 2008).

Regardless of their support or lack of support for the NCLB legislation, it became very clear as superintendents rolled up their sleeves and began work on the actual implementation of the legislation that it required a significant shift in the role of superintendent of schools. While their managerial and political expectations did not in any way diminish (and in some instances even increased due to the increased public scrutiny brought about by NCLB) the expectations for them to be instructional leaders dramatically increased. The ability to enact the policies spelled out in NCLB regarding academic achievement depended on superintendents taking on the role of instructional leadership. This role change brought others as well: the need for more collaborative leadership (no superintendent in any district, large or small could achieve NCLB goals on their own) and for a deep recognition of the fact that changes would have to be made in order to comply with the legislation. Thus, collaborative leadership and both understanding change as well as the ability to bring change to actual daily practice became imperatives for superintendents (Anthes & Education Commission of the States,

2002; Bredeson & Kose, 2007; Brunner, et.al., 2002; Cohn, 2005; Cudeiro, 2005; Goldring et al., 2003; Sherman, 2008).

Changes Required By NCLB

NCLB created a greater and much more public pressure to succeed in the area of student achievement than superintendents had ever faced. The changes and improvements needed to raise scores across all subgroups and to decrease the achievement gap between these subgroups and White students not on free or reduced lunch required significant change. Teachers and principals found they must change in order to address significant educational and achievement demands. Technical skills in data retrieval and data analysis became far more important for teachers and administrators at every level. School leaders and classroom practitioners found they must critically examine curriculum. Professional development began to play a more prominent role for all educational professionals, including superintendents (Anthes & Education Commission of the States, 2002).

These changes required a new and intense focus on collaboration, community building, cooperation, effective teamwork and relationship building. Leadership framed from a perspective of control, power, authority or management began to give way to a professional community devoted to collaborative practice (Brunner et al., 2002; Cudeiro, 2005). Superintendents began to provide visions of change and serve as political activists at the local, state and federal level while simultaneously being devoted to continuous improvement for all schools and students in their district. They discovered they needed to be personally attuned to test score data and achievement gaps and create a functional vision of how these achievement issues will be addressed (Sherman, 2008).

This focus on distributed leadership and shared governance was a relatively new phenomenon and was almost certainly spurred by the difficulties inherent in implementing NCLB. Superintendents quickly realized two related truths: they could not meet the stipulations of the law by themselves and organizational changes would have to be made to support principals and teachers as they did the hard work on the ground required to actually meet the needs of all students (Brunner et al., 2002). While the concept of transformational leadership began with the studies of Burns in 1978, it was in the full glare of NCLB that superintendents began to fully implement the concepts of mutual and shared leadership that creates a vision for the transformation of the entire organization (Burns, 1978; Byrd, 2001; Cudeiro, 2005).

The challenges of NCLB were often what Heifetz and Linsky (2002) referred to as adaptive changes. Unlike technical challenges, for which information currently known could be used to solve problems or issues, adaptive changes require new ideas, concepts and ways of doing business within an organization and how to solve them is unknown: it is up to the people within the organization to use their creativity and insight to come up with new sets of attitudes, beliefs and behaviors (Heifetz & Linsky).

Michael Fullan describes the changes required by superintendents and other central office administrators to meet the adaptive changes brought about by NCLB. He describes ten key lessons that emerge from examining school districts that were successful in meeting the challenges of adaptive change:

- 1) Leading with a compelling, driving conceptualization that builds coalitions, distributes leadership and creates teams with a clear and coherent strategy for how they will lead through changes.
- 2) Building clear moral purpose centered on the notion of closing achievement gaps while treating people ethically and fairly.

- 3) Creating a laser-like focus on student achievement and building professional learning communities.
 - 4) Building leadership capacity within buildings and on district teams.
 - 5) Building leadership capacity laterally across the entire system.
 - 6) Creating a working philosophy of assessment for learning and making constant instructional adjustments based upon assessment results.
 - 7) Creating an atmosphere and culture that allows for creative disagreement.
 - 8) Having a culture that is both demanding and high-trust.
 - 9) Making use of external partnerships.
 - 10) Creating financial structures that support the increased focus on student achievement and the professional development needed at every level to support that focus.
- (Fullan, p. 67-75, 2005).

These organizational changes represented a change in mind-set for many superintendents. Rather than leading by directive or by virtue of their considerable position power within a school district, superintendents had to change district cultures in such a way that they cooperated with and supported their building principals and teachers as the entire organization navigated through the challenges posed by NCLB (Goldring et al., 2003; Sherman, 2008).

Bredeson & Kose's extensive survey and analysis demonstrates the changes for superintendents as they responded to the reforms demanded by NCLB, particularly the changes requiring them to fill the role of instructional leadership (Bredeson & Kose, 2007). In analyzing the results of this survey of 426 superintendents in the midwest, they compared the findings to a similar survey conducted by Bredeson in 1995.

They looked closely at how the work of superintendents had changed in the decade since the first survey. They saw the most dramatic changes in the requirements of superintendents to create district and school cultures that improved curriculum, instruction and assessment practices while greatly increasing organizational focus on student achievement.

Attending school budgets was ranked first in both 1994 and 2003 (the years of the actual responses as compared to publication dates of the surveys). However, curriculum and instruction rose from the 4th spot in 1994 to the 3rd spot in 2003 (ranking behind finance and community and public relations). There were differences between superintendents from small districts and larger, urban districts: small district superintendents place far more importance on facilities management than large district superintendents. But overall, 48.5% of superintendents said that they had significantly increased the amount of time spend on curriculum and student achievement in the 2003 survey. They also reported that responsibility for supporting principals' instructional leadership was among their highest priorities (Bredeson & Kose, 2007).

A huge challenge for superintendents that emerged from the survey was meeting the new requirements for accountability while simultaneously seeing no significant decrease in their other responsibilities. School board policies had not kept up with organizational changes. Superintendents reported that budget and finance, personnel administration, and communications all ranked significantly higher on their professional evaluations than student achievement results.

So, while superintendents had taken action to shift their roles to the areas of instructional leadership, curriculum, professional development and student achievement, there was not a corresponding shift in how they were evaluated by their school boards. While superintendents demonstrated their understanding of how their roles have changed under the intense and public scrutiny of NCLB, they were handicapped and placed under enormous stress by the continued performance expectations in budget, personnel and facilities management on the part of their school boards and the general public (Bredeson

& Kose, 2007). They found themselves looking for ways to positively impact student achievement while balancing all the other demands of their position.

The Effect of the Superintendent on Student Achievement

There are studies that examine directly the effect that superintendent's have upon student achievement, though not a particularly large number of studies of this effect that have taken place since the passage of *No Child Left Behind*. The study most closely linking the superintendency to student achievement is currently in process. The Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning Center (McREL) released a working paper on the topic in 2006: this paper represented their initial findings in what will become a book on the subject entitled *Leadership at the Top*. In this meta-analysis, McREL examined 27 quantitative studies conducted since 1970 to study the influence of the superintendent and other district level leaders on school achievement. I would note that of the 27, only 4 were conducted in the period since the passage of NCLB. It is the finding of the McREL study however that superintendents can, if they engage in certain specific behaviors and leadership practices, have a positive influence (a positive correlation of .24) on student achievement (Waters & Marzano, 2006).

The research questions utilized in the study were as follows:

- What is the strength of relationship between leadership at the district level and average student academic achievement in the district?
- What specific district level leadership responsibilities are related to student academic achievement?
- What specific leadership practices are used to fulfill these responsibilities?
- What is the variation in the relationship between district leadership and student achievement? Stated differently, do behaviors associated with strong leadership always have a positive effect on student achievement? (p. 7).

Of the 27 reports examined in the meta-analysis, 14 contained information about the overall district leadership and student achievement. The computed correlation between district leadership and student achievement was .24 (95% confidence interval: .19 to .30). In addition, five district level leadership responsibilities had a statistically significant ($p \leq .05$) correlation with average student achievement. They were:

- A collaborative goal setting process
- Non-negotiable goals for instruction and achievement
- Board alignment with and support of district goals
- Monitoring the goals for achievement and instruction
- Use of resources to support the goals for achievement and instruction (p. 10-11).

A finding that appears contradictory was that “building autonomy” increased student achievement, while “site based management” seemed responsible for a decrease in student achievement. Waters and Marzano indicate that this is tied to their earlier findings, in that superintendents who establish clear and non-negotiable goals see student achievement rise. Thus, while buildings have autonomy in districts where student achievement rises, they must work within non-negotiable boundaries and board policies: they are not out there on their own, doing whatever they think is best for students (Waters & Marzano, 2006).

Numerous other studies support the findings of Waters and Marzano, particularly those done since NCLB that firmly establish the importance of superintendent instructional leadership and the creation of strong district cultures that focus on learning (Anthes & Education Commission of the States, 2002; Black, 2007; Bredeson & Kose, 2007; Brunner et al., 2002; Byrd, 2001; Cohn, 2005; Cudeiro, 2005; Deasy, 2004; Farkas et al., 2003; Fullan, 2005; Goldring et al., 2003; Husbands, 2005; King, 2002; T. J. Kowalski, 2005; Mocek, 2002; Sherman, 2008; Smolek, 2005; Vaughan, 2002).

That said, the specific linkage between the role of the superintendent as instructional leader and the decision making process of superintendents regarding student academic achievement is still an area of research that could use additional study, particularly given the importance of the superintendent as an instructional leader and the compelling public and moral imperative to raise student achievement for all students, to shift our schools from equal access to equal opportunity and to provide all students with a genuine opportunity maximize their unique and personal gifts.

Summary

In this chapter, I have reviewed the historical perspective of the superintendency, beginning with the creation of the position of superintendent of schools in 1837. I have discussed the evolutionary stages of the superintendent's role, which began with a primary focus on instructional leadership, moved through a series of phases with greater focus on management issues, and the return of the strong focus on instructional leadership occasioned by the accountability movement and ultimately, NCLB.

The role of the superintendent began to gain in difficulty with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983. As more and more pressure began to fall on superintendents to be instructional leaders, the many other managerial and leadership tasks expected of superintendents by this time did not go away: indeed many of them, particularly the political role they needed to engage in on the local, state and national level, actually continued to grow, thus complicating the efforts of superintendents to be strong instructional leaders.

I noted increased pressure on superintendents in terms of the time that being active in the field of local, state and national politics took for them and the perception of

many superintendents that this demand increasingly stole time away from their ability to perform effectively as instructional leaders. The nature of relationships with parents also began to change during this time, as superintendents needed, often for the first time in their careers, to deal with often hostile opposition to educational structures, curriculums and other elements of instructional leadership that had rarely been questioned by the parent community before.

I then explored the ways in which the role of instructional leadership and the pressure for superintendents increased significantly with the passage of *No Child Left Behind* in 2001. This landmark federal legislation greatly increased the public pressure on superintendents to raise achievement for all students. Initially welcomed by superintendents the demanding and difficult task of actually achieving the lofty goals of the law while facing intense and often critical public scrutiny eventually soured most superintendents on the law. Regardless of their feelings regarding the legislation however, the vast majority of superintendents continued to believe in the premise of equal opportunity and to give more and more time and importance to their role as instructional leaders.

CHAPTER 3: METHOD

The purpose of this study was to examine in detail the factors that are considered by a superintendent of schools in making decisions regarding instructional leadership and student achievement. While a great deal of research literature exists concerning the role of the superintendent, including the role of the superintendent as instructional leader, this specific element of the superintendent role has not been the subject of focused inquiry since the passage and implementation of *No Child Left Behind* in 2001. In fact, leading researcher Paul Bredeson, in a comprehensive survey of 426 superintendents in the mid-west, states, concerning the complexity of their role, notes that, “No known study has systematically examined how superintendent’s work has changed over the past decade within the context of this reform (NCLB)” (Bredeson & Kose, 2007, p. 2). Another researcher analyzing the multiple demands of leadership in the superintendent role also noted, “No research has examined the behaviors of superintendents within local context, especially as they translate standards-based reform initiatives into practice under public scrutiny” (Deasy, 2004, p. 6).

Therefore, this case study examined in detail the decision making process of a superintendent of schools regarding instructional leadership and student achievement. Through the central research question and the five additional related questions, this case study offers an in depth exploration and rich, thick description of the daily realities of a superintendent as they navigate the complexity of their position, giving particular

attention to what the superintendent does with regard to the important elements of instructional leadership and student achievement and the translations of NCLB expectations into district policy and daily district decision-making and actions.

Research Design

I chose the qualitative case study design because it fits with the complexity of my subject. This design allowed me, as the researcher, to engage in a process of understanding that explored the social and human issues associated with meeting the student achievement goals stipulated in the federal legislation *No Child Left Behind*. The within-subject case study design allowed me to build a holistic picture of the realities on the ground in a school district, to give detailed views of informants and participants within that school district, to conduct the study in the natural setting of all informants and to then analyze the thick, rich descriptions and participant interviews as well as relevant artifacts from the field in light of my research questions. This case represents a bounded system, represented by the school district (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2001).

The reality faced by superintendents of schools is complicated. Their decision-making process impacts virtually everyone involved in the school district, as well as reverberating though the larger community of which the district is a part, and to which it is often intertwined. Within this complexity, another issue unfolds: given the public scrutiny that school districts are under to reach the student achievement goals stipulated in NCLB legislation, how do superintendents of schools choose to address their role as instructional leader of the district and impact student achievement through their decision-making process?

Therefore, given these multiple levels of complexity, the choice of a case study was appropriate. The research questions involved asking how a superintendent engages in the process of decision making as it pertains to his vital role as instructional leader and the equally important task of addressing student achievement.

This case study is holistic in its description and explanation. It is particularistic, in that it focuses on a particular situation (meeting student achievement goals) and a particular person (the superintendent of schools). It is descriptive, in using rich, thick description of actual events, decisions and the perspectives of the superintendent and a small group of additional school district, school board and community members. It is also heuristic in that the descriptions illuminate the reader's understanding of the phenomenon, through the confirmation or expansion of what previously was known. This greater understanding was gained through naturalistic fieldwork of the case, and through observing and interpreting the superintendent's role regarding instructional leadership and student achievement. In this way, I establish an empathic understanding for the reader concerning the experiences of the superintendent of schools (Merriam, 2001; Stake, 1995).

As noted above, there is a need for further research in this area. This study provides a detailed perspective of the realities and pressures faced by a superintendent of schools as he strives to meet the student achievement goals required by NCLB. The study took place in the natural setting of a school district and provided thick, rich descriptions of the realities on the ground required to meet the NCLB requirements. The selection of a case study allowed me, as researcher, to play the role of active learner, thereby telling this vital story of the role of superintendent as instructional leader and his

decision making process from the participant point of view in a level of complexity that matches the daily reality confronted by the superintendent and other informants and participants within the school district (Creswell, 1998, 2003; Stake, 1995).

In focusing on the superintendent of schools in the context of the school district in which they work, the disciplinary orientation of this case study will contained three elements: ethnographic, historical, and sociological (Merriam, 2001).

It is ethnographic in that there are unique and specific cultural elements within a school district and within the teams, buildings and working groups that exist within the larger structure of the district. It is historical in that the study involved the examination and analysis of primary source documents such as *No Child Left Behind*, state educational legislation, school board minutes, the district strategic plan and mission statement, and documents produced by the district having a direct bearing on the research questions. Finally, the sociological elements derived from the fact that an important component of the study is the role of the superintendent as instructional leader and the impact of that role on the structure of the district, the related roles played by other people in the district and the impact this role has upon the interactions and behavior patterns of district employees, school board members, students, their families and related community members (Merriam, 2001; Stake, 1995).

The study involved description, explanation and judgment. It developed better understanding of the decision-making process of a superintendent regarding the role of instructional leadership and impacting student achievement through a holistic and dynamic description of the superintendent involved in real-life decisions that took into

account the challenges of playing the role of instructional leader among other, equally challenging and complex roles (Merriam, 2001; Travers, 2001).

Research Questions

Central Question:

“What are the factors that influence a superintendent in his role as instructional leader and his decision-making process regarding student academic achievement?”

Additional Research Questions:

- 1) How is student academic achievement addressed by the superintendent and how does this weigh in importance to other considerations and decisions?
- 2) How are resources allocated for the purpose of student academic achievement?
- 3) How is the district structured and what degree of autonomy or uniformity is expected from schools regarding student academic achievement?
- 4) What specific actions or behaviors does the superintendent engage in that have direct or implied impact upon student academic achievement?
- 5) What are the interactions of the superintendent with various intact cultural groups regarding the issue of student academic achievement?

Participants and Site

The site (or bounded case) for my research was Hamilton County School District 1 in a state in the intermountain west (Researcher’s note: all place names and personal names are pseudonyms). The school district is of what might be referred to as “medium sized;” there are approximately 2,800 students and 250 employees. While the communities have a long history of being essentially rural and some components of this rural/small town character remain, growth and development has transformed the two

communities that comprise the main population base of the district into bedroom communities, where the vast majority of the working population commutes to nearby population centers for employment.

The participants included the superintendent and assistant superintendent of schools, the director of curriculum and instruction, the high school, middle school, and three elementary school principals and the president of the board of education. Each participant was the subject of an hour-long interview, with the superintendent giving three, hour-long interviews and the director of curriculum and instruction giving two, hour-long interviews. Their interviews were then transcribed, and the transcriptions used for data analysis (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2001).

Methods of Data Collection

In this case study I gained access through Dr. Bill Johnson, the superintendent of schools, who also served as gatekeeper for all data collection involved in the fieldwork and interview process. I spent fourteen weeks in the field. Gaining the confidence of the participants was never an issue in this case study, due in large part to the trust that the key participants have in their superintendent, Bill Johnson (this trust emerges as a theme of the research). The participants also seemed to be at ease with the fact that I was a practicing public school administrator. They were friendly, open, trusting, and gave me tours, showed me information, and shared a great deal of information with me outside of our formal interviews during the 14 week period of my fieldwork. During the entire course of my research all the participants were polite, open and honest, providing a welcoming environment for me as a researcher.

In addition to conducting interviews I took notes during all of my fieldwork, as well as spent time gathering and examining records, making observations and exploring the natural setting of the district, including the district administration building, all five schools, and the downtowns and neighborhoods of the two small towns of Plains City and Highland that comprise the population centers of the district. The data thus collected were used to construct the case and then analyzed (Creswell, 1998; Gillham, 2000; Yin, 2003).

Five primary sources of data were utilized in this case study. They were my observations, fieldnotes and the reflective journal I maintained during my fieldwork; documents such as school board minutes and agendas; public documents produced by the district that pertain to the research such as mission statements, strategic plans or accreditation plans as well as relevant national, state and district policy documents; interviews with participants and key informers; and archival records (Gillham, 2000; Merriam, 2001; Yin, 2003).

My conduct as a researcher in gathering fieldnotes was that of observer. These fieldnotes reflected both my observations and reflections. As an observer, I was an outsider at the beginning of the process, but quickly gained the trust and cooperation of my participants, as noted above. I gradually become somewhat more of an insider but was not a participant observer (Merriam, 2001; Yin, 2003). My fieldnotes include physical descriptions of the natural settings in which the observations were conducted, descriptions of events such as meetings, classroom instruction, or informal interactions, and a variety of other formal and informal activities that have relevance to the research questions (Creswell, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). Fieldnotes and observations were

carefully framed and planned to serve the purposes set out in my research questions. I kept a copy of my research questions with me at all times during my fieldwork, and was very systematic in keeping track of all my data sources during the entire time I spent in the field (Gillham, 2000; Merriam, 2001; Yin, 2003).

Mainly because of the willingness of my participants to open up and give me a wealth of information the interviews offered insights of depth and complexity and added tremendous focus to my research observations and fieldnotes. By obtaining insight concerning what participants had on their mind concerning the role of superintendent as instructional leader and superintendent decision-making concerning student achievement, I gained perspectives that cannot be directly observed such as feelings, thoughts, intentions and interpretations. Because the questions were open-ended, participants had ample opportunity to frame and interpret according to their unique and individual perspectives (Creswell, 1998, 2003; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003).

In keeping a research log as an element of my observations and fieldnotes I had the opportunity for reflection as well as reminding myself not to get too locked into a point of view or perspective that does not allow for divergent and contradictory data (Creswell, 1998; Gillham, 2000; Yin, 2003). By examining what people said, what they did, how they interacted and acted and what public records said, I had the opportunity to reflect upon emerging patterns in the research and whether those patterns were convergent or divergent (Creswell, 1998; Gillham, 2000; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003).

The observations, fieldnotes, use of primary source documentation, interviews, and use of artifacts from the field constituted a multi-method approach that allowed for both a solid chain of reasoning and triangulation as I completed the data gathering stage

and moved into the phase of data analysis (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2001; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003).

Methods of Data Analysis

The data analysis for this case study was inductive in keeping with the emergent qualities of case study research. Categories, patterns, and themes emerged from the data and formed the basis for analysis that led to my research conclusions.

In case study research, data analysis is constant, and is simultaneous with the collection of data in the form of fieldwork, artifact collection, and conducting interviews (Creswell, 1998, 2003; Merriam, 2001; Miles, 1994; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). I kept constant track of my data, mainly keeping focused on the research questions, taking time after every visit to the field to write down researcher reflections, and to keep a simple system of files for the data I compiled (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 2001; Miles, 1994; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). By staying grounded in my research questions as I engaged in my fieldwork I stayed focused and was constantly probing for deeper meaning (Creswell, 2003; Miles, 1994; Stake, 1995).

I coded my data according to themes. In keeping with the emergent nature of my research I kept a research journal and beginning with the earliest visits to the field, I began informal notes and jottings concerning potential themes. By the time I had spent six weeks in the field major and secondary themes were emerging, allowing me to sort through and reflect upon my data in light of these themes, as well as using these themes in the process of ongoing member checks.

Themes, categories, and perspectives emerged in the narrative process. The structure of my narrative also began to take shape during this time. This too was very

thematic in nature. My desire was to let the emerging information give me insight and perspective in order to construct a very naturalistic narrative structure that captured the thoughts, perspective and insights of my fieldwork. By the time I had spent 10 weeks in the field, I had reached a saturation point in that no new themes were emerging.

In examining the issues, relationships, themes and categories of data that I gathered in the field I was able to probe for deeper and fuller understandings of my case. Patterns emerged through the narrative analysis process that gave meaning to my data and thus, to the case. The narrative I constructed was both chronological and thematic, as well as exploring the interconnectedness of themes.

With 14 weeks of fieldwork, 11 interviews, my fieldnotes and fieldwork reflections and such data as board of education and administrative meeting agendas and the district and individual school accreditation plans, I set about creating an interpretation of the meaning of the data. This interpretation is essential thematic, using the same structural framework of primary and secondary themes that emerged during my fieldwork, while incorporating my individual understandings, derived from my culture, background and experiences. It also compares my findings to other findings in the research literature. My conclusions convey personal, research-based and action-based meanings (Creswell, 1998, 2003; Merriam, 2001; Miles, 1994; Stake, 1995; Travers, 2001; Yin, 2003).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of a research design leads to credibility concerning the results of the research (Creswell, 1998; Stake, 1995). In keeping a copy of my research questions with me at all times during my fieldwork I was very confident that these questions drove

both data collection and data analysis (Creswell, 2003; Stake, 1995). In my analysis, I am explicit concerning my researcher bias, and include a section comparing my findings to relevant research literature (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 2001; Stake, 1995).

Prolonged Engagement in the Field/Member Checks

In my 14 weeks in the field, I did extensive and continuous member checks to determine whether or not my emerging themes and perspectives resonated with the participants themselves. Trust and the ability to get honest feedback from participants built both vitality and agreement into the data and ultimately, the findings of the research. My participants were very open, honest and trusting, and proved invaluable as I spoke to them repeatedly concerning the emergence of themes and received in-depth feedback from them in this regard (Creswell, 2003; Stake, 1995).

Triangulation

As advanced by Stake (1995) it is imperative in a case study to employ the concept of triangulation. This is the process of using a variety of data sources and comparing them to each other. This case study brings together data from observations and fieldnotes; documents such as school board minutes and agendas, public documents produced by the district that pertain to the research such as mission statements, strategic plans or accreditation plans as well as relevant national, state and district policy documents; interviews with participants and key informers; and archival records. All of this data were continuously triangulated through the research process (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 2001).

Rich, Thick Description

Rich, thick description was employed throughout the narrative to allow the reader to make independent decisions regarding whether or not the case being researched has transferability to other cases or potential cases. If, for the reader, the detailed description of the case offers insight into other cases or situations, due to shared characteristics between the two, then the case may be said to have transferability (Creswell, 2003; Stake, 1995).

Clarification of Researcher Bias

As a researcher, I brought to the process of this case study 22 years of experience as a public educator. My personal connection to public education runs much deeper than this: a source of both pride and inspiration for me is that I am a third-generation public educator, and grew up in a household where my mother was, for 30 years, an elementary school secretary and office manager, and my father spent 40 years as a junior high and junior college social studies teacher. I deeply admire my parents and grandparents (my maternal grandmother was a science teacher in the 1920s) and from them, gained a deep love of community and educational service that resonates in my personal and professional life.

I am also a very relationship oriented person. The great satisfactions in my life spring from personal relationships. I have been fortunate to have many positive relationships in my personal and professional life. Working on strong teams, where people truly care for each other on both a personal and professional basis gives my life and my work deep meaning.

Because I have dedicated the bulk of my professional life and career to public education, and because I believe that strong leadership plays an important role in whether or not schools and school districts provide a quality education for students, I chose my research topic to further explore the relationship of leadership to instructional leadership and student academic achievement. Doing the research and the fieldwork held great personal and professional interest for me, as I wish to continue for a number of years in my own career as an educational leader.

The primary subject of my research, Dr. Bill Johnson, the superintendent in Hamilton County School District 1, is an engaging, likable person, who demonstrates consistently through his words and his actions that he cares very much for children, their families, and all district staff members. These personal qualities emerge as a primary theme of my research. However, I developed a bias regarding Dr. Johnson that is in keeping with all the participants of my study – I came away from this fieldwork with deep personal respect for his dedication, honesty, sincerity and dedication to public education. Given that this is exactly how all my participants feel about him, I do not find it surprising that my personal feelings for Dr. Johnson ended up being similar to those who work for him and with him on a daily basis.

I cannot help but have been influenced by his essential decency and honesty. However, I did my very best as a researcher to have those qualities reflected through the honest and open perceptions of Bill Johnson that are quite simply who he is as a person. I believe and hope that these qualities were captured by my narrative and that they will resonate with readers and give an insight and understanding of Dr. Johnson, the type of instructional leader he is, and how his personal qualities make a difference to students

and their families. I believe that both this honesty in terms of researcher bias and the honest reporting of Dr. Johnson's characteristics from my fieldwork and interviews will give readers a solid perspective of the impact that the researcher bias might have on the inquiry process and the conclusions or findings reached (Creswell, 1998, 2003; Merriam, 2001).

Presentation of Negative or Discrepant Information

Real life is composed of many points of view and multiple perspectives. However, in searching for and presenting participant points of view or perspectives that run counter to the prevailing themes that emerge from the data, I was truly unable to uncover any relevant information. Consistency in personality, personal discipline and an ability to be open and honest seem hallmarks of Dr. Johnson and are reflected in the way that his school district is organized and run on a daily basis.

Such honesty is revealed in his interviews, and in his willingness to hire a full-time curriculum and instructional director when under his direct instructional leadership, student scores had a period of improvement, followed by a period of stagnation. So, in this sense, a true picture of student achievement in Hamilton County School District 1 is on display, as well as the open efforts taken by Dr. Johnson and his entire leadership team to address these areas of instructional weakness and learning gaps.

CHAPTER FOUR – THE CASE STUDY NARRATIVE

Author's Note: In the following narrative of a day in the life of Dr. Bill Johnson, I have appropriated the style of the short story. While all of the people and virtually all of the incidents that occur in this narrative are totally factual, there are also some details in which I have taken artistic license. These small deviations from observed actions or facts constitute my attempts to tell a larger "truth" that is interpretative as opposed to the simple retelling of observation. In appropriating the stylistic form of short story author, I am using what I learned from extensive time in the field and interaction with real people to interpret what I saw and enter into the thoughts, intentions and motivations of these real people from the perspective of a fiction writer. What thus emerges is a narrative that attempts to be real on a personal and professional level and in keeping with the truthful realities that Dr. Johnson and his personal and professional associates work through in a typical day.

As previously noted in Chapter three, all names and place names are pseudonyms.

A Day in the Life

Early Morning

Dr. William Johnson hears the alarm clock go off and knows he has to get up, but he's tired. He was at negotiations last night until after 11:00, and they went pretty well, as those things go. There were some issues from the Hamilton County Education Association, as he knew there would be, and even though it was little stuff, he had let it get to him some. He had a lot of other things on his mind, too – these were tough times economically and a lot of people were hurting. Money was going to be tight, and the same crew from HCEA would probably be a pain in the ass about it – but he sighed as he lay in bed and thought, "Thirty-two years in the business, and I still let some things get to me. Will I ever learn?" He had been up, lying in bed, restless, until at least 12:30, which was when he got up for a few minutes, and padded barefoot through the house, and let the

dog out for a little bit. But he brought her back in, because you had to be careful of the coyotes. So he knew he was up at least that late, and a little later – he figured he probably drifted off around 1:00.

And now, this morning at 7:00 at the high school, he had a faculty meeting to attend to talk about money, and assure them that despite the terrific downturn in the economy, and the fact that money was tight, there were not going to be any layoffs. He had scheduled a series of meetings over the last few days when he finally got information out of the commissioner's office about the economic stimulus package, and it looked pretty good, considering. He had reviewed it with Mike Wayford, his financial administrator, as they sat together at lunch, as they did every day. He had taken Mike out that day – they usually just sat in his office or Mike's and ate in – because he wanted a little more privacy. He showed him the numbers, which Mike had gotten too, that very same morning. And he asked him, "Does this mean I can go talk to them, and let them know we won't have any layoffs? I know they're nervous. They're worried. Hell, everybody's worried."

And Mike had told him, "Yep, I ran the numbers this morning. It's good, Dog." He loved that Mike called him "Dog," and he also liked that he only did it when no one else was around. Nobody called him William, and he would correct people when they called him "Dr. Johnson," and smile and say, "Just call me Bill." But he and Mike had been together the whole six years he had been superintendent in Hamilton County District 1, and had gotten very close. They were a great team. In his old district he had done all the finances, and it had been a hell of a lot of work and kept him from some other things he really wanted to do. So when he came here and Mike was already the

finance guy, he was really happy to be able to turn more to the instructional side. Plus, of course, that very first year they had to scramble to put together a bond issue to take to the voters. Right away, Mike had proven himself absolutely invaluable. He liked Mike from the start and they were very tight – they trusted each other absolutely. A damned good thing for a superintendent to have. Mike liked him, too. A few years ago, he got him a coffee mug that said, “The Big Dog!” on it and Bill got a kick out of it. Mike started teasing him and calling him “Dog,” and they laughed about it – it was their little secret.

Bill rolled out of bed and stretched. The time had just changed to daylight saving time and it was still dark. He liked it that way. For as long as he could remember, from when he was a kid, back in Missouri, he had liked the quiet of the early morning. He pulled on a bathrobe and kissed his sleeping wife, Jenny, on the forehead, quiet and softly so as not to wake her. Then he went downstairs and let Hamburger, their dog, out again. She loved their big yard. He made coffee, sat down at the computer while it brewed, and looked at the news. A terrible thing in Germany – some school kid had gone on a rampage. Sixteen people were dead. It turned his stomach. He read it a little bit, and then he couldn’t read it anymore. It just bothered him too much. His coffee was ready.

He poured himself a cup, black, as he always drank it, and went outside onto the big deck. God, he loved this house. He and Jenny found this lot on a green belt, facing the mountains, and they both just knew it was right. Jenny liked old places and they found a builder to design an Arts and Crafts style house. From his deck he could just begin to see the mountains take shape in the early morning light. He came out here in all weather and never tired of looking out at those mountains. On summer mornings he

sometimes had a hard time tearing himself away – he could just sit in his outdoor recliner and enjoy his coffee and the quiet, and watch the sun drench those snow-capped peaks.

But he had a meeting. He went in and had his usual breakfast of bran flakes, fruit, and milk, took his vitamins, poured his second coffee and went up to take his shower, get dressed, and get going for the meeting. He thought about the meeting the night before as he showered. HCEA wanted to go back to the old days: instead of having four discretionary and eight sick days, which is what they had now, they wanted twelve discretionary days. Mike told him that when they had done that before, it was a disaster. The community went ballistic when they found out people were taking off in the middle of the year and going on cruises with their spouses and things like that. Sure, it wasn't everybody. But substitute teacher costs had skyrocketed. There was no way. But he needed to think of an alternative, something fair. It hadn't come to him yet. He'd ask Mike. He knew he would have been thinking about it, too. He would ask him at lunch.

The Meeting

It was a packed house at Kennedy High School. People were worried. He knew it. The economy was in bad shape – he had never seen it like this. His grandfather had told him many stories of the Depression when he was a kid, but he had never seen things go down like they were now – he was worried too. Hadn't done his 401K any favors, that was for sure. He particularly thought of the young people. He loved his young teachers. So many of them reminded him of his early days. They were so enthusiastic, they loved their kids so much. It gave him a lot of energy to see those young teachers. He wished he could pay them more, he really did. He did the best he could, but many of them had families, he knew, or wanted to buy their first house, and in his heart, he really

did wish he could do more for them. But he couldn't create money, and so he and Mike did the best they could.

He didn't count, but he figured just from glancing around the auditorium that pretty much the whole staff was here. They had kids in the building at 7:30, so he knew he had about 10 minutes, maybe 15, no more. He started.

"Well first of all, thank you for being here. I know you have important stuff to do, and you've got kids coming in a few minutes, so I'll keep it short, and we will see if there are any questions. What has happened is that I have gotten some numbers from the state, from the commissioner's office, regarding the stimulus. I am sure you guys have been reading about some of this in the newspapers, but I wanted to tell you what it means for our state, and what it looks like it will mean for our district. You have probably already heard a lot of things, and you may continue to hear things, but my intent is to give you accurate information. I have handouts here, and you can take them with you and they spell it out pretty well.

"Here's the big thing. We are going to be okay. This year – and it looks like probably next year – we are going to hold our own. And the most important thing for us is this: we will not be having any layoffs. I hope you were not worried about that, because you know that, unlike most school districts in our state, we have continued to see some growth. This really helps us. Now, the stimulus money, which goes to the state, is going to help us even more. So, we will be able to keep people. We probably won't be able to add any, but no layoffs."

He paused. The relief was palpable in the air. He let it soak in. Then he continued. "We will continue to work, Mike Wayford and I, to develop these numbers

and get more specific. Like we always do, we will share this stuff with you. We want you in the loop. Of course, we are in negotiations right now, and we will work with the school board, and plug these numbers in, and they will be the basis we will use through the negotiations process. But like I said, I figured maybe some of you were worried, and I didn't want you to be worried over nothing. So, that's really all I have. Are there any questions?"

There were none. They were just happy to hear the news. They knew of course that they were in the midst of negotiations, and that he wouldn't have any concrete answers yet on specifics. But they were relieved.

"Okay folks, thanks for coming out this morning. Go out there and do what you usually do, and do great work with those kids." He watched as they left the auditorium. He could hear kids in the background as they came into school. He loved that sound – young people, teenagers, coming to school in the morning, swinging their backpacks, talking to their friends, laughing. He had loved it from the start, when he was a special education teacher in a mainly Black high school back in Texas. His first job. Sometimes it seemed like a long time ago. He never forgot the joy of watching young people come to school in the morning. It still almost gave him goose bumps. He loved being superintendent. But he could feel wistful, sometimes, for those early days. He had been pretty young, not much older than the kids he taught. Some days, that could feel like yesterday. Other days, it pretty much seemed what it was – 31 years ago. Good years, he knew. Some better than others. But that was just life. Mainly good days. I mean, how lucky was that – to live your life doing something you loved, to look back and think, it has been pretty darned good. He walked through the hallways, kind of going the long

way around, soaking in the kids. Many of them said hello. He liked going to the plays, and the track meets, the games, and the dances. Just liked being around kids.

A Morning of Work

He headed straight to the office, and said hello to Mary, his smart, loyal and dependable secretary, and she said hello back, and asked him how he was doing, knowing he had negotiations the night before. "Well, Mary," he grinned, "I'm a little tired. Getting' old I guess." She laughed too, and he walked down the corridor to his office.

His office like his deck at home, looked out over the mountains. A little cold out there this morning – they had been in a warm spell, and he liked that. But, not too bad really, pretty much expected for early March. The big peaks glistened in the sun now. Some days, when maybe some little thing would be bugging him, he would get some coffee and spend a minute or two looking out at those mountains, and that would pretty much do it. Such beauty. He really did feel lucky to be here.

He poured himself a coffee in the Big Dog cup, and greeted people as they came in – several were already in their offices. He popped his head into Mike's office.

"How'd it go over there?" Mike asked, looking up from a mountain of paperwork. Negotiations were a lot of work for Mike.

"Good. No questions. I didn't know for sure what to expect. But I think they were really relieved. I could see it, sense it. I am really glad I went. Good thing to do."

"I agree. No sense having them worried, or upset. Keep 'em focused on the kids, not on worrying if they have a job or not."

"Yep, that's it. Well, see you later. See you at the meeting." They had administrators meeting that morning at 9:00. They always had their meetings the same

day as their school board meetings. Another long day. He hoped he could pop home for a little bit and grab a bite to eat, see Jenny, relax a little. He figured he could. But you never knew.

In his office, he sat down in his chair, and started the day like he always did – checking his voicemail and his e-mail. He probably got 40-50 e-mails a day, some days more. He tried to read them all. He spent probably an hour each morning listening to his voicemails, and reading and responding to his e-mails. He liked to do it first thing. Then, he would get on the phone and call people back. Liked to do that too. Get right back to people. It had always worked for him. People appreciated it. Other people like him, who had pretty big jobs and were really busy, they really appreciated it. But he also liked to think he was good to everyone. Parents liked it too. So, it was part of his discipline. He felt good about the rest of the day that way. Often, he would do the same right after lunch, and then before he went home in the evening. Keeping up was good. Kept him on top of things too, kept things from getting away from him. And Lord knows they could. Lots of stuff, every day. It never stopped.

He wasn't going to get through it all before the meeting, but that was okay. He wanted to review the agenda too. He always did. He put an awful lot of thought into these agendas, and into the school board agendas. It was his way. He put the work in up front. One of the reasons he liked this office, that view of the mountains, all the windows. He could think here. And thinking was something he did a lot of – thinking about things, all the things that were going on, all the time – stuff just keeps scrolling up at you. Putting in the time, the hours, thinking it through first – that was the ticket. It

kept him sharp, kept him on top of things. Then he was prepared. Made stuff go smoothly. No surprises.

That was his golden rule, particularly for his board. No surprises. He really worked at that one – worked his ass off. But if you had the ability to think it all through, and to try and see it from all angles, and to think, really think, “What will so and so say?” or “What else will happen when we do this?” then the chances were that you would see the issues before they got there. Sure, there were surprises. Came with the territory. There was no way to foresee everything. Some stuff, you just had to deal with as it came up. Think, and do the best you could. Damage control.

But Bill felt that the more he thought it through, the less of that type of thing that happened. So, thinking. Tossing it over and over in his mind. Like he had been doing last night, and even this morning. He still did not know what he was going to do about that damned deal with the discretionary days. But, he knew something would come to him. Something fair, something that would get it off the bargaining table, so they could get past it and on to the things that mattered.

At about 8:30, he stopped with his e-mail and reviewed the agenda. He remembered that his people would be distracted today. All the big state testing was going on. It was a shitload of work – so many rules, and they changed some every year. His people did a great job with that. All six years he had been here and never a problem. He had great people. He was pretty lucky, because he had not hired them all – in fact of his five building principals, he had only hired two. But he had inherited good people, and they had seemed ready from the start for the things he brought to the table – vision, leadership, discipline. He figured he would have hired them all. They were a good team.

Anyway, he had promised to keep it short today, so they could get back into their buildings. He would, too. He kept his word. That was a big deal to him, and he did it in things large and small. That went way back. Walk the walk. Talk was important, actually. In this business, you had to talk things through. A guy in his shoes had to listen a lot. Really listen, and think, think, think. What did people want? Were they asking for what they said, plain and simple? Or asking for something else, and maybe just beating around the bush some? Were they upset over something? You had to really listen, and then think about what you heard. His people were honest. They did not bitch, or at least not too much – everybody bitched a little, it was normal. He did it too. But they were a good crew – hard working, honest, trustworthy. He could trust them all. Now that – you couldn't buy that. That was the best thing really – knowing he could trust them.

As usual, they would go over the board agenda. They would need to be there tonight, at least for awhile, because they had to do their summer school presentations. He did not require them to be at board meetings unless they were on the agenda. And they had to review the in-service for April 24th. There were still some kinks to be worked out for that. And probably the biggest thing was the district accountability meeting. He wanted to be sure that was well planned and that everybody was going to be prepared.

Staffing projections were a really big thing, but they had been talking about it all along. This year, with the economy and the state budget in trouble, there had been more uncertainty than most years. But they were going to get some stimulus money. Thank God for that. Thank God for Obama. He hardly had words for how much he hated George Bush. He felt he had ruined the country. And No Child Left Behind! God – that

legislation had set public education back 10 years. What a fiasco. One fiasco after another. Bush. Well, he pushed the thought out of his mind.

Staffing projections. They were going to be fine. Just like he told the folks this morning – no layoffs. He had a meeting scheduled at every school. The principals were actually very, very good about communicating things like this. They kept their staffs informed. But he felt a special obligation this time. People were worried, and rightfully so. They needed to hear it from him. They needed to trust the district, because right now, in this economy, there was not much out there you could trust. His principals had put a lot of effort into hiring good people – it was one the things he stressed to them the most. Hire the best! He would tell his principals, “90% of whether or not you are successful is going to depend on who you hire. Do your homework, and have a good interview process, and listen, and pay attention and then hire the very best.”

The district had very low turnover. Mike played a big role in that. He ran the money as well as anyone Bill had ever seen – better even than he himself had done it, and he had taken a lot of pride in doing a hell of a good job with the budget. They paid people pretty well. They could not quite compete with the bigger districts. But compared to the other smaller ones around them, they did very well. And, perhaps equally importantly, they treated people well. They made sure there was lots of money for professional development. They made certain every teacher could go to a conference every year. Not all of them wanted to, but they encouraged it. They helped them get credits, to move them along the salary schedule. And they kept class sizes small. Bill knew the research – there were very few places that could get class sizes small enough to make a statistical difference in student performance. But he knew classrooms too – he

never forgot what it was like to be a teacher. And by keeping class sizes small, he was convinced he kept people happy. Fewer issues, easier to individualize for the kids, easier to get to know the kids and their families.

But what had been running through his head was that if they got nervous, particularly the younger ones, they might start looking around. He didn't want that. His principals had worked too hard to get these people. So he had made the decision to personally go around to every school and talk to them. He liked doing that anyway. He got out into classrooms a lot. So they knew him. He was no stranger under any circumstances. But he felt they needed to hear about the budget from him, directly, so they could relax, and focus on kids, and not worry.

He reviewed the meeting. He went over every item. He thought about what he would say. He heard himself talking about each point. He checked his handouts as he reviewed each item. He thought it through. He considered how everybody would think – each principal, his curriculum coordinators, his TOSA's – what would they think. He felt satisfied. He was ready. It was almost 9:00. He gathered up his stuff, and headed downstairs to the conference room.

They had great facilities. Built in 2002, a couple of years before he got here, it was a very nice building all-around. Good office space, lots of windows, nice meeting rooms. A pleasant feel to the whole place. It was very nice, but not fancy. He knew that would never go over in a small town like this one. He had done the same with the bond issue, the elementary they built and the additions to the other four buildings. Nice, solid construction, good environment, but not too fancy, just well done. In these small towns, people were basically conservative. That had been changing some, in this part of the

state. All the growth, and the people moving away from some of the bigger towns nearby, coming to these former farming towns along the interstate. Happening all over the country. People looking for housing they could afford. Still, by and large, people were conservative. They loved their schools actually, and wanted them to be nice. Schools were a focal point in towns like this. A source of real pride. But you walked a fine line between nice and fancy.

Still, it pleased him that they had this place. The conference rooms were off-white – all the walls were off-white, and the carpets were various shades of brown. Those carpets were great – another one of Mike's ideas. They had gone with the exact same carpet that had been used in this building on all the new construction and the remodel. Every building had this brown, mottled carpet. It wore like iron, didn't show the dirt, and was a pleasant, warm color. And it saved them money. He was sharp on all those kinds of details.

Mary had the juice, coffee, water, bagels and rolls set up. She was the best. Little details like this might seem beneath her. She had real responsibility, and was a great partner with him, and the board. Still, she quietly did these little things too. She was great. He went with water. He started off with coffee at home, then had a cup here, when he got in. But that was usually it. He didn't go at it all day. Made him jumpy. No, once he finished his morning cup in the office, he switched to water. He grabbed one now and went into the conference room.

Not everyone was there, but he knew they would be in a moment. Dave had called him from the high school as he was driving over, just after he left the place and said something had happened after school yesterday and he had to deal with it, and he

would be a little late. Everybody else was good, generally. Sure enough, by just a couple minutes after 9:00, they were all there except Dave.

He greeted them. “Hey how’s it going today?” They nodded. As he expected, they were distracted a little, with the testing going on in their buildings. “Like I said in my e-mail, we will be quick this morning. I promise to get you out of here by 11:00, earlier if we can do it. So, let’s get going.” They nodded their assent, and he dove right in.

For years now, he had been doing it this way – the board met twice a month – first and third Wednesdays. So, he had his administration meeting on those same days, in the morning. It kept things focused and tight. Just how he liked it. It also kept there from being any surprises at the board meeting, something he liked even more.

He reviewed enrollment, remarking only briefly that they were lucky – it had been very stable for them, actually going up slightly, and this was really making a difference in the financials. He mentioned a science guy who did a really cool thing with weather – they even had a glass box to create a tornado – who had contacted him. He had used the guy before, and asked if he had their permission to have him contact them and see if he could do his presentation in their schools. He had material for all grades. They sounded interested. He made a note, and moved on. He wrote everything down himself, right on the agenda, even though Mary was always there and wrote down the whole thing. He just liked taking the notes. It kept him focused, kept his head in the game.

When he mentioned the in-service plan for the April 24, there were some puzzled looks. Mike, who handled district scheduling, said the technology guy was expecting teachers in the morning – he had reserved a lab at Carson Elementary – the new school

they built with the bond. The elementary principals all started shaking their heads. Eric Green, the newest principal, began checking his palm. "Go ahead," he said, "I'll look at this."

They moved on to the next item, which was the principal roundtable. It was something they were doing with the state to review RtI, which everyone was implementing statewide. They were all good with that. He returned to Eric. "Well, I show that day is team meetings in the morning, and individual time in the afternoon. I think that is what the calendar says." Connie Burton, another elementary principal chimed in, "That's what I thought too. That's why I was puzzled when you brought up the technology thing."

"Well, we need to get it squared away."

"I'll clear it up," said Eric. He was very well-organized, not that the others were not. But he stayed well on top of things like this. "Don't worry boss, I got it."

"We need to know by Friday. You other guys agree?" he said, nodding to Connie and Terry Wilson, his third elementary principal. "Definitely," said Terry.

"I'll get it taken care of," said Eric, and the other two nodded their assent.

"You have to let me know, and you have to let Mike know, and you have to let Harry know too. It sounds like he has a lab scheduled here, and that has to get cleared up too."

"No problem." They moved on. A situation clarified. A potential problem, handled in advance. No harm done. That is why he stuck to the details, and reviewed this stuff. The little things can get you. They might have made a lot of teachers mad.

Now, they would never even know there was any confusion. It would all go off smoothly. Good. Good work here.

They discussed that the state was considering dropping the writing assessment to save money. “It’s not required by NCLB,” Bill said. “It costs us 18 million. When I was down there a couple weeks ago, at a State Board of Ed. meeting, one of those guys said something like, ‘18 million really isn’t that much,’ and I spoke up and said, ‘Well, that’s our entire budget for the year.’ I mean, I look at it this way. If you can save a teacher’s job, or put a book in a kid’s hand, or a computer in front of them, or have them take a test, which would you rather have?”

His rhetorical question hung in the air. These guys all knew him, and knew how he felt about NCLB. No reason for them to even comment, though a few nodded their heads sympathetically. They got it. He was preaching to the choir.

The really big thing on the agenda was the accountability meeting. This was important. It was the first step in the annual cycle that led to the creation of draft plans in the spring and final plans in the fall, once they got their state scores back and plugged them into the formula. It was very detailed and it was very results-oriented. He felt that the process was the most important academic work they did. They looked carefully at data to set it all up and they made very specific plans to improve. Nothing was general. It was all very specific, very tied to the data, and there were measureable goals for everything. The whole school was involved and parents, too.

The district had made big improvements his first three years. Then they had flattened out a little. So, last year, he brought on Carrie Chambers as a full-time curriculum and instruction director. She was good – very good. He loved instruction,

loved data, loved the whole instructional leadership thing. He prided himself on it a lot. But as they had grown, an inevitable thing had happened – he got pulled away from it more and more. He did not like it much, but it was just how it was. He knew that to take the next step, they needed a full-time person doing nothing but keeping the focus on teaching and learning, really digging deep into the data, overseeing the curriculum review process and the curriculum committees. So he brought on Carrie. He felt tremendous pride in the fact that she was even better at it than he was. He worked very hard at budget and at instruction. But he loved the fact that he brought on really good people. For whatever reason, he had no ego in that regard. He like having top people all around him, really smart people. He loved the conversations that occurred with intelligent, committed, focused people. It kept him at the top of his game. Really made him think. That was good for him, and it was good for the district.

He reminded the principals that their accountability plans were due before they went on spring break. Then, in the week before the accountability meeting, he and Mike and Carrie would pour over them, going through them carefully, looking at all the goals, the data, the reasoning. It had to be good. This was where the rubber met the road. If kids were going to get a good education in this district, it started here. And the whole enterprise boiled down to that really – doing their best to give kids a chance. It excited him, the thought of going over those plans.

His principals and their teachers put a lot of work into those things. That was something he really believed in – the teachers had to be involved. They were the ones in the classroom, day in and day out. They knew what was going on, and they loved those kids. Sure, a few were a pain in the ass, and not as good as they should be, didn't feel

that passion for kids and for learning. But very, very few. Most were great. Most worked their tails off, would do anything for their kids. Most were fierce in how much they loved their kids. So, he preached that over and over to his principals – these plans have to come from your teachers.

It worked. The plans were realistic. The goals were never easy – they would be tough. He preached that too – make them challenging. Not ridiculous, not something unrealistic. But tough. “I would much rather fall a little short of tough goals than have the false satisfaction of meeting easy ones,” he told his principals, and he meant it. He never gave them grief if they and the teachers fell a little short on a goal that was tough if he knew they had given their all. He praised them in fact knowing that every day, they were out there trying.

When he got the chance to sit down and review them, it got the teacher in him excited. He imagined himself in classrooms, putting the plans into action. Working with kids to push them and make them excited to learn. It was great to see all the different ways in which people were creative, all the different strategies they would use. It was one of his favorite times of the school year, when he got to go over those plans, see the whole coming year begin to stretch out in front of him, begin to take shape and form and seem real.

They did not need to be reminded, but he did it anyway. They seemed excited too. He knew they took a lot of pride in these plans. They were good people. A good team.

Dave McElfrie came in from the high school. He leaned over and whispered into Bill’s ear. Bill nodded. Dave had handled it well. He had been there a long time, over

20 years. There were issues about accountability and instruction that were big changes for Dave, for anyone who had been in the chair as long as he had. But he took it all on. He still had energy for it, and had always had a lot of passion for the kids. A good man. He settled into the meeting.

The last two items they had been talking about all spring: finances and staffing. It was starting to take shape. It was going to be tight, but they were going to keep everyone on. Bill wondered if people knew how much of a relief that was to him. It broke his heart to think he would ever have to lay off good young teachers just because of money. Well, not this year, and not next year either. Hopefully, by then, they would be through the worst of this financial mess.

He did review some legislation that would impact their finances if it passed. He was pretty active with his state association, and they did a great job with legislation and legislative updates. He kept on top of it. He paid for all his administrators to belong. He felt it was important to let them know how much he supported them, and the organization was a good one – great professional development, really on top of legislation, good conferences. These guys worked so hard, it was the least he could do.

“Well, that’s it. You give your summer school presentations tonight, and then go home. You don’t have to stick around. We did pretty good – 10:45. Nice job, everyone.” Bill paused. “Can you believe we are nearly done with the third quarter? Where did it go?” They chuckled. “Time flies when you’re having fun,” said Eric, always the one with a smile, always the one to wise-crack a little. Bill really liked him. “I did good there,” he thought. “See you tonight.”

They were done. One more in the books.

He went back to his office. Between 11:00 and 12:00, when he met Mike for their daily lunch, he completed all his e-mails. More had come in, of course. He also had a rather interesting message. One of those little things that make you mad when they happen, but you laugh about later. A few weeks ago, a crew from the city had been out to burn off some grass and weeds that lined a little reservoir just to the southeast of the administration building. The wind that day was blowing right from the lake toward the building and the smoke from the burning was terrible. The H-VAC system sucked the smoke right into the building – it was really unbearable. He went out and asked the guys to stop. There were just two, an older guy who seemed to be in charge and who was working the hose from the truck, and a younger guy who was actually doing the burning. He had been nice, but pretty direct. The smoke was so thick you could not see the municipal pool building just 50 yards away.

“Hey, buddy,” he said, “do you think you can take a break from this? We’re getting smoked out over here.” He pointed to the administration building, which was shrouded in a thick fog of smoke. The guy seemed irritated. He asked again. “The smoke is killing us here. Do you think you could do this another time maybe, or wait for the wind to shift?” The guy was very irritated.

“I’ll handle it,” he said.

“So, you’ll stop?”

“I told you, I’ll handle it.”

Bill could see the guy was irate. He left it at that. He started walking back to the building. When he got to the door, he turned around. There was the young guy still

burning. The other guy had done nothing, and was feeding out the hose, same as before.

Now he was mad. He walked fast, and went right up to the guy.

“I thought you told me you were going to stop burning.”

“Why don’t you mind your own god-damned business.”

“You’re smoking out my people in the office. We can hardly breathe in there.

You need to stop.”

“I told you, I’ll handle it.”

“I am talking about stopping now.”

“Okay.” The guy was being a total jerk, but he did walk toward the young guy doing the burning. As he did, he turned back toward Bill. “Asshole.”

Bill shouted. “What did you say?”

“You heard, me. Asshole.”

It was at that point that he lost it. He prided himself a great deal on his composure. It was important for a guy in his shoes to keep his cool. He needed to set an example for his principals. He rarely got mad. But he was mad now.

“You better be careful, buddy, who you are calling an asshole.”

He walked right into the building and put in a call to the town manager, a good friend of his. He was totally honest, and admitted had had lost his temper with the guy. That was who the message was from that he listened to now, from his friend, the town manager.

“Hey Bill, got your message. Yeah, the guy is a little aggressive. Don’t worry. It won’t happen again. Not when I get done with him.”

Bill chuckled. He had not been trying to get the guy in trouble. And he had not wanted to lose his temper. But the guy pissed him off. Oh well. Nobody's perfect, he thought. He knew what Jenny would say. She would laugh at him. Far from perfect, she would say.

He finished all his phone messages and e-mails, and called Mike. "You ready for lunch?"

"Yep. Finishing up on a couple things. Come on over."

Daily Lunch with Mike Wayford

This was generally the highlight of his day. It was a tremendous asset in his position to have someone like Mike – honest, smart, knew the district, knew his job, saw his job strategically, but also got all the details right. They bounced ideas off each other. He pretty much ran all his thoughts past Mike. Mike did the same. They "got" each other. Were totally comfortable with each other. Most important – total trust.

Trust was what made the world go 'round as far as Bill was concerned. He worked hard and gave a great deal of thought to earning and keeping people's trust. It was actually sacred to him. He felt that nothing was more important in the running of an organization like a school district than earning people's trust. He was so lucky to have Mike. Between the two of them this place was focused and strategic. They kept the focus on kids, instruction, improvement. They both saw the big picture, but paid attention to all the details, too. Neither micro-managed. That, in fact, was a central element of trust. Hire good people, than let them do their job. Give them some structure, than get out of the way. Support them every way you can. That's what made a good system. Keeping engaged, keeping on top of things. Thinking things through, seeing all

the angles, and being there to help your people. But trusting them to do their work and honoring their creativity and intelligence. It had worked for Bill for a long time. And lunches with Mike, each day, were a microcosm of everything he believed about leadership.

He went to the microwave and warmed up his chicken and pasta that had been put together by Jenny the night before and was waiting in the fridge for him this morning like a love note. Her thoughtfulness and attention to detail never ceased to amaze him. She worked too, an administrator at a local hospital. She was often just as busy as he was and her job carried a lot of responsibility. Yet still she found time to always do these kind gestures. He tried to do the same. It was a marriage of equals. He was a lucky guy.

When his food was hot, he walked into Mike's office, where his assistant superintendent was contentedly eating a beef sandwich. They wasted little time with pleasantries. It was their way. The usual stuff that guys often shot the breeze over – sports, women, politics – they rarely discussed, except politics as it pertained to education. They were nearly always ready to talk business except for them it was enjoyable. They loved both loved planning, and thinking ahead, and thinking things through. It kept things going pretty smoothly to walk through everything together.

"I've been chewing on that proposal from HCEA last night about converting sick days to discretionary days. It really bugs me, but I don't have a solution."

"Well, me too," replied Mike. "But, I got something I want to run by you."

"Let me have it."

"How about this as a counter-proposal? First of all, I have all the figures that made us move away from the whole discretionary thing eight years ago. When we first

did it, 10 years ago, our days out and of course along with it, our substitute teacher costs went through the roof. I have all those figures. It's why we took it off the table back then. So, we start with that. That takes a lot of the wind out of their sails, particularly if, when we begin with those figures, and the board sees them, we also show that we are doing everything we can to keep people employed. We remind them that we have made a commitment of no layoffs.

"So then against that backdrop, we give them a little something. Right now, we are at three discretionary and nine sick days – 12 total. We offer to add one discretionary and move back to eight sick. In addition, we offer to create a protocol whereby any employee can petition you and the board for additional discretionary days if they feel they are in a circumstance where they need them. That way, we account for the rare circumstances where something like that might be legit, but we keep the lid on our days off and keep any bogus stuff from even being brought forward. What do you think?"

Bill sat a moment, and took a bite of his chicken. He liked it. But it was not his way to respond to things off the cuff. He was always pretty deliberate. Knowing this, Mike continued eating as well. Silence was comfortable between them. Mike knew exactly what was going on, could practically see the wheels turning.

"Okay, we do that, and they accept. What is the impact on our days out?"

"Well, it's a little hard to predict. A majority of the people use two right now. Quite a few use all three. Hard to say where adding a fourth would fall. I mean, most of our teachers are responsible. But human nature is to take what is given, most of the time anyway. I guess it would probably cost us something, but it's hard to say what."

Bill thought some more. "I like it. Good thinking. But what about this?" He paused as he thought things through. "What if we create some sort of incentive for not using the days. You know, some sort of cash payout. We could structure it so that it would be less than what sub days would cost, but it would still be attractive to people – it would be money in their pocket in June, just before they would be going on vacations, or looking at a little home improvement or something."

"That's good. Let me run the numbers, draw something up. I'll get back to you."

They both ate. The late night last night was having an effect on them both. They were a little tired. Lot's going on. "I didn't used to think anything of a late-night session, but I'm tired today," Bill said, smiling.

"Me too," said Mike. "I guess we aren't as young as we used to be."

"No," replied Bill. "I guess not. Still got a few miles left on us though. Hey, with the meeting tonight, I want to spend a little time going over that agenda. Nothing new right now on the financials right?"

"Nope. Pretty much what we thought. The only thing is to see how this whole stimulus breaks out. Enrollment is steady. Big thing is that kindergarten/senior differential. Between the 130 seniors and the 227 kindergartners, we've got close to 100 kids difference there. So, overall enrollment is steady, but that boosts us up real nice for next year."

"Okay, well, I'll check with you before I head for home. I think I'm going to run over to Blueford awhile today. Does me good to get out, see the kids. I've been cooped up here too much."

“Good,” Mike replied. “Check in when you get back. I’ll see if I can’t run something on that buy-back proposal. It interests me. The two together could really work.”

“See you later, then.” Bill smiled. Of course he would have a proposal this afternoon. Working with Mike was kind of like having a magic wand. Bill would think about things and put out ideas, and Mike would always say, “I’ll see what I can do,” and then guaranteed, when he got back later this afternoon from Blueford, a solid proposal with every angle figured and a whole history of sub-day usage tied to discretionary vs. sick days for the past five years would be on his desk, waiting for him. The guy was solid gold. No doubt.

An Afternoon of Work and a Visit to Blueford

He went back to his office. No more phone messages. A few e-mails. He worked his way methodically through them. Nothing big. Just the normal stuff. He put in a call to his board president, Michelle Raines. Great lady. She too had been with him the whole six years. In fact, she had just been elected board president the fall before he came. He loved working with Michelle. She totally got it, and had the respect of the rest of the board. It was a good board overall – civic minded people, who wanted the best for the district. They did not micromanage things. Michelle wouldn’t allow it if they tried. He knew he was lucky.

Working with a board is the bread and butter for any superintendent. All the good ones dedicate a lot of time to board relationships. But what Bill knew, from his past experiences and that of too many good colleagues, is that you are always just one election away from being out of a job. “It’s never the board that hires you that fires you,” and,

“When you take the job, the bullet’s in the barrel,” were a couple of common sayings that all superintendents repeated. Boards are elected, and the superintendent has no control. Even worse, in a lot of smaller communities, there are not even contested elections. Somebody with a hidden agenda can just end up smiling at the table, all the while stabbing you in the back because they didn’t even have to campaign, so no opponent forced them to reveal their true intentions. He was lucky twice: a good board without those kind of hidden agendas, and an even better president who supported him and “had his back” out in the community. Sure made his life easier.

He had gone through his share of heartaches before. It made a lump of anger rise in his throat to think of how things had gone after a bad election in his first superintendency. Coming here had been the best move of his career, and he rarely, if ever, harbored bitterness over the past. He knew it was wasted emotion. But sometimes, often out of nowhere, that anger would rise over how two board members created issues out of nothing and soured his last couple of years in a place to which he devoted 17 years of his life.

It had taught him, though. He had learned. It made him smarter, more cautious, less willing to engage in a fight. He let more go now, and it was better for him and better for everyone – better for the district. It also made him keep foremost in his mind, every single day, of the risks of being a superintendent. There is really no job security. He figured he knew that before, but after what happened in his other district, the way a couple of guys with hidden agendas and no integrity made him miserable those last two years, he kept it foremost in his mind. If it could happen to him and happen to him there, after 17 years of service, where everybody knew him and most people respected him and

a lot of people had loved him – well hell, it could happen to anyone, anytime, anywhere. He had seen bad boards eat up some decent people who did nothing to deserve what they got, but they had boards with no integrity, with selfish, narrow-minded people, undercut them and toss them out. So every single day, he counted his blessings to have Michelle and a good, solid, community-minded board of education.

He met with Michelle and his board vice-president on Tuesday, a week before their meetings, to set the agenda, get it printed and out in the packet by Thursday, so the board always had a week to read the packet and prepare. They reviewed everything then, went over every item. Usually, he brought most of the agenda, but sometimes they brought items too. They met for lunch and set the agenda, and made sure that there was nothing out there or nothing on the calendar that was escaping their notice.

Then he kept in touch. He figured he e-mailed something to the board pretty much every day, sometimes several times a day. He kept them all totally in the loop – his sacred mantra – “no surprises.” He called Michelle every Wednesday before the meeting, just like today, checking in, making sure that nothing had come up. He had an image in his mind of what board meetings and administrative meetings looked like. It was a pipeline, with a funnel at either end. At the front end was all the preparation – hours of it, thinking everything through, consulting with Mike, with Carrie Chambers, with his principals, with Michelle. Then came the meeting, and it was all reviewed. The meetings were short, by comparison with the preparation. He often figured he put in 10 hours or more of preparation for a two hour administration meeting or a 90 minute board meeting.

Then there was the funnel at the other end of the pipe – all the things that had to be done, all the projects and more meetings, and the work that had to be done to follow up on each item from the meeting. Things that set the whole district working, that changed policy or procedure that set yearly processes in motion, like what would happen at the end of the month with the accreditation plans. Thousands of hours of human effort would be unleashed following the decisions he made. Bill figured that most of his decisions were literally million dollar decisions, when you figured all the human effort that went into carrying these decisions out. It was a big load, but in truth, he loved it. Not for the power, or at least not the power per say. It was not about personal power, but it was about unleashing human potential, human creativity. Done right, done strategically, his decisions and the decisions he reached with this team and his board of education let loose a cascade of human creativity, human potential, the forces of good in the world. It was a deeply satisfying thought, and it was something that kept him going in all the long hours of preparation and follow-up that each one of these four monthly meetings created.

He checked in with Michelle. They ran through the agenda, item by item. It went quickly. Nothing on the agenda that had not been already discussed. No surprises. It looked routine. When they were done, they both just said, “See you tonight.” Okay. He was good to go. That quiet little piece of satisfaction that he had attended to all the details, that he was ready for the meeting, Michelle was ready, his principals were ready. It felt good.

He put on his jacket and went out to check in with Mary. "I'm running over to Blueford. I'll be gone an hour or so. Anything out there?" They both kept tabs on his schedule.

"No sir, nothing until tonight. It's a nice day. Enjoy the weather."

He took the back stairs down to his vehicle. A nice little Jeep. He really liked it. Pretty simple vehicle, nothing too fancy, but a nice car. He rolled down his window. It was a nice day. The mountains shimmered in the afternoon sun as he headed down the highway a couple of miles to Plains City, one of the two small communities five miles apart that were located pretty much in the middle of his district. Blueford Elementary was named after twin sisters who were both teachers in the district for over 30 years, going back to the 1930s. All three elementary buildings were named for educators from the past – he liked that. It was a good tradition. Nice community thing. He pulled into the small town of Plains City and drove down the familiar main street. Not much had changed here in the six years he had been superintendent. The smaller of the two towns that made up Hamilton County District 1, it was a sleepy little place, that, much like Highland, (the other small town in the middle of the district) was a turn-of-the-century farming town, created, like so many places all across the west, by German immigrants looking to move from the squalor of the big cities out east and make a life for themselves and their families out in the west. Farming communities for most of their 100-plus years, it was only in the last decade that towns just like these – close to interstates and located in rapidly growing urban/suburban growth corridors – had changed to essentially bedroom communities. Affordable housing, no traffic, good schools, access to jobs, shopping, culture and sports had made hundreds of these formerly sleepy little farm towns into

rapid growth housing and family outposts. The urges were really the same as the people who came 100 years before – a chance to raise a family in a decent place and make a decent living. Only the external circumstances were different. Bill liked these small towns – they were not much different in many respects from the small farming community back in Missouri that he had grown up in as a boy.

He pulled up to Blueford. The entire front entrance, the gym, cafeteria and the media center were all new as was a classroom wing. The two elementary, middle school and high school buildings were all pretty soundly built structures, so when they passed a bond his first fall to deal with all the growth, and built Carson Elementary out south of town, he and Mike had been very careful to maintain the quality building standards that the community expected, and to make certain that every building, and every kid, benefited from the bond. A lot of the money had gone to modern media centers with quality computer labs in every building, as well as a new auditorium at the high school. It was money well spent, and it continued to serve them well, five years after being built. The growth was probably leveling off now, particularly in this economy. These buildings were going to be all they needed for another decade, Bill figured. It would be the only bond issue he worked on as superintendent.

He stopped in and said hello to the office manager, Holly Hill, and asked if Eric was about. She said he was doing some observations, and was in classrooms. She wanted to know if he needed him. “No,” he said, “no problem. Just came to visit.” It was unremarkable. He visited all the time. It was, hands down, one of his favorite things to do.

Just like this morning, when he had basked in the glow of teenagers coming to school at the high school, he walked the busy, buzzing hallways of Blueford and smiled at the sound of little kids learning and laughing and having fun. Tests were over for the day, and everyone seemed happy and relieved. Bill thought Eric did a great job of keeping people relaxed. He was funny and full of energy, and really mixed it up with the kids. It was easy to tell they loved him.

He just wandered, stopping into classrooms, quietly saying hello to teachers who were happy to have him stop in – they were used to it, and never made a fuss about him one way or another. He just hung back, watching kids work on their math in one room, doing a science experiment in another. He was happy to see the objectives on the boards and the bulletin boards. It had been a district-wide goal for the year in the accreditation process from last spring – posted learning objectives in every classroom, and for every subject. It was a challenge for the elementary teachers of course, because they taught every subject. There had been a little sporadic resistance at first, nothing more than what you would expect from something new.

But, because it was teachers who made up the bulk of the accreditation teams, everyone knew that these things were developed by their colleagues. Very, very little of what happened in classrooms was from “on high.” Bill very well remembered how he had resented that kind of thing as a teacher, and those memories had driven him in all his administrative jobs to include his staff as much as possible, to cultivate their creativity and build up their leadership capacity. Eric fit that philosophy. “You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar,” he would say with his ever-present smile. Bill had to agree.

He spent an hour at Blueford. He never did run into Eric. He just enjoyed himself. He really had fun with the kindergarteners. They had just been sitting down for a story, and the teacher asked if he would like to read. He had said, of course, he would love to. One little kid just came up, natural as could be, and sat right in his lap. The other kids giggled. It made Bill smile too, made him think of his own daughter and son, and how they loved to sit on his lap on evenings when he would read to them. Kids were kids. So he sat there with the little boy content in his lap and read a story about a bird that loses his mother. It was an old book he remembered it from years ago, "Are You My Mother?" The kids loved it – he showed them the pictures as he read. A very satisfying 15 minutes. The little boy got up cheerfully when he was done and went back and sat like a perfect little gentleman on his carpet square. He thanked them all and they all said, "Goodbye," and waved, and wiggled in their little kid way as they sat on their squares. Nothing like a visit to the kindergarten room to cheer a guy up, he always said.

Back to the office. It was still warm, unseasonably so. He kept the window rolled down. Nothing new when he got back. A couple of messages on his voice mail. Nothing big. He got back to people, ran one more time through his e-mails, and then pulled out the negotiations packet. He just wanted it all in his mind. He looked through everything they had covered. Just as he had expected, Mike had a proposal sitting on his desk. He looked that over, too. He liked it. It combined their best thinking, which was what he was always looking for. He would let it sit for a day or two – they had until next week before the next negotiations meeting. Right now he couldn't think of anything he wanted to change. He anticipated a pretty straightforward discussion this year – no big issues such as planning time. They were looking at only a 5 ½ % increase in health

benefits – anything in the single digits was good these days – and as far as he could see, there was not a lot to it. Very normal, very ordinary. It did not make him nervous, exactly, but he also reserved his judgment. You just never knew, and assuming nothing while being prepared for anything was always a smart strategy.

He was getting tired. He looked at his watch. Nearly 5:00. Board meeting at 7:00. He looked around his desk, checked his calendar. Nothing. He had taken care of everything in his control. Time to head home for a little supper and maybe a half-hour nap. That sounded delicious right now. He checked in with Mary. All good.

“See you in a couple hours,” he said.

“Yep, see you then.” She was shutting things down and would follow him out in a minute. He took the back stairs again, got in the Jeep. With daylight saving time, it was still full light. He was adjusting to that still, but he liked it. Still warm. Though he could hardly believe it, he drove all the way home with his window down, loving the fresh, earthy smells of wet land as spring began to take hold after the cold and snow of winter.

A Short Break at Home

Jenny was home. He came in and she was working on dinner. “Hey honey,” he said, and hugged her and gave her a kiss. All these years, and these were still his favorite moments, the simplest little things. Coming home to a woman he loved, holding her a minute, having her smile at him. The best.

“Sweetheart, I’m just making burgers and baked potatoes and some corn. Pretty simple. You mind cooking the burgers for me?”

“No, not at all.” He went out to the grill and fired it up. The mountains were beautiful as the sun began to go down. Normally he would pour himself a glass of wine and sit out here in the gathering dusk, and relax and enjoy this awesome natural beauty. But he would never do that on a night he had a board meeting. It wasn’t that he drank much in fact, he didn’t drink much at all. Just enjoyed some wine with dinner, and maybe a of couple beers on a weekend afternoon. All the same, he refrained.

She set the table, got out the other stuff. He did up the burgers. They sat and ate, she talked about her day, he about his. She had spoken to their daughter, who lived in the area – she was coming over for dinner on Sunday. That made him happy. The main reason he had looked for a job in this area was that his kids were out here – both in college at the time.

He enjoyed the simple dinner, the conversation, just relaxing. “I’ll clean up, honey. You just relax,” Jenny said.

“Thank you,” he said. Normally, he enjoyed helping to clean up. They both liked the house clean and neat. It was actually fun, being with her. They would continue to talk about their day, things that were happening in the world. But he appreciated her letting him have a night off tonight. Pretty ordinary for her – she was great about knowing when he was busy and tired. He did the same when she had meetings at night.

He glanced at the internet, read an update on the terrible incident in Germany. Things like that just made his head hurt. All those families. It shook him up, actually. He loved his two kids so much, he could barely even let the thought enter his mind: What if it were him?

The market was up – a rarity these days, that was for sure. Not too much else that interested him. He liked baseball – the Cardinals had been his team since he was a kid. He checked their website. Not much new. Chris Carpenter, their best pitcher, coming back from an injury and from Tommy John surgery, had a strong outing. “Now that would help the club,” he thought. He logged off and sat down. Jenny had some music on in the kitchen – she had recently purchased an I-Pod docking station and really enjoyed it.

He sat in his recliner and looked out the big picture window and listened to the soft music in the kitchen, and dozed off a little. He didn’t really sleep, but it was just so nice to close his eyes and relax. Jenny came in, “Bill, it’s 6:30.”

“Yah, time to get going.” He got up, went to the mirror and re-did his tie, which he had loosened upon coming home. He nearly always wore a white, long sleeved shirt. He felt comfortable in them, he had worn them for so long. “See you later Jen,” he said, and went out to the garage, got in the Jeep, and headed back over to the office.

The Board Meeting

The board room was really an all-purpose room, and was used constantly by the district and by the community. Many board meetings were held there – not just theirs. All of the district committees used it. They were looking at a math curriculum adoption and all the different math packages and books were on tables around the outside walls – the curriculum committees had been in earlier in the afternoon.

It was, like all the rest of the building, a simple, functional room. For board meetings they set up about 50 chairs, though rarely more than three or four people attended. Michelle had told him that back when she first ran for the board, it seemed there were always parents up in arms about something or other – the room was often full.

These days, it was pretty calm in the community and the board meetings were conducted to small audiences.

Michelle arrived just as he did and they walked in together. Mike was there too. They chatted a little and got settled in. Nobody used laptops, not even Mike. They had talked about it some, but it seemed like a lot of expense at a time when money was tight. So they let it go. For board meetings, the setup was really simple: two oblong tables set together in a sort of “V” shape with Mary, Mike and Bill down at one end, the five board members seated to Bill’s left, starting with Michelle. By 6:55, everyone was there. As usual, the audience was sparse – besides the five principals, who were there to give their summer school presentations, there was the young reporter for the local paper and just three citizens, none of whom had signed up to speak.

It was all done in a very orderly fashion. They followed the agenda closely. Both Bill and Michelle agreed that they would take as much time as needed, and allow any discussion that was required, but at the same time, they did not want to take more time than was necessary. The fact that they communicated so continuously with each other and the entire board meant that everybody was prepared. Bill liked his board, and he had to hand it to them – they all came ready to work, having done their homework and carefully reviewed their packets.

The meeting always started with the Pledge of Allegiance, then the roll call, approval of the minutes from the last meeting, approval of the agenda, audiences with anyone who wanted to speak, which tonight, as usual, was nobody, and then, the first real item that was different each meeting, the superintendent’s report. Five minutes into the meeting, they were on item seven of a 15-item agenda.

Bill gave his report, mainly discussing the financial situation and his meetings with the staffs to let them know what was going on. He praised Mike for his always-outstanding work, saying, "I can't think of anybody in the state I would rather have working with me in times like this than Mike Wayford." He meant it, that was for certain, but he also looked for opportunities to praise his team when he could. They all worked hard, and he liked to give them this little thing, even though during most meetings it was only the board who were there to hear it. Still, it made a difference to the people to know he supported them.

Mike gave his enrollment summary and there were no board reports tonight. Michelle led them through the consent agenda, mainly personnel items, and Dave introduced his choice for the open athletic director position at the high school, a very nice young guy, lots of energy, who was well known in the community and seemed, to both Bill and Dave, ready to step up and begin an administrative career.

There was no old business. The principals then gave their summer school presentations. There were a few modifications from what they had done in the past year, most notably that elementary would be at just one site, making better use of resources. Otherwise, the proposals were quite similar to the year before with only minor adjustments based on learning a few things, such as allowing only one absence instead of three at the middle school.

It all went well. His principals were prepared, and relaxed – comfortable with the board. The board had a few questions, but mainly just informational. Great stuff, solid programs and good results in the past from the kids who participated.

New business tonight was just the revision of a couple of policies, nothing big, just cleaning up some outdated provisions in the board policy book. Finally, Mike gave his detailed financial report. As usual, there were no questions or discussion – he was not only good at his work, he was also really strong in communication. Mike was a real teacher – he brought the entire board along in a very relaxed way, slowly increasing their sophistication at understanding the district budget, state and federal requirements, and the nuances of finance. Sometimes there were questions, usually very thoughtful ones that were simply more demonstrations of Mike’s patient and relaxed teaching. None tonight, though. They all knew that he would have more information at the next meeting, as more specifics of the stimulus package came in from the state and Mike plugged them into his formulas.

They had a brief executive session to consider the hiring of the new athletic director at the high school. That also went smoothly, and then, there it was. Another one in the books. Tired by now, at about 8:30, Bill thanked everyone, told Michelle he would call her tomorrow to set up a meeting with her, himself and Mike to prepare for negotiations, and then he headed home.

Home and Another Day Done

Back in the beautiful Craftsman style house, he walked into the kitchen. Jenny called out hello from the bedroom, where he knew she would be reading – she belonged to two book clubs, and loved them both. She had always been a reader. She would be curled up in the big reading chair, feet on the ottoman, Hamburger sprawled out lazy and indulgent at her feet.

Now, he poured himself that glass of wine. He went outside, just for minute. It was still pretty warm with his jacket on, and he listened to the quiet sound of the night. This time of night, the traffic from the interstate, three miles distant, played softly in the background. All of the time, people on the move. It was the world in which they lived. He drank his wine slowly, enjoying it – he was a little bit of a wine connoisseur – not a serious nut-case like some people, but he subscribed to Wine Spectator, and he and Jenny had been on a half-dozen wine tours in California, France and Spain. Those were great – relaxed, easy travel, the beauty of those great wine growing regions, he and Jenny together, great food, fine wine. Man, he loved those. He sipped a very nice French 2005 Bordeaux. Another day in the books. Soon, he would join Jenny. A new *Atlantic Monthly* had arrived in the mail today – he would pour another glass of wine, go in and read, and then, relaxed and tired, head for bed.

Epilogue

This concludes the “short-story” narrative section. The remainder of the presentation of the case is information gleaned from my fieldwork, interviews and examination of documents.

I believe it is also important to point out that it would be possible for readers to somehow believe that Dr. Johnson is somehow, “Too good to be true.” This is not his assessment of himself and his abilities as a superintendent have been hard earned. I believe that he points out a key component of this success in an interview when he clearly states, “I make mistakes, like anyone. What I try to do is never make the same mistake twice.” It is this ability, combined with hard work and a trust of his team, that create his current success in the role of superintendent.

Background, Personal and Professional History

Bill Johnson is from a family of teachers. As far back as he can remember, education was a main focus of his family, and it was always understood that he was going to go to college. He and his parents really didn't talk about anything other than that – it's just the way it was. As he grew up, he had three or four teachers who had a great influence on him, one in particular and this teacher pointed him toward a career in education. "I think that most people would have one or two teachers who really had a strong influence on their lives. That was important, and so was my mother, who really wanted me to go into teaching, and so I began to think about my career in teaching."

As Bill was growing up, his mom was a schoolteacher. She and his dad were older when they had kids, because of the Depression, and they put off having a family due to hard times. They had a lot of experiences from the hard knocks of the Depression. But his mom found her niche in education. "She always felt that if you had a job in education, you might not ever get rich, but you would always have a job. She taught elementary for 37 years. In the early part of her career she taught in country schools. It was instilled in me by her to go to college and get a degree, and I just always planned to be a teacher."

"Actually getting there was kind of a long road. It took me a lot of years. At the outset of it, I don't know that I had this in mind – if you went back to anybody that I went to high school with, they might say, 'He's a superintendent of schools?' I had never gone to a high school reunion until I went to my 35th, and I had not seen a lot of those people since I graduated from high school in Missouri, and they were surprised to find out what I did and some could not believe it."

But it was actually back in high school that he began thinking he would be a teacher. “I was thinking about my career and what to do when I grew up. I went to college in the fall of 1967, and I went for two and-a-half years, and then I was able to get into the National Guard. I came back home and was out of school for about a year, and then I started back. I was in Central Missouri State. It was a teachers college, with a huge education department. I knew then that I had found what I wanted.”

Bill got involved in an early marriage that ended up in divorce. Not too long after that he met Jenny, his current wife. They were young, and soon were married. Jenny worked for Braniff Airlines and had a chance to get a promotion. It meant moving to Fort Worth, Texas. So they packed up and moved and Bill started looking for work. At the time Bill began looking for jobs, there were limited opportunities, but you could get jobs in special education. This intrigued him. He went back to school some more, got more training and really fell in love with special education and working with kids with disabilities.

His first job was in Fort Worth, Texas, in special education. It was a high school that was 95% Black students, and nearly everyone else in the school was Hispanic. He and a few other teachers were White – everyone else was Black or Hispanic. Bill loved it. He describes it as a great first job, a really wonderful place to work, and great experience. He was a vocational education coordinator. He met with employers in the afternoons and taught in the mornings.

Then Braniff Airlines went bankrupt. He and Jenny had one baby and she was seven months pregnant with their son. He had been giving some thought to getting into administration. Jenny had lived in the west, and they talked about moving back there.

They both decided that if they were ever going to do it, now was the time. So they decided to move. Bill applied for and got a job as an athletic director/assistant principal at a small high school out on the western plains. It was the beginning of his administrative career.

He had learned a lot about teaching, learned a lot about from other teachers. “I had a very good principal early in my career who worked very closely with her staff, and that had a big influence on me. But I learned from being a teacher too and carried it over into my career as an administrator – I learned what to do and what not to do.”

As he progressed through administration, he also continued to learn a great deal about teachers themselves. Bill believes that teachers play a major role in kid’s lives – that school is their home away from home – and that teachers can shape the mind of a young girl or boy. They allow for kids to grow up right in their own classrooms and learn a lot about life so it is very important to have the right teachers working for you. This belief has permeated his entire professional life as an administrator. He has long believed that the most important decision made by he and his principals is who they hire.

He wanted to be a principal and when a position opened up in a nearby community as a middle school principal, he took it and ended up staying there six years. “During the six years I was there, we made the transition from junior high to middle school, and I really enjoyed that job a lot. Then the high school principal retired, and the superintendent placed me in the principalship at the high school. Then a few years later the assistant superintendent retired and the superintendent asked me to become the assistant superintendent.”

This was the beginning of his career in the central office. Three years later, the superintendent retired. The board did a search and he applied for the job and got it. He was the superintendent there for five years, ending his career in the community with 17 years of service as a principal, assistant superintendent and superintendent of schools.

“There were some situations with a couple board members – you know it is never the board that hired you that you end up being crossways with – it is always new board members who come on later. I got crossways – I did everything I knew to not get crossways with these two people, but I got crossways with them. It was over the silliest darned thing in the world. Anyway, that happened.”

The situation continued to deteriorate. The two board members who had turned against him got other board members questioning him but Bill felt he was working his way through it. He was not getting along with two board members, one in particular. They had just agreed to disagree. Bill says by and large they were civil, but the situation weighed on him. He and Jenny’s children had gone off to college and they missed them. Then the position in Hamilton County #1 opened up, and he applied. Three weeks later, he was hired.

He was coming into a new district and there was a learning curve there. His predecessor had been there seven years and had decided to retire. The community was very different then from what it became due to continual growth through his six years on the job. When he arrived, the community was booming – it was actually the fastest-growing district in the state. Bill found it exciting.

“The first thing, believe it or not, was that we began to work with the board on a bond election and an override, the first fall that I was here. Luckily, I knew some people

in the community and they really helped us out. It passed and we did some really neat building projects, built a new elementary school and projects at all the other schools. It was a delightful process and I had a lot of fun doing it.”

Getting thrust into the community that way was difficult from some perspectives, but Bill has always believed it also helped him and even forced him to learn a great deal about the community very quickly. Of course, he was happy to have Mike Wayford. Mike had been there a number of years and was very helpful. He was, and remains, great with the budget, which took a tremendous amount of work off Bill’s plate. In his previous district, he had done the entire budget and that was a lot of work. When he got to Hamilton County #1, he had to devote his time to growth, population, facilities, mending some fences with community boards, which took a lot of his time. He worked very closely with Mike and developed a strong relationship.

“That first year, everyone knew me, but I did not know them. Mike helped me build relationships with principals and others and that was huge.”

Bill found his new work was refreshing. He had been in the same community for 17 years and felt that was a long time to be in one place. “I was starting to see kids that I had when I was a principal that were married and had families.”

The move was good for him.

I have been able to do a lot of things here, because my vision and the direction I wanted to go with this was supported by the school board. I have developed a great relationship with the board and with my administrative team, my principals and I have a capable and strong assistant superintendent. From the start, right up to today, it has been a great situation.

Looking at the last five and a half years, it has gone by very quickly. I have really enjoyed it here. I have not liked all of it – there are good days, really good days, and some lousy days and lousy weeks.

But when I look back over all these many years – it has been 30 years that I have been doing this – I would not trade it for anything. I like it. It has been a great career for me. I still enjoy going into schools and watching kids, watching teachers teach, see all the new, young men and women come into the profession, and the enthusiasm they bring to the job. I remember like it was yesterday my first year of teaching, or my first day of being a principal. I look back on it and there are a lot of things I would do differently – you learn as you go through it. But I've tried to never make the same mistake twice. Once in awhile I have, but I have really tried not to. I have learned.

He brought with him some of his foundational beliefs, beginning with hiring the best teachers and administrators he can, and not being afraid to fire them if they don't do their job. Bill believes it doesn't matter how much training and preparation, how much learning that a person has, if they can't convey things in a classroom, can't meet the needs of kids, can't get at the level that the kid is at, open that door and turn that light bulb on, then they can't teach them a thing. He has worked with hundreds of teachers in his 30-year career and continues to believe that the hiring and mentoring process is of vital importance.

He sees his primary job as instructional leadership and board relationships. He takes a very active and hands-on role in the curriculum process, the accreditation process and in working with and supporting his principals. "As a superintendent you have many jobs to do, but you try to never lose sight of your role as an instructional leader, and set the vision for the district through that leadership."

"We needed a lot of help when Bill came in," says Mike Waford. "Bill is a collaborative guy by nature, but he will do what he has to do. Changes needed to be made, and he recognized that. He did not ask, 'What do you think we need to do?' it

was, 'Here is what we need to do.' He was a pretty forceful guy. There is no doubt of who is in charge."

This made the system change quickly. What had been a collection of buildings under an umbrella of the district became a true district.

"There are a lot of ways in which he brought accountability to our system," Mike recalls. "When he came, he made it evident that we were going to do three or four things to shape up student academic achievement. People were asked to do these things and participate. If they did not, he knew, and he followed up with it. There was a big turnover at first. There were quite a few people who left, and it was because he made it clear that they needed to collaborate and join in this vision, or look for something else."

A key element of Bill's success in those early days, and since, has been his positive relationship with his board of education, his board president, and the support the board offers him. Working together with his board is a key element of Bill's style.

"I have evolved into a superintendent who also understands the need to work with the board. The school board can make you or break you. They can make your life miserable. Or they can make you look like a king. They can make you look wonderful. My goal in life as a superintendent is to do the best job I can possibly do, keep my school board informed and happy, keep my district at the forefront of what is going on in education, and be able to look back on all of this when my career is over and be proud of this."

He feels a sense of pride and satisfaction at his ability to help kids and to create good learning environments in schools and in school districts. But in the end, he feels it comes down to his ability to learn.

“Some people learn and listen a lot better than others. I pay attention to what has occurred and what is happening, pay attention to the opinions of people I trust, and then make my decisions based upon what is the best thing to do.”

District and Community Background

The situation that Bill came to in Hamilton County District 1 was a district comprised of two small towns, with some developments scattered among farmland. The two small towns of Highland and Plains City sit five miles apart in the middle of the Hamilton County School District 1. Highland is the larger of the two communities, with around 8,200 people, compared with about 6,000 in nearby Plains City. Both had their start as small farming communities located along a railroad, and their early days were typical of many such settlements in the intermountain west. Located in relative geographic proximity to a number of larger communities, they remained small, quiet farming communities for most of their incorporated existence, which dates to the early 1900s. In the pre-WW II era, both towns had seen growth since their founding at the turn of the century, but were still small, sleepy farming communities in 1950, with Highland having grown to about 900 residents, Plains City to 600.

There was little change in the basic farming economy or size of the two communities for decades. But beginning in the 1980s and rapidly accelerating in the 1990s, both towns grew considerably. Highland, which had the advantage of being closer to the interstate and thus having better access for commuters, took a lead in population over that of its sister city only five miles distant. The forces of change were, again, typical to what was seen in that time frame all across the intermountain west.

As farming continued to play less and less of a role in the economy, and as the number of people living on farms declined tremendously, the advantage of Highland and Plains City to families was the ability to offer reasonably-priced housing by comparison with larger communities to the north and the south along the interstate growth corridor. In patterns seen in many western states, the urban hubs expanded, and growth occurred rapidly all along the interstate corridors. Located within an hour's commute of all three major state universities and the large college communities that are home to them and also within an hour of the major metropolitan area of the state, Highland and Plains City became bedroom communities for these larger cities and towns.

The school district history also follows very typical historical lines. Up until the state-mandated school district consolidation of the late 1950s, both communities had their own, independent school districts. In keeping with state legislation, the two communities became a single school district the early 1960s, with the high school going to Highland and the middle school located in Plains City. There were two elementary schools, one in each town.

With the rapid growth of the 1990s and early 2000s, significant additions were made to the high school and middle school facilities, and a third elementary school was built. For the first time in district history, elementary school boundaries were created. Bill Johnson was superintendent by this time, and under his leadership, along with tremendous support from his board of education, the change went smoothly.

The configuration created at that time remains the same today: three elementary schools (K-5), a middle school (6-8), and a high school (9-12). The population of the district, which grew dramatically from the middle 1990s until about 2005, has settled in

at just under 3,000 students, with growth continuing between 2005 and 2009, but far more gradually than the decade before.

This then, is the situation that Bill Johnson came into when he arrived six years ago. He brought experience to this situation and has gained in experience since then. But what is most important to Bill and central to this case study is leadership and how it is exercised, particularly regarding instructional leadership and student academic achievement. For Bill, leadership in any of its forms is essential for a superintendent and it all begins with relationships and treating people with respect.

Leadership

When it comes to discussing leadership and examining the daily reality of how Bill Johnson exercises leadership in his district, what becomes immediately evident is that Bill believes in and follows the concepts of principle-centered or ethical leadership practices. This is obvious from watching him on the job, from extensive interviews with his administrative staff and from what he shares about his beliefs. He starts with people and relationships, with the concept of striving to be a good person, treating others ethically and professionally, trusting good people to do their job. This allows them, within a framework or focused district structure, to be free to think, solve problems and be creative as it pertains to their unique situations.

“One of the things that you always need to remember is that you can consider yourself to be a great leader, and have all these great ideas, and be at the top of your game, but then you can’t ever forget to check over your shoulder to see if they are still with you – the principals and the teachers – because you can’t lead them if they are not going to join in and participate and have a major role in the education process,” Bill says,

making it apparent that he believes in working with his people, in collaboration, in listening, and in supporting those he leads.

“People have to rely on you, trust you, know you are willing to listen,” he said. “You have to learn from them. Just because you like something and think it is a God-send to education, if your staff doesn’t like it, and the community doesn’t get behind it and believe in it, then it is not going to be successful.”

Walking The Walk

“Bill walks the walk. He does not say we are going to do something, and just talk about it. He gets right in and starts on it. He rolls up his sleeves and gets after it. His message is unambiguous: ‘If you are not getting the job done, I will find someone who will.’” This is Mike Wayford, discussing his sense of Bill Johnson’s presence in the district. The exact phrase “walking the walk” and this perspective was echoed over and over again by his administrative team. People see Bill as someone who just gets in there and gets the job done – he wants the responsibility that comes with leadership.

Eric Green, the principal at Blueford Elementary, is the newest member of the team, hired in the spring of 2008. Having been in a different school district very recently, Eric is in a good position to see Bill from a fresh point of view, as well as able to contrast his leadership with the superintendent in his previous district. Bill’s genuine desire to be a role model impresses him tremendously, as well as his constant presence at community and district events.

There is one thing I have observed that I think is really cool. He is very involved. He is there. He is at volleyball games, basketball games, he is at concerts. There is no graph or percentage that can measure that and say, ‘Hey, this leads to better academic performance.’ But when stakeholders see the superintendent at stuff outside of the required time, it’s impressive.

He is out and about. You could say it is not instructional leadership, but I don't know if I agree with that. You know, in my experience, people are rarely upset about curriculum. They care about us, and he shows them that he cares about them, about their kids, all their kid's activities and what they do. This is how he is a leader in the community, and all that good will adds up. I think it does relate to instructional leadership, because people want to work for him, and I mean out in the community too, not just people who work here in the school district.

Connie Burton, principal at Horton Elementary, agrees. Connie has been in the district nine years, three years longer than Bill. While her experience in the district is much longer than Eric Green's, her point of view about Bill's leadership is remarkably consistent with his.

Consistency is what it is all about. How he acts in any one instance is how he acts all the time. The way he treats people is consistent. He demonstrates that he cares. He does it all the time.

Also, how he treats the staff. I myself have experienced some personal challenges the last few years. He calls, he comes over. I mean, two years ago, he extended a personal invitation for my family to go over to his house and share Thanksgiving with him. I thought that was really nice. I have seen this with other staff members. One of my kindergarten teacher's father was a former superintendent here. He passed away last fall. Bill had saved some of his letters and effects and he sent them to her so she could have them, and she said to me, "What a kind and thoughtful thing."

He attends services, whether it be a funeral or a band concert, so it is very much there in everything he does. This is how he is with children, with colleagues, with staff members.

I also really appreciate his honesty and his forthrightness. There is no guessing with Bill. If you ask him, "How am I doing?" he will be honest and tell you. I want to know that. I want to know areas that I can improve on.

Another relatively new member of the administrative team is Carrie Chambers.

Bill revealed to me that, as the district had grown, he felt unable to devote the time he once had been able to give to instructional leadership. He knew he needed to bring on a

person who really understood the entire scope of instructional issues, able to devote full time to the job.

“I hired Carrie because I knew she would be even better than I could be at instructional leadership.” He paused for effect. “Did you hear that?” he asked. “Do you understand what I just said?” Bill truly believes in hiring the best, and in an instance where some superintendents might be intimidated by a person with such a strong background, Bill hired her and then offered the trust and total support that she needed. He also leaves much of the job up to her. As he demonstrates over and over in his leadership style, it is about trusting people to do the job, then letting them do it.

As Carrie states:

I think it matters so much for the leader of an organization to have that kind of trust. When that is the case, then people will work in the best interests of the organization. When it is not the case, people will not do things, usually, that would cause them to lose their job. But they will do little things to undermine, because they just can't stand the leader. I see it in a neighboring district. People cannot stand the superintendent, and so they do things all the time to undermine them. The level of respect for the person goes down.

Here, from janitors to principals, from people in the community to someone in my position, he treats everyone fairly, he treats everyone the same and handles things well, handles all situations.

The longest-tenured member of the administrative team is Kennedy High School principal Dave McElfrie, who has been at the helm of the high school for 21 years. He also commented on Bill's ability to put into action his beliefs.

Bill has exceptionally high visibility in the community. He has worked with local boards and with local entities like the police departments, and created great relationships with everyone. He knows the structure of the two towns, knows city government, and works well with them and with many people who are community leaders. He also understands how important it is to be present at plays and music performances and athletic events. Now there are way too many of them for any one person to be at

them all, but let me tell you, he is at a lot of them. He totally gets it that this shows his support of the kids, the coaches and teachers, and that it is a great way to always be building relationships in the community.

Collaboration and Trust

Bill Johnson works hard to create an atmosphere of trust. He wants everyone in the district, but particularly his administrative team, to be honest with each other and with him. He accomplishes this in many ways. He is in many buildings weekly throughout the district. He is always happy to visit with the principal, but that is not really the reason he goes there. Nor is it about catching someone not doing their job. It is genuinely motivated by his desire to understand, consistently and over time, what is really happening in his buildings, and not just with the principal, but with the teachers and staff. Everyone knows him, and everyone is used to simply having him in the buildings. His attitude is always friendly, and he gains a great deal of information that he keeps in mind and incorporates into his decision-making process.

“It is not a gotcha’ and the teachers know that, too,” comments Eric. “I have never seen that before in a superintendent, to be out here weekly. It’s really about saying, ‘How is it going?’ Usually they have an agenda, or they are rushed for time. But Bill comes in and asks me whether I have time to talk to him. I know he means it, because if I am in the middle of something, he will just go off and visit classrooms.”

This same sentiment is echoed by Terry Wilson, another district veteran who was a principal when Bill first came to the district. Terry states:

Bill does so many things associated with leadership well: developing a vision, guiding the process and giving us the resources we need to do a good job. He provides time and resources for professional development in our buildings. He looks closely at data and at student achievement. And he is out here all the time. All the teachers, the custodians, the classified staff see him as a familiar face, and as a friend and partner. He is always

wandering around in classrooms, or attending different functions – not many superintendents come to elementary music performances, but Bill does. It really means a lot to parents and grandparents to see him at stuff like that.

Bill's principals appreciate his sincerity. They also appreciate his sense of personal discipline. They consistently talk about meaningful phone conversations, or, if they have to leave a message, knowing that he is going to get back to them. I observed this as well in my fieldwork. He is present, he is in the moment, he really listens. Commented Middle School Principal James Patterson, "He is such a good listener that if you talk to him about something, and then you come back to him a month later, even with all the stuff that he has going on in his life, he clicks right into what is going on. He can help with your issues. He is thoughtful and puts thought into what he does and what he says."

Bill sees his principals and his administrative leadership team as the most important element of his success.

A key thing that I have done, especially since I have been in the superintendency, that has really made a difference, is that I hire not only the best teachers, but the best administrators. Those administrators I didn't hire, I do my best to work with them, and arrive at a common vision of supporting kids and staff that we can all live with. They have to believe what we stand for, and make commitments to our students, our staff and the community. The better the people are who you bring in to help you carry this out – well this makes you or breaks you. The same thing goes for administrators as teachers. If you think you made a good decision, but you find out that you did not, then you have to cut that tie early on. They have the most influence on a building, like what a teacher has on a classroom.

Bill also has a tremendous sense of personal balance. His team talks about his calm attitude. They note that it is never apparent how much stress he is under. Over and

over again, people comment that Bill has a lot more stress than any other administrator in the district, but never shows it.

What he does is to make it evident that he expects them to work toward common goals, and that he wants them to collaborate. As is always the case, he “walks the walk.” He himself collaborates. He demonstrates trust and collaboration through his actions and his interactions with people. He believes in people, and believes that people will get the job done. He does not define how he wants his team to work, but he hires people who are going to work the way he wants or nurtures that ethic in people who were in the district when he came.

In terms of objectives and goals, Bill makes it plain that he wants to see them, but he does not micromanage. He does not use his position power. In many ways, he is more of a colleague than a boss, even though it is obvious that he is the boss. He is the superintendent, but position power does not mean much to him – relationship power means everything to him. The relationships he develops are the key.

Carrie Chambers discusses what it was like to work with Bill in her first weeks on the job:

What he has done in this district is always highly collaborative. He always takes a systems approach. I think I am a good example. He had seen me work and observed how I work and I did not even apply for this position – he asked me to come here and I think it was for that reason – he knew I was highly collaborative. He hires people who align with his beliefs.

Then, he backs you up. I know that in order to do my job, I need that. I came here because I trusted him. He wanted me to come in here and do some very specific things and lead some very specific efforts. I knew he would back me up. If I did not trust him, I would not have come here. There are superintendents out there who would ask you to do some things, and want you to be the bad guy. They would not back you up. They don't

want to be the bad guy. Bill is willing to do whatever it takes to get things done. He explains the importance of things, and makes it clear that I will be in charge of this. But when there are roadblocks, he asks if I want him to intervene and if I need him, I know he will support me. When I am out in the buildings, everyone knows that I have the support of the superintendent of schools. I speak for him. It is more implied. He is very respectful. He would never try to impose his authority over you in public. But it is also clear.

It is because people respect him, and they know I have his support, that I am not going to be undermined. He doesn't sugar-coat things – he is honest. But he creates collaborative systems, and expects them to work. He is out for my success, and believes and trusts that I am out for his success. His actions are very much in alignment with his beliefs. Bill is a person of absolute personal and professional integrity. I have to work with someone that is like that. We are spending taxpayer dollars and we have to deal with the whole situation with honesty and integrity, and that is what Bill is like. I see how he acts and I know what he believes, and his actions and beliefs are aligned, and so that makes a great person to work for and to work with. I guess it comes back to students and student achievement in terms of what is best for them. Because you know that those are his sincere beliefs and you see them lived out consistently, then you know that you can move forward with an initiative, because you know that he has done his homework and believes it is the best thing. He supports me, has my back, and he will always respect me and maintain my dignity.

District veteran Dave McElfrie, having spent 21 years in the district, echoes

Carrie's comments:

Bill is a strong leader, but something that I think is very interesting is that he is also very relaxed. He is very comfortable in his own skin. He takes a very active leadership role, but he never imposes things. He is highly collaborative. Running a high school is a complex and demanding job, and while I know that he is my boss, he really seems more like my partner in terms of how we work together.

You know for certain, when you work for Bill, that he is the lead person, that he is in charge. This is because you trust him and you believe in him. He is a forceful guy, but he does not force leadership. What I mean by that is that he leads by example, and he is so consistent, so ethical in how he acts, that he makes a very strong leader and sets a very strong example. Bill leads by being a person you can trust. You know you can always count on him. His behavior is very consistent, his demeanor is very even-

keel. He establishes strong working relationships based on trust. He is also very perceptive. If he sees or even perceives that you are struggling with something, he steps in to help and support you. Yet he does it in a very quiet way, never intrusive. He is just so consistent. I know that no matter what came up, no matter how difficult, I would always have his support, as long as I was trying to do the right thing for kids and for the school.

Another aspect of his professionalism is his ethical conduct, his belief that when you are an educator, the public trust is vital, and that all the efforts of the district must be worthy of that trust. It is because of this emphasis on trusting each other that he is able to have collaborative relationships based on honesty and a belief that people share his values.

Connie Burton notes how he works with her as she strives to do the best job possible at Horton Elementary:

He will disagree with me. He will challenge me. He will push me. But that is part of the respect. He cares, and that is why he does those things. But when he is pushing me, or challenging me, it is as an equal, it is with great dignity.

Watching him work with other principals, as things progress and move in a positive direction, he gives you more leash, he gives you more trust. He mentored me and guided me, and helped me to become better at my job. But I have also noticed that as the years have gone by and I have worked for him for six years now I am not given the directive to call him and consult as much with him, because by now, we are both on the same wavelength, and know what to expect of each other.

Bill is always fair. His expectations are the same across the board. He always allows you state what you think. If you disagree, he allows you to maintain your dignity. Everyone knows that he treats everyone that way. So there is so much trust.

James Patterson, who worked with Bill in his previous district and followed him to Hamilton County #1, agrees:

He is an honest and ethical man, and that is what I believe all superintendents should be like. I like his clarity and his communication.

But that is not what is most important. I am never sent out to do anything that is not the right thing. Nothing is behind the scenes, nothing is hidden – we work with everything and everybody out in the open. We always do what we think is the best thing for kids. That is what is important.

Doing What Is Best For Kids

Bill leads by acting toward others the way he would wish to be treated. But he also makes something else apparent: he will make every decision through the lens of what he believes is right for kids. Bill speaks with great passion about students, about the young men and women for whom he feels responsible, and that he strives to provide with a good education. This element of his leadership received constant comment from his leadership team. They saw him as genuine and making every sincere attempt to figure out, in every decision, what would be the best possible outcome for kids. Bill knows that any number of people could look at a situation, have the best interest of kids in mind, be ethical and honest people, and yet still come to different conclusions about what is best for kids. It is difficult to define what is best for kids. For instance, Bill is adamant that No Child Left Behind is one of the worst things that ever happened to American public schools. He is extremely passionate on this account and has the support of his board of education and his administrative team. Yet, at the same time, he is highly accountable, and believes in being held accountable for student performance.

But his leadership shows not so much in having a neat definition of what is best for kids as much as demonstrating in his words and his actions that he views decision-making through this lens. He has a bedrock belief that all decisions, programs and district actions should be considered in light of whether they are best for kids.

Mike Wayfield, who perhaps works most closely with Bill, and who eats lunch with him every working day, remarks:

Number one, when it comes to the kids, it is evident in everything he does and says that he cares about the kids. Everything. I mean, he cares about facilities, and whether or not the heaters work, or the air conditioners work. This is the best facility-wise that our school district has ever been, and we definitely owe that to Bill and to his leadership. It might be that we are trying to provide the best possible help and support to a special education kid. He makes certain that it happens. Bill has always, first and foremost, stood for the child. It is obvious in what he says and in how he acts. He always wants what is best for the kids.

Says middle school principal, James Patterson:

What helps in terms of motivation, and what makes it genuine in my mind is that there is that ethical expectation that we do what is right for our kids. As principals, we know that this might not always be the most fun – to focus on our performance – because we also know that he gives this focus to that area because he truly believes in it, and he truly cares for kids and for the community. It is obvious when he is here at our site, how much he loves the kids. The warmth is there. It is so honest. The kids really feel it.

Again, I attribute that to the fact that he communicates well, he defines things well, and then he demonstrates his trust in me and makes me respond to things. I mean, he acts, every single day in his job, like he is going to do what is best for kids, and so that is how I have been trained and how I think now too – that is what he establishes – that belief of really looking at everything we do and asking ourselves all the time – what is best for kids?

The people who work for Bill believe, very sincerely, that he is a quality person. Bill creates the level of expectations for what he wants from staff and students, and then gives administrators the support that they need and the confidence they need to ask him any question and feel they are doing what he wants.

New principal Eric Green saw these qualities in him from the very beginning.

At the beginning of the year, when we had our first district-wide meeting and he talked to the entire staff district-wide, you could tell he was

sincere. He was not using education speak, he did not talk about test scores. What he talked about was the importance of our job as educators and how important we all were in the lives of kids. He came out and talked to my building staff, here and said the same thing: how important we were in the lives of kids on a daily basis. He discusses what is best for kids, and keeping kids as the focus and the center-point. He truly believes that it is all about the kids.

Comments Carrie Chambers, “For me, I have the ability to give him my allegiance. He is leading the system. I trust him and it makes me want to always keep the best interests of kids in mind, because I know that that is what he does and what he wants.”

Though his administrative team is quick to point out that he backs up his beliefs with actions, it is interesting to note that Bill gives voice to the very same perspectives that his team discusses when asked about his leadership.

Through the years, I have seen many things come and go, that are introduced and that have a name or a concept, but when you really look at it, it is often the same thing: opening that door for the kids, getting in there and being prepared, being trained, but most importantly, knowing how to get in there on the level of these kids and work with them. Your most successful teachers will tell you that very same thing: first of all and by far the most important thing is that you have to love kids. You cannot come into this job, and do this job and not have a special place in your heart for children, or for young adults. If you don't, or if you lose that, if you had it at the beginning, but you get toward the middle or end of it, and you lose that, that is the time to step back and look at it, and if you can re-focus, and regain that, or get back into it, then that is okay, but if not, then you need to leave the profession.

Preparation, Awareness and Support

“Every single decision I make affects hundreds of people,” Bill told me on an afternoon we spent together. “It affects kids, parents, teachers. Usually, there is a significant cost involved. It can be thousands, even millions of dollars. So you have to really think things through.”

This quality of thinking things through and being prepared is something I had many opportunities to witness in my fieldwork. In attending numerous administrative meetings and school board meetings, I saw first-hand his sense of preparation and the effort he put into thinking things through strategically and empathetically – not so much in any single element of his work but rather from the whole of it – I never saw a situation arise for which he was unprepared. The fact that he had done his homework was obvious, from comments he would make about what was currently happening in legislative sessions, to references to recent articles on principal and administrative professional development.

Mike Wayford, who has a front-row seat to Bill's decision-making process their daily lunch meetings together is still impressed, after six years with him.

He has such great awareness. He is so busy, but he always seems aware of everything. He puts in the time. He keeps up with everything. Bill does his homework. He will still surprise me. He does his research, he does his networking, to know what other people are doing. He wants to lead us to success, but he does not think that we have to reinvent the wheel.

I think Bill, the way he always works, first and foremost is very professional. That idea, that tone of professionalism, is never forgotten. We will be looking at student academic achievement, and he knows the data, he knows the trends, he has thought of possible solutions and it is just clear to us that this is what is expected of us as professionals.

This shows up in the way Bill works at administrative meetings and school board meetings. For starters, he schedules both on the same day, with his administrative meeting in the morning and the school board meeting that afternoon. Planning for the board meeting begins with Bill meeting with his board president, Michelle Raines and his vice-president, Gail Schmidt. They plan the entire meeting. Bill has typically done hours of work for this meeting, thinking through everything that might require discussion,

looking at the district and school calendars, consulting the State Board of Education calendar and the Department of Education deadlines, all to be ready for the planning meeting.

Together they plan the board meeting. He creates an agenda out of this meeting, then works with Mike, Carrie, and any other administrators who might be tied into the agenda, and creates a packet to go out to all board members so they are prepared for the meeting.

Simultaneously, he is repeating the same process with Mike, Carrie and all his principals to prepare for the administrative meeting. He always has a standing agenda item of his administrative agendas, and it is first on the list every time: "Items for the Board Meeting." If anything that will appear that night on the board meeting requires active participation, such as the night principals presented their proposals for summer school, Bill has done even more background work. He goes over each and every plan with the principal, as well as reviewing the principal's presentation, to assure that each step goes smoothly.

The entire team then reviews the board packet. Some items are reviewed quickly and with little discussion. Other items, such as elementary boundary changes that occurred during the time of my fieldwork, involved extensive discussion. Just as was the case with the principals' summer school presentations, Bill spent countless hours with his elementary principals, his school board and with community members, putting in painstakingly detailed background work. The result was that the boundary changes went off without a hitch, and anyone who has been around school districts for very long will tell you that this is an amazing feat. I have personally witnessed boundary changes that

felt like a bloodletting, with the entire board room filled with angry parents. It has been known to cause board recalls. Yet in Hamilton County School District 1, it went off with no problems or issues whatsoever.

Having reviewed the board agenda at his administrative meeting, Bill has closed the information loop. He has made sure that if there are any issues or perspectives that may have escaped his thinking, he gets them that morning. Nothing is left to chance.

His obvious emotional connection to the people who work for him was also on display one morning in administration meeting. He had been working a great deal with Mike on the budget, and though their district was in better shape than most around the state due to their continued growth, he was still worried. But as word came out to superintendents around the state about the stimulus package that had just been passed at the federal level, it became obvious that things were going to be okay financially in the district. Bill knew that many people probably had been having sleepless nights, particularly young teachers who are on the bottom of the seniority scale – if there were layoffs that is where they would begin. Bill loves his young teachers, and thinks a lot about their families. In one interview, he told me, “I wish I could pay them more, and not just a little more, a lot more – I would love to see first year teachers come in at something like \$40,000 a year.” They currently begin at \$33,500.

But what was arresting that morning was how emotional he was as he expressed his relief that no one would face layoffs in the district. He was nearly teary-eyed as he told his team, “My number one priority is going to be to keep people employed. Our staff needs to have faith in us. We need to keep morale up and have people trust in the ability of the school district to keep them employed.”

This genuine concern simply cannot be faked. It is at the heart of Bill's belief system, and a tangible example of his leadership style. Because Bill believes that all leadership starts with trust, and because his actions and behaviors consistently promote trust – his people trust him and he trusts them – everyone in the system believes in him. As a result of this personal belief, they are willing to work with him to fully realize his academic and educational vision, knowing that it is founded upon the desire to improve the lives of the children and young adults who are in their care and whose families have entrusted them to provide a quality education and improve their children's chances in life.

This is what Connie Burton is speaking of when she says:

The other thing that I think he does very well that helps to promote our academic growth is that there is support. When we handle things well and are accountable, and we respond to his expectations, then he is there to be supportive.

It is support in terms of the professional support that I have already mentioned, but it is more than that. It is personal support – you can go to him and have a private conversation, and say you are frustrated, or you are concerned, and he is willing to come back and say, "Here is an idea, or here is something to try." Another piece of that is that he is willing to look at the big picture, and if what is frustrating you is also proving to be a frustration to other principals too, then we will examine the whole thing, together, as a team, and work it out, and try something different. It makes us work together, and it gives us a deep sense of trust in his leadership.

Instructional Leadership

The central theme of this case study was to examine instructional leadership in the superintendent of schools. I had ample opportunity to watch Bill do this, to speak to his entire team about this specific element of his leadership and to examine the results in terms of student scores. But what is perhaps most important is that for Bill instructional leadership is of a piece with leadership in general. Those elements of his leadership that

define his core beliefs – establishing trusting relationships, being ethical and honest, doing everything through the lens of what is best for kids and always being prepared and thinking things through – these form the foundation of his instructional leadership as well. However, Bill does engage in some very specific behaviors that focus on instruction and student achievement.

Bill was very aggressive as an instructional leader in his first year in Hamilton County District 1. He began the process of curriculum alignment, both horizontally (meaning that the curriculum looks the same across a specific grade level – the 3rd grade curriculum in all subjects being very similar or even identical in all three elementary schools) and vertically (meaning that the entire curriculum works as a cohesive whole in a single subject – students build upon prior knowledge as they move K-12 through a science curriculum for example). He brought in Alpine Achievement, an outside firm that produces in-depth data analysis of student test results. He started the process of curriculum committees and he changed the accreditation process. He took a school district that, in the words of long-time high school principal Dave McElfrrie, “Was a collection of separate schools, each working hard for kids, but working independently of each other,” and forged a school district. All schools have a sense of autonomy to deal with their individual circumstances, but are expected to work strategically and collaboratively with each other in an effort to provide consistency and focus across the entire K-12 curriculum.

As related by his close working partner Mike Wayford, Bill wasted no time in putting into place those elements of instructional practice that would put the focus on student achievement and student learning:

He kept it simple in terms of looking at what we needed to do, but when he got here, he actually did a great deal of stuff. He brought in Curriculum Mapper, he began a textbook adoption cycle, we brought in Alpine Achievement, started the three or four main things that we were going to do. Within that context, we really started looking at things K-12. Before that, we were all over the map.

I was used to being K-12 where I was before, so this was great for me. Schools didn't even talk before Bill came. We were behind the eight-ball, believe me. I really think that because people were so old school here, they really believed that state testing was just another fad, that they could ride out the storm and it was just going to go away. So we were one of the last districts in the state to really take this seriously. But we started to take it seriously when Bill got here. He kept it simple and moved us forward.

Bill has an unambiguous vision of exactly what his role is as an instructional leader in his district:

As a superintendent, I rely on previous experience as a classroom teacher, and as principal in the middle and high school, to play a large part of forming my beliefs. When you get to the situation where you are actually superintendent you don't get that opportunity to be nearly as hands on. So, what you have to do as superintendent is instill in people a common belief in the same principles and beliefs and sense of direction of things. These beliefs are what I want my principals and my director of curriculum to work with, with their staffs and in their schools.

Your role then becomes one of basically being the driving force, and you have to instill in them what you really believe is the best course to follow. But you also must rely on them, to a great extent, to carry this out. This is a unique situation here because we are still small enough that we don't have too many layers to go through. There is me, and then basically just my administrative team, which is my principals, my assistant principals, my assistant superintendent and my director of curriculum. Then you are at the school level, and you are hands-on. My principals are doing the things that we want to see carried out.

We have had a major focus on curriculum alignment. This is my sixth year here, and we have gone through the complete cycle. We are in the last year of it, looking this year at social studies and we have done complete curriculum alignment, development, purchase of new materials and textbooks, made a huge effort with technology, and done it on a

grassroots level: lots and lots of input from our teachers, and it has really worked well.

My own perception is that they should develop the vision for where they want the district to go in terms of academic achievement, than I guide that process to insure that what they see actually comes to pass. They need to be provided the resources and offered the time for discussion as well as promoting that vision, following that vision.

Part of it is getting people together and talking about instruction, talking about achievement, really going in and getting people to look at the data and ask, what is the data telling us, making certain that this data analysis is a team effort. It is important in the role of superintendent to make sure that there is good buy-in for this process, that it is the same throughout the district.

This is what that vision and sense of instructional leadership looks like from the point of view of elementary principal Terry Wilson, who was also a member of the administrative team prior to Bill's arrival:

Bill has done a very good job of communicating his goals, of getting us together to do the things that we need to so that we maintain our focus on instruction. In our administrative meetings we talk about these things and they are important. We discuss assessment and instruction, and then that is what I discuss with my staff here in the building. We address those issues here, because there is a strong vision, or a strong expectation, that we do those things.

With Bill, there is more clarity, a stronger vision of what we need to do with instruction, there is a much more concrete process in terms of what we do with data. We really look at exactly what we need to do in order to move forward. He has also done an excellent job of providing the time to do these things.

He gets staff involved in the whole process – in professional development, in assessment, in data analysis, and that takes a lot of work finding the right people to be involved. This is something that he has done for us, getting those people and the administrative team together to look at where we are at and what it is going to take to move us forward.

I don't know that there is a stated vision about it, but we know that we really need to look at our students' growth. He communicates to us, "Where are our kids at, and where do we need to go?" He does a nice job

of constantly generating that conversation at the administrative level, asking, “What are the things we are doing right now, what do we have in place and how is that making a difference for kids?” So, I think that is the sense we have, that student performance, educating our kids, is what is most important.

Number one, in terms of carrying it out, what he has done is initiate these conversations, and not just at the administrative level – it is the whole district having that conversation. It is in setting up the curriculum review process, in creating the curriculum review team. He really came in and set up that cycle of evaluation. He got the teachers involved in the process – in fact, at this point the teachers are really guiding that process, of looking at and evaluating curriculum. I think we get better buy-in because of that. I think there ought to be some district norms and district expectations, and the most important ought to be, “What is best for kids?” We should not have anything going on in our buildings that we are would not be willing to have any parent walk in and see. We want to open up and let anyone see what we are doing.

As a staff, and as a principal, you also need to be given the ability to recognize what your staff needs and what keeps your staff motivated – that is where I need some autonomy. I think that the best way to work is that I take the directives from the superintendent in terms of what he expects everyone to do or accomplish, and make those things work in my building. I believe that whole concept of the fact that everything we do is public. We demonstrate responsibility, we are ethical, we are providing quality instruction and doing the right things academically, but there has to be a way to get your staff involved and that is the autonomy issue.

We are given a lot of autonomy. We are free to deal with issues and staff and the unique qualities of our buildings. However, if I need help or support, say with a staff member, and I have some issues that maybe something is not working, or if I had some staff members who were not working collaboratively around these common expectations, I know I have a superintendent who is going to come in and support me. And even if need be, say directly to those staff members, here is how we do things in this district and this is the way it is going to go.

I also have flexibility. There are times when I need more autonomy and times that I need less. Student behavior – we have norms in our building that set a climate and a tone. It ties into student achievement. The way we conduct ourselves on a daily basis has a lot to do with how well students can attend to their academics. I have a lot of autonomy there. We have district guidelines and policies, but I have a lot of autonomy.

These comments are echoed in the point of view of James Patterson, who came with Bill from his previous district and saw him work there, and then bring his vision of instructional leadership to Hamilton County #1:

I think that what is true across the board is that Bill and the board of education provide us with a clear framework. We are expected to follow that framework. We are expected to work together as a team. But in our buildings, how we get there, what we do to get there as long as we are following that framework and those expectations we can pretty much do what we need to and follow our best judgment. That is nice.

My personal perception is this: we say, "Here are the things we need to do," and he gives us that sense of professionalism as administrators. Once we have decided what we need to do then he trusts us and believes we are professionals in terms of taking that back to our buildings. He is also a role model that way too, because in turn, that is how I treat my staff. My message to them is, "You guys know what you are doing in your classrooms, you are with those kids for six and-a-half hours a day, and you know what you need to do." I trust them, and give them autonomy – every teacher is a little different, and you allow that to be the case. That is another thing he does with us – we all have different personalities, and something that might work for me might not work for someone else. He gives us a little bit of latitude there. He pretty much says, "Make it work for you. How will you accomplish this with your staff?"

Bill is always quick to give credit to his principals and teachers in the buildings, and to fall back on his own experiences as a teacher and a building principal in striving to play the role of instructional leader for the entire district:

There has been a lot of hard work and appreciation from staff, who have had this opportunity to work together. So, as instructional leader, you have to be the person to set the pace and the focus, than depend on the folks you have working for you to carry that out.

I would never ask any member of my administrative team to do something that I would not do myself. If I did not believe in it, I would never ask them to do it. With that, what I try to do with instructional leadership – it is part of my job, but my job is so much more than that – I try to be very clear in what my expectations are. I will let people do what they believe you need to do as long as they communicate with me and we are in agreement. You have to convince me it is a good thing, be focused on a

few things and stick with them. It takes three, four, five years to really make something work. It takes that long to really change things. So don't bring a lot of other things to pile on top of teachers. We use some tools, like student data management systems. We love what we use, but we stick with the one we have so we are not always training people on new things. You can provide focus as an instructional leader and give a sense of vision, but you need to live it. You need to let people know that they are supported. They have to be able to rely on you. They have to know you will support them. They will do the best they can if they trust you and can rely on your support.

You have to be a role model. You have to be a trustworthy person who will not pull the rug out from under them. You must allow them to lead, but not to step off the cliff. I have learned these things through experience. Experience plays a huge role in being a successful instructional leader. You have done it, you have tried things in the classroom or as a building principal, and you know what it is like to implement new things. You have learned through your own experience and have seen how other people work. It is less important what specific program you are using than whether or not things fall in line with your beliefs and whether or not you have the right people in place to implement these changes or programs.

Bill puts these beliefs into action on a daily basis and with great consistency. He offers extensive support for professional development for his administrative team and for staff members in his buildings. A key element of his belief is shown in providing time for collaboration. Teams are given time to meet, schools are given professional development time in their schedules and regular professional development days are included in the district calendar.

I observed closely the approach that Bill takes to their district professional development days. In a series of four consecutive administrative meetings, Bill placed on the agenda planning for an upcoming professional development day.

First of all, and as is usual, he had made the day possible by working with Mike Wayfield as the district calendar was developed. There are a minimum number of

instructional hours that are required by the state, so any district calendar must be constructed to meet or exceed those hours. This means that a certain number of teacher contract days must be used to fulfill this requirement. Then, in the context of the larger picture, any professional development day when schools are not in session means that the district is paying all of its teachers for an entire day. This is a significant financial commitment to professional development, but it is one that Bill believes in, and which is built into the budget every year.

Bill conducted a series of meetings with Connie Chambers and with each of his building principals to determine what was needed and how best to meet those needs. The day was then focused on meeting the needs at the various levels – elementary, middle school and high school. Once the plans were in place, there was considerable discussion of them at the administrative meetings, making sure that every detail was plain, the focus was right and that the needs of teachers were being met.

Finally, there was a very deliberate focus on the implementation of what was learned that was shown by dividing the day into two distinct halves: The morning sessions are “learning sessions,” where teachers gain additional knowledge through research that is specifically focused on helping them in the area that data has indicated there is need. The afternoon is devoted to “application sessions,” where the teachers meet in teams to discuss what they have learned and to plan lessons that incorporate what they have learned into lessons that will be used in their classrooms. Follow-up time is then allowed at the sites, so that teachers can further discuss what they have applied by examining student work and checking to see if students did, in fact, learn what they needed to in order to address the gaps or deficiencies that were showing up in the data.

The team truly works as a team, and they are very conscious of the vision and desire on Bill's part to put plans in place that build toward excellence in instruction across the entire district. Because he emphasizes collaboration, and creates systems for collaboration to happen, the entire district works together toward the broad goal of improving student academic achievement, but also with an understanding that there are unique needs in varying buildings. Principals can work to meet these needs, as long as they are working within the basic guidelines and vision that Bill has outlined for the district as a whole.

Ceding More Hands-on Focus to Carrie Chambers

In hiring Carrie Chambers to take on the full-time role of director of curriculum and instruction, Bill acknowledged that additional expertise was needed and that he had to provide more support for his principals than he was capable of giving, with all the various responsibilities for which he is accountable:

The instructional leadership is only part of my job: some days it is huge and some days I don't even deal with it. I get consumed with all the other stuff that is out there. You have to hire the very best you can find, and if they are not getting the job done you have to be tough enough to let them go.

Your role as instructional leader in the superintendency is the whole reason for this job – we are here to educate kids. That is it. But the importance of all that and what I can always spend time with, those are two different things. That is why it comes back to hiring the right people. You see, if you have the right people on the job, then even if you cannot personally spend as much time as you would like on instructional leadership, you have confidence and trust in your people that they are spending that time and that they are doing what needs to be done out there, in the buildings, where they are working directly with kids.

Carrie discusses what it is like to work with Bill, and also how her vision of the superintendent as instructional leader has changed since coming to Hamilton County

School District 1:

It is easy to assume that the superintendent is not an instructional leader in these times. A lot of people do not see the superintendent as an instructional leader. But now that I work so closely with this superintendent, the majority of what he does affects student achievement in one way or another it is just that a lot of people perhaps don't see that. Some of it is indirect, but what he does all the time is keep the focus of the system on student achievement, even if he is not, perhaps, directly involved.

I have a new perspective from working here. I am probably less harsh on superintendents in general. I guess I thought before that they did not understand what was going on. I made assumptions in the past that I wish I could take back now – the role of the superintendent is just so important. If that person does not support hiring the right people and provide the budget to support and drive the changes, then it would be incredibly challenging to try to get anything done. It is vital to have a superintendent who is an instructional leader. A lot of people think that a superintendent could, for instance, be a business person and come in and do this by just, quote, “running a tight ship.” Well, I believe that is wrong. I see this superintendent as an instructional leader and I strongly believe that no district can be successful without a superintendent who is an instructional leader.

The daily reality of being a successful superintendent is all about instructional leadership, particularly in mid-sized or smaller districts, but I think it is, even in bigger districts.

I think as superintendent, you have to have instructional background. You have to have been in the classroom, you have to have been a building administrator, and Bill has done all that. Teachers and principals will not give you the credibility that you need if you have not walked in their shoes. Bill has that credibility, and he also brings to the table the trust and respect he has earned over the years. His focus, his energy, his sincerity and his ability to engage personally in instructional leadership as well as assembling an administrative team that prioritizes instructional leadership means that here, in this district, we keep the focus on student achievement and quality teaching and learning.

Having gone the traditional route of being a classroom teacher, a building assistant principal, building principal and finally an assistant superintendent before becoming a superintendent gives Bill much credibility. Also, having been involved in all these levels gives him enough knowledge to have a vision and sense of direction of where he wants his district to go in terms of student achievement.

Bill also wants his district to be a real community. He wants his principals and teachers to all be on the same page, and have a common vision of working for students and families. Delivery might be a little different from building to building, and he acknowledges that. He knows that needs are different at every building. The population is not the same at Horton as it is at Blueford and he knows that. So, there are some things that happen in one building that don't happen in another. But if you are a third-grader in one building, you will be doing basically the same thing as a third-grader in a different building. They will be following the same curriculum, following the same units. Then, when students come to the middle school, or when they go on to high school, they have the same basic set of experiences, the same foundation, and the same academic background. When they get together in 6th grade, they come together having had the same curriculum in any of the three different schools.

Bill strongly believes that a key is to have a K-12 perspective. It is why he set up the student achievement committees. These committees work independently in their buildings, but also meet together, so that there is building representation, but at the district level. While Bill used to be directly in charge of these committees, Carrie Chambers leads the process now, though still with input and oversight from Bill.

Bill also works with principals to make sure they get the professional development work they need, so they are the best possible instructional leaders they can be in their schools. In paying for their dues to state and national professional associations and in regularly sending them to educational conferences and workshops, Bill is providing opportunities for them to learn on a regular basis. He also incorporates this learning process on a regular basis in their administrative meetings, seeking input and direction from his building and district level leaders, bringing their collective knowledge into play as they collaborate to move the district forward.

His close working partner, Mike Wayford, sums up Bill's instructional leadership well:

He facilitated this process through the years, so there is a continuity of vision. We also see all the elements of instruction as working together. For instance, we have seen some trends that we knew, from our research, were related to curriculum issues and those have been referred to our curriculum team. They do their work, and then we have done adoptions, and that has made a very positive difference for us.

I think something that Bill does a really nice job of is, he celebrates the good things. He is always looking to credit his team and his teachers for their hard work, their efforts every day with kids. I have nothing but good things to say about Bill. He is a very bright man who has come in and really established a vision, and we all know where he is coming from. Maybe more important than anything else is that he wants to see teachers happy, he wants to see kids happy. He wants to see us continue to improve, but what that means to him is that he wants it to be a good place for kids. It is part of that process of making people feel valued. And it works. People like it here and they chose to stay here because they are treated as professionals. They are treated with respect, they are trusted to do their job and they are valued.

It always comes back to kids for Bill. There is a real level of compassion that allows him to keep that perspective. No matter what is out in front of him, he is always asking – what is right for kids? Even construction issues or landscape issues, he is always asking if this is the best thing for kids. He does the same for staff. He talks about teachers a lot. He believes that

when teachers are happy, they are at their best for kids. He also talks about how all of us can get distracted. We can lose sight of what we are here for. I see him just not doing that. There is a tendency when you rise into the superintendency to forget those things. But Bill still loves going into schools and talking to kids and to teachers. He is sincere and cares about them and this shows, but he also keeps in touch that way with what is really going on out there.

Student Achievement and Building Accreditation Plans

Instructional leadership plays out in some very specific ways. What happens every day in classrooms is what makes the difference in student academic achievement. Knowing that this is true, Bill gives a tremendous amount of thought, time and focus to the annual cycle of creating building accreditation plans. These plans are the blueprint for what will happen in buildings and classrooms across the district. They lay out goals, but also lay out exactly what instructional practices and instructional materials will be used to meet these goals. There is no element of instructional leadership that shows more obviously the approach taken by Bill than the importance he places on creating and using the building accreditation plans.

The process of examining student achievement and constructing accreditation plans at the building level and the district level is in some part driven by state regulation, which is, in turn, driven by national legislation, particularly *No Child Left Behind*. The state decrees that all schools and school districts must complete an accreditation plan and that the plan must be submitted for approval to the state department of education.

There must be an accreditation committee at every building, and a committee at the district level. Both building and district committees are required to have parents on the committee. Because of state deadlines, all school districts in the state follow the same basic framework in terms of timeframe. However, schools and school districts are free to

come up with the specifics of how they structure their committees, how the committees interact with practitioners, and what specific areas of improvement they wish to have as their main focus.

In Hamilton County School District 1, as stipulated by the state, they have building committees and district committees. The specific ways in which these committees, building administrators, teachers, classified staff, central office administrators, school board members and members of the parent community interact are strategic and unified. In District 1, these plans are the tangible proof of Bill's instructional leadership and instructional beliefs.

First of all, Bill believes that everything should work together and that the documents produced by the accreditation process should truly be the guidebook and structural outline for their efforts in the coming year. Because of his leadership, the documents produced by the building committees and by the district committee truly serve as the roadmap for what they are going to do for the coming year.

The accreditation process starts in the spring. In late February or early March, each principal meets with Bill and Carrie, and discusses where they think they are in terms of meeting the goals that were set the previous year. They examine a great deal of data, using some objective, norm-referenced testing from national testing firms. They also use student work, student grades, teacher feedback, feedback from the curriculum committees, from the school accountability committees, attendance data, and student discipline data.

After this initial meeting, principals work with their staffs to create a rough draft of an accreditation plan for the coming year. These are due to Bill prior to spring break,

which is always in mid-March. These draft plans are then reviewed by Bill and Carrie. They then go back to the buildings, where they are reviewed again and finalized. The final drafts are due before principals are done in June.

Meanwhile, a similar process is happening at the district level, except that it involves the board of education and the district accountability committee and lags just a little because of the desire for the building plans and the district plan to be in harmony with each other.

State test scores come out in late July every year. Principals report at that same time. There is a large data-sharing meeting that is called within the first week of returning on contract to the district. Principals have had time to do two things: look at and analyze the data and begin the process of plugging that actual data into their plans from the previous June. If the actual data is different from what was anticipated, then principals also have to adjust their plans accordingly.

The big meeting is very public. All data is shared. Carrie and Bill handle the dialogue on the district data, and principals handle the conversation on their building data. Everyone is there: Bill, Carrie, Mike, the two district Teachers on Special Assignment (TOSA's) the principals and the secondary assistant principals. Bill and Carrie begin the discussion with an overview of the district data and what it tells them as they drill down into the specifics and the dialogue quickly opens up to include everyone. The same is true at the building level: the principals start by sharing the insights and perspectives they have developed by analyzing the data (middle school and high school assistant principals are part of the process) but in very short order, everyone shares their observations, perspectives, and thoughts.

When this all-day meeting is concluded, Bill and Carrie have a very good idea about how to go about finalizing the district plan and are ready to begin working with the district accountability committee and the board of education. Building principals have a sense of direction and know what to do as they return the plans and the data to their building accountability committees, teachers and classified staff.

The plans at both levels are very specific. They mention specific data points, set very specific goals that can be measured by the data, have extremely detailed action plans and identify stakeholders who are responsible to carry out those action plans.

Once finalized, the district plan and the building plans are signed off on by their accountability committees, and then go to the school board for accreditation. The district defines accreditation as, "Certification by the State Board of Education that public school districts have met the requirements and rules for accrediting public schools and school districts pursuant to state law."

The school board reviews each plan and makes a determination. Schools may be accredited, placed on academic watch or on academic probation. While plans are in place for schools that are placed on either academic watch or academic probation, all schools have been fully accredited in the six years Bill has been superintendent. Following the guidelines for a school that found itself on one of those two ratings has never happened under his leadership.

Bill's vision for accreditation is comprehensive and strategic. The daily work in classrooms is driven by the specific strategies developed as a part of the accreditation process. The data analysis that produces the strategies is ongoing and is monitored by

Bill, Carrie, Mike, the building principals and assistant principals, the TOSA's and the board of education all year long.

Professional development strategies are selected to train administrative, certified and classified staff members to fully implement the strategies that are in the accreditation plans. Curriculum alignment is examined through the lens of the data too. For instance it was discovered a year ago that students across the district were not doing well at the elementary level in algebraic concepts. In working collaboratively, the principals of the three elementary schools and their math curriculum teams (who are teachers) discovered that the curriculum was structured in such a way as to fail to cover these crucial areas before the state testing in the spring. The sequence was adjusted, and while they will have to wait for the testing this year to determine if their adjustment works, everyone involved is certain that they will see improvement in this area. This is a perfect example of how all the academic teams work together.

This working philosophy of deep collaboration became immediately evident to Carrie Chambers when she came on board in July. She commented to me:

Everybody has a district accountability committee, but not many districts have an achievement council that works together with parents and staff from every school and involves so many people in the process of keeping things on track for students.

The purpose of the council is to give feedback – it is a perfect example of Bill's flexibility and his desire to work collaboratively. We adjust our plans according to this feedback, and we provide input to Bill about the ways that this feedback impacts what we are doing and trying to do. The curriculum review process is also highly collaborative. Before Bill came here, there was no formal curriculum review. Now, with me on board, we have been able to formalize that even more. This is a demonstration of how he involves people. He starts these things. But he does not run them. He does rely upon them for feedback and getting what he needs to make good decisions.

These people are involved in the field. They know what they need on a day-to-day basis. Bill is getting the information he needs to stay on top of situations and do his best for students and staff.

Carrie and the administrative team work hard to nail down the data, but also to make sure that communication is happening – that teachers, principals and everyone who works with students is getting data that is focused, helpful and meaningful to them.

At the elementary level, the curriculum committee came up with an assessment matrix to assess elementary literacy. It defined a series of benchmarks, K-5, that allow teachers to screen, benchmark, progress monitor and to some extent to diagnose exactly what is happening with each student as they progress through the K-5 literacy curriculum.

We use Dibbles, (a national, norm-referenced test) running records and Treasures, which is our K-5 curriculum, Treasures Individual Reading Inventory, which gives more information, particularly diagnostic information. We use the state assessment data too. There is also fluency, Fry Instant Words, reading levels tests, as much stuff as we can get. We are also looking at the time piece. In elementary, we feel that they do a great job with placement and benchmarking, but they don't do as well at progress monitoring because of the time. Usually time is associated with how easy it is to accomplish.

We are looking at a program called Progress Reporter, which is a computer-based program that we hope will get at the issues of time – it is easier to administer and so we hope teachers will use it more frequently. It tracks student growth over time and so we are also hopeful this will help.

A lot of assessment depends increasingly on technology. Teachers are pretty crunched for time and they have a lot to get done every day. They need to be able to download the data easily, so that they can look at it as a team. If someone has to take the time to load the data into an Excel spreadsheet, that alone is very time consuming. So we are moving more and more toward using technology to help with the analysis of growth.

The district is struggling with math, particularly at the secondary level. Many kids are failing math. In 9th and 10th grades, kids are taking Algebra three times. Carrie

knows that this should not be the case. She can obviously see that they need to do something to help their teachers and their students with math at the secondary level.

This is part of curriculum alignment. But, I don't find teachers using data, at least as teams, at the secondary level. I mean, there are some teachers who do, but they are isolated. There are teams at the middle school who use data.

But because we have not really done a good job at defining what we want to use and how we are going to track kids over time, teachers are just using whatever they have or whatever they can get their hands on. So they don't have a lot of useful data. They do the best they can at the end of 8th grade, but the matrix does not really get us what we need.

There is also a communications gap between middle school and high school teachers and how they go about determining accurate placement. We cannot possibly do real progress monitoring if we don't have a common data system, one that is universal for the secondary level, and one which everyone can agree upon. It is problematic. We are bringing in Acuity and seeing if we can use their system.

The teachers absolutely see the need here. They have agreed that we need to come up with a universal system that we use for all students in grades 6-10. They are saying that they don't want five or six different tools, they just want one. They want something with the technology built in, something that has a sound research background, something that has a proven performance record – that has made a positive difference for other schools and other districts. For instance the biggest district in our state has been using Acuity for over a year, so I think that looks pretty good.

What we have right now and what we have in place a year from now will certainly be different. The ways we use data at elementary is different right now. They have leadership teams at each school. Those leadership teams discuss data frequently and bring things to the staff and to the principal that they believe merit their attention. There is a core of people who are really getting into it, really discussing this, and trying to move the school forward.

So, the work goes on. The cycle that is district accountability in Hamilton County School District 1 plays itself out over and over, each year. Each year there is new data, there are new goals and strategies based upon that data, fresh ideas for professional

development, so that administrators and teachers can become more skilled in the areas of teaching and learning that show the most need for improvement. Most importantly, it all works together, systemically and strategically, with educators at all levels, parents, school board members and the superintendent of schools all collaborating on the process, not just a few times a year to complete a document, but every day, and in every building.

Board Relationships and Communication

While Bill Johnson assumes a lot of responsibility in terms of instructional leadership, working closely and collaboratively with Carrie Chambers in particular, he also understands that no aspect of superintendent leadership can be successful in any school district unless you have a strong working relationship with your board of education. They are really the “boss” of the superintendent and the superintendent is their sole employee. So, working closely with your board, developing a relationship that, like his other leadership relationships is built on trust and mutual respect, is central to Bill’s leadership and his instructional leadership.

Michelle Raines, president of the board of education for the entire six-year tenure of Bill Johnson, recalls what things were like before Bill came, and what happened after he was hired:

Bill made a huge difference when he came on board. I came on the school board mainly because of the concerns I had with the last superintendent. Shortly after that, he retired, and we hired Bill. It is the best thing we ever did. He has been a great superintendent, and none of the concerns I had that caused me to run for the board of education have been evident during the time that we have had Bill here.

One of the first things he did was that he said we needed to behave and act like a district. This meant that we needed to have a curriculum review. We went through everything. He saw to it that we updated materials – our high school kids were using textbooks that were over 20 years old – and

he made sure that we were following the standards and that the entire curriculum supported that.

Bill believes in collaboration, and that is what he set up right away. He created the curriculum teams that still exist today. It was Bill who insisted that these be teams of teachers, and while they had a clear outline of what it was they were supposed to accomplish, he let them loose to do their work. He trusted them, and that meant a lot to them.

Those curriculum committees still are at work today – it was not just a one-time thing, but it was something that he knew needed to be an ongoing thing. They are still at work, and keep our curriculum aligned, they keep it on track and they study it in-depth, to be sure it is providing the best possible education to our kids.

Bill went to work from the first day to make this the best district possible for kids. It is what he talks about all the time, and it is how he goes about his business.

Bill knows and understands that the key to any superintendent being successful – not just as an instructional leader, but as a superintendent – is to create, nurture and maintain a positive relationship with the board of education. It is not always an easy position to be in. Boards of education are elected officials, typically, as is the case with Hamilton County District 1, to four-year terms. The state also has term-limit laws that apply to all elected officials, including school board members, so the most a board member could possibly serve would be 10 years. If appointed to the board, they may serve two years before standing for election, and are eligible to run for two consecutive elections after that. If elected from the beginning, than an eight-year term is the limit.

A common saying in the superintendent ranks that Bill has repeated upon occasion is, “The board that fires you is never the board that hires you.” The reason for this aphorism is apparent: a superintendent was hired by a board of education because they thought he or she to be the right person for the job. However, two, four or six years down the road, there may be an entirely new board of education, or even just a majority

of board members who are new, and for any number of reasons, they may think that the person hired by a previous board is simply no longer the right person for the job.

Nationally, superintendent tenure is typically between 5 and 6 years. In recent years in this state, the average has been 2.5 years. Bill understands, as does any working superintendent that he is powerless to do anything for instructional leadership if he does not have a positive board relationship. A negative relationship could easily mean that, regardless of his efforts or achievement in terms of student academic achievement or anything else, he could simply be out of a job.

Because boards are elected, superintendents have little or no control over the process by which people end up on a board of education. The structure of school districts in this state is that the superintendent of schools is the sole employee of the board of education – everyone else in the district is either directly or indirectly supervised by, and evaluated by the superintendent of schools.

Bill has been working with boards now for 11 years – five years in his first district, six in his current district. He believes that no other element of his philosophy and workday reality have changed as much as his point of view about working with boards. He started out with a positive relationship with the board in his first district, but saw the board change when a vocal critic of his leadership was elected to the board. That critic slowly managed to turn one other board member against him, and turn two more (on a seven member board) into swing voters, who were sometimes for, other times against, what he was trying to accomplish.

I asked him, “What is the difference between yourself now, in your 11th year in the superintendency and your first year?”

I would say that the difference between when I first became a superintendent and the way I work now is not a difference of night and day, but I would say close to it. In some areas, particularly in board relationships and working with the board, I have changed a lot. This is where I have grown the most. You don't ever have an opportunity to have the experience of working with a board until you are in the job. Even as an assistant superintendent, when I saw things from a pretty close seat, still, when you come into that job, understanding and working with school board is your bread and butter. I mean, it is your life. They will make you or break you.

Advice I got from a very experienced superintendent was – “If you have a five member board, never make three of them mad at you at the same time.” The other thing I have learned is to choose your battles. Don't make an issue or an enemy of a board member over nothing. If it is not critical, don't push it. Now, if it is critical, do everything you know how to do to discuss, convince, apprise them of the situation. But, in the end, it is the board's decision. Don't take it personally. I did that with a couple board members early in my career and it didn't do me any good. Did me much more harm than good. Many sleepless nights over nothing. That is probably the biggest thing. I have also learned that every time you have an election – even if it is just one board member who changes – that changes the whole complexion of a board. The best advice I can give to superintendents is to say, always remember that you work for them.

Bill is, by nature, a hands-on leader. He loves what he does, and he has a strong work ethic. He likes to roll up his sleeves and get to work. However, he is also deeply collaborative, and does not micro-manage. He would never ask one of his principals or one of his teachers to do anything that he would not do himself. But no superintendent can do it all. What that means is that he gives people important work to do, work that he truly would be willing to do himself, but can't. He trusts his team to do important work, to do what is right for students, and as a team, they are willing to do it. But to survive as a superintendent means that everything his team does and everything that happens in the district must be accounted for, explained to, and approved by his board of education. As Bill explains:

Communication is the important thing. The education-ese is something that people in the business understand, and everyone uses acronyms. But with your board, keep it as simple and down-to-earth as you possibly can. Try to put yourself across the desk and realize that the information you are going to be presenting to your board is complicated. Put yourself in their place. Don't try to bury them, don't try to consume them with all the numbers and charts and figures – give them an overview of what it really means. For example – “We are showing improvement here, we are not doing so well here, we need to focus on certain areas here,” without burying them in numbers and data. They don't care about that. They want to know – are we getting better here, are we doing okay here, or are we not doing so well here.

So, that is how I approach this. I have learned some hard lessons along the way and have taken them to heart.

The other thing in terms of communicating to the board is “no surprises.” Don't ever bring something to a board meeting that you are not prepared for or that is going to hit them blindsided. I have always had an agreement with my board that we don't surprise each other. I have an agenda meeting with my president and my vice president before each meeting and we do a lot of planning and we stick to our agenda. We try to keep our focus. I treat my board in the same manner that I want them to treat me. I use a lot of email – it is available, they all have e-mail, they all use it regularly, and that makes my life easier. I do a lot of communication with my board via e-mail.

Everybody gets the same message. Now a lot of times, I will get on the phone with my board president and talk about things first with her. I never send something to one that I do not send to the others. They might do that too: talk to me first, to give me a heads-up on something, but immediately let all the other board members know, and possibly get it on an agenda to discuss at board meetings.

I share anyone's concerns with the whole board. Most of my experiences with boards have been that the more they know about the big picture, the better they feel about coming to meetings and the better they feel about board members. Things run a lot smoother. Treat them just like you want them to treat you.

Don't try to cover up anything that is going wrong. They are going to hear about it anyway, and I would much rather that they hear it from me than from somebody else. Just be upfront with them, be truthful, and share the good things as well as the bad. Don't try to keep anything from them, ever.

It would certainly appear that Bill has been successful at applying these lessons to his situation in Hamilton County District 1. He enjoys a close and highly professional relationship with Michelle Raines and the other members of his five-member board. He works very closely with them, and communicates literally anything and everything to them that he feels they might want or need to know. He takes his own board mantra, “No surprises,” to heart, and works extremely hard at making sure that absolutely nothing comes up that would surprise any member of the board at any time.

This is reflected in the comments of Michelle, as she discusses what it is like to work with Bill:

He had a plan from the start, and he still does. Bill thinks everything through. He always has a plan for how to deal with issues, and when he comes up with a plan of action, he always has a timeline, and always some very specific outcomes that need to happen with the work.

He thinks everything through. He is never unprepared or caught off-guard. I suppose, like everyone, things do sometimes catch him off-guard, but he never shows it. I think it is because, behind the scenes, he has thought everything through. Sometimes, he will call me and he does not really have a question, he just wants to know what I think. And then, I know that he is getting himself together. He values what I think, but I believe it is probably even more important to him to just hear what I honestly think, or what I believe, because that helps him with his own thought process.

Bill communicates everything with the board. We never have to guess about anything. He is very open with us, very honest with us, even if it is bad news. Now, there is really not a lot that has been bad since he came here, but what I mean is, he does not keep us from anything. We hear about everything, and if there is a problem to be solved, we hear about the problem, but also what he thinks we might be able to do to solve it. He sees us as a team, and he is always working with us. He is open and honest – good news or bad.

He says, so many times you could never count it – I want to make sure there are no surprises to my board. It is true. It is really the way he

works. This is where it shows how much thought he gives to things. He always brings us stuff in advance and we always are prepared. If something happens out there in the district, and he believes we ought to know about it, he lets us know right away. So, there is a sense that he will always support us, never leave us out. Also, he talks to all of us. There is no one person who knows more or less about what is going on. Now, because I am the board president, he might call me, as I mentioned before, and talk something through with me. But it is not really private, in the sense that whatever we discuss or whatever we talk through, all the members of the board are going to get that information.

We see this communication across the board. This is how he deals with people in the community this is how he deals with everyone in the district. There are never any secrets, never any guesswork, never any wondering what he is up to, no hidden agendas – he conducts all his business right out in the open. He earns people's trust.

The whole community, by now, knows this about Bill. He brings everyone together. There were some boards, between the two towns that did not always cooperate before he came here. But, by dealing with them, being patient, and listening, he has gotten them to come a long way, and now they not only cooperate with the school district, they cooperate with each other. This has mainly to do with his leadership.

We have developed protocols for how we work. For instance, if you have an issue with a teacher and you go to a board member with that issue, than we know exactly what to do. Or I should say we know exactly what two things to do: one is that we immediately ask if that person has gone to the teacher. Usually, of course the answer is no. Then we tell them that they need to go to the teacher, and that then, if they are unsatisfied, they need to go to the principal, and then if needed, to the superintendent. Only then, if the superintendent thought it was appropriate, would it come to the board. The second thing we would all do is immediately call Bill that a parent had contacted us concerning a teacher, and let him know who it was, so he would also not be taken by surprise.

It used to be that board meetings were filled with people who were angry, and now, that just is not the case anymore. It is because Bill brought these protocols and ways of doing business, and that he deals in honest, open ways with everyone, so that type of thing just does not happen anymore. Bill is a great listener. He truly wants to know your point of view, and he listens very carefully to what everyone has to say. He wants to listen, and he wants to understand.

By the time he makes a decision, you can be assured he has listened to all sides. He thinks things through very carefully, and he tries to get input from everyone.

Bill is a believer in finding solutions. There is never any finger pointing, never any blaming. When something needs to get done, he approaches it in a very strategic and thorough way, but it is never about looking for blame, it is always about finding the best possible solution. He approaches communication by believing you need to be open and honest, willing to share the successes and the stumbling blocks with equanimity. He works constantly to keep his board informed, to nurture and deepen their understanding of the school district and the district needs, and to earn their trust through honesty and transparency. He applies the lessons he learned from his first superintendency about board relations to create a sense of mutual trust and respect with his current board and a highly collaborative leadership style with his board president. He works on a daily basis to earn their trust, and because his actions match his words on a consistent basis, and because the board has come to believe that he always wants what is best for the district and what is best for kids, they do trust him. The result is a focused, strategic and functional relationship with his board of education.

Summary

Being a superintendent, assuming the leadership for a school district and despite everything else that a superintendent must do, being an instructional leader striving to keep a relentless focus on student academic achievement are all things that Bill Johnson has chosen – they are the bread and butter of his professional life. The job itself is very complex, and maintaining a positive relationship with the board of education – in doing so, keeping his job – is just as complex as the actual job of running the district.

Yet, with all this complexity, there are core beliefs that emerge from watching Bill Johnson do his job, from talking with the people on his leadership team and his board of education, and from carefully examining the documents, structures and plans that result from his work and his leadership. “Do what is right for kids.” “Treat others the way you would be treated.” “Be honest and open and transparent.” “No surprises.”

These personal sayings are not just sayings for Bill: they form the central core of the person he is. Though he does say these things often, what you get when you observe him, or talk to those who work for him, and with him, is that these beliefs truly inform how he lives his daily life as a superintendent of schools.

CHAPTER FIVE – ANALYSIS OF THE CASE

Overview of the Case

The case study involves a superintendent of schools, Dr. Bill Johnson, his role as instructional leader and his decision making process regarding student academic achievement in his school district, Hamilton County School District 1, and the focus across the district on student academic achievement. District 1 has just less than 3,000 students in grades K-12. Bill Johnson has been the superintendent of schools there for nearly six years. During that time, there have been two distinct periods regarding student academic growth. When Bill first arrived the previous superintendent had done very little to address this issue, and students in the district generally scored below state averages on the annual standardized state testing.

The first period of academic growth under Bill saw relatively dramatic gains, due in large part to a considerable focus on the student learning, and significant changes in approach to addressing student achievement. Bill established an ongoing district goal that on each of the state tests (administered to students in grades 3-10 and involving three subjects for all grades – reading, writing and math, and science testing in grades 5, 8 and 10 for a total of 27 tests) students in District 1 would score at or above state averages.

In the early years of his tenure, the students in the district made steady progress toward this goal, in the meantime significantly improving overall academic performance. However, in the last two years of Bill's tenure, scores flattened. They did not regress, but neither did they continue to make the progress that was seen in the early years.

During this entire time the district was growing. In 2003, the first year of Bill's tenure as superintendent of schools, the district had a total student count of 1,977. That same fall, a bond issue was passed to accommodate student growth by building a new elementary school and constructing additions to the middle school and the high school (the district had grown from 1,368 students in 1997, an increase of over 600 students in the seven years prior to Bill's arrival). By the beginning of Bill's sixth year, in the fall of 2008, the student population had grown another 746 students, to 2,723.

As the district grew and as the reality of flattening test scores became apparent, Bill made a decision in the spring of 2008 to hire a full-time curriculum and instructional director, a decision fully supported by the board of education and Bill's administrative leadership team. Bill continues to play a strong and visible role in instructional leadership, but with the hiring of Carrie Chambers, he acknowledged that as the district had grown, he was simply unable to devote the same amount of time to the vital task of tending to instructional leadership and student academic achievement. The period of time covered by the fieldwork in the case (fourteen weeks – from early December, 2008 to mid-March, 2009) involved the beginning stages of the second phase of Bill's instructional leadership – creating a leadership partnership with Carrie Chambers, and a diminishment of Bill's hands-on participation (though very little diminishment in focus

and importance) in the daily tasks directly related to instructional leadership and student academic achievement.

Responding to the Research Questions

These are the research questions that formed the foundation for this case study and which informed me as I conducted my fieldwork and my reflective analysis during the fieldwork:

Central Question:

“What are the factors that influence a superintendent in his role as instructional leader and his decision-making process regarding student academic achievement?”

Additional Research Questions:

- 1) How is student academic achievement addressed by the superintendent and how does this weigh in importance to other considerations and decisions?
- 2) How are resources allocated for the purpose of student academic achievement?
- 3) How is the district structured and what degree of autonomy or uniformity is expected from schools regarding student academic achievement?
- 4) What specific actions or behaviors does the superintendent engage in that have direct or implied impact upon student academic achievement?
- 5) What are the interactions of the superintendent with various intact cultural groups regarding the issue of student academic achievement?

These questions will be fully answered in the analysis of the case study. They will not, however, be addressed individually, but rather thematically. In reviewing each of the central and secondary themes which emerged from the fieldwork, all of the research questions will be fully and completely answered.

The Emergence of Central Themes From the Fieldwork

As is intended in the case study design themes emerge during the course of the fieldwork which create a framework for understanding the reality of the situation under study, "...understanding the complex interrelationships among all that exist" (Stake, p.37). Spending many hours in the field, interviewing the superintendent of schools, the president of the board of education and all members of the district administrative team, as well as the close examination of a variety of public documents produced by the district allowed me to build a complex, holistic picture of the realities on the ground in a school district, and give detailed views of superintendent Bill Johnson and the people charged with leadership in the school district that constituted my case. By conducting the study in the natural setting of the district, and observing my central participants over a period of fourteen weeks, I have been able, in Chapter four, to construct a rich, thick description of the realities faced by Bill Johnson regarding instructional leadership and student academic achievement.

A series of central themes, and a number of related themes emerged from the fieldwork.

There were three central themes that emerged:

- Being a good person, treating people with respect and dignity, being a role model of integrity, honesty and transparency – being a principle-based leader who puts people first and demonstrates genuine care for them – this is the key to being a successful superintendent and by extension, a successful instructional leader. If people believe in you and trust you as a person, if you demonstrate your care for

them, support them and believe in them, then there is very little that they will not do for you and for the students, parents and staff through the entire system.

- Caring about the kids – truly looking at every single decision through the lens of “What is best for the kids,” and proving over and over again that this is really what matters most to Bill, to the board of education and to his administrative team.
- Collaboration, trust and transparency – seeing his role as nearly constant collaboration with the board of education and his administrative leadership team and nearly total system transparency – doing everything from budget to curriculum review in full and total public view – and trusting the people on your team to be instructional leaders in their respective roles and to do the jobs they were hired to do without excessive oversight or monitoring.

Additional themes of importance that will be explored in the process of the analysis of the case were:

- Working with the school board.
- Curriculum and curriculum alignment, data analysis of student achievement results and professional development.
- Budget and the relationship to student achievement

Analysis of Central Themes

Theme Number One

Being a good person, treating people with respect and dignity, being a role model of integrity, honesty and transparency – being a principle-based leader who puts people first and demonstrates genuine care for them – this is the key to being a successful

superintendent and by extension, a successful instructional leader. If people believe in you and trust you as a person, if you demonstrate your care for them, support them and believe in them, then there is very little that they will not do for you and for the students, parents and staff through the entire system.

This theme emerged as the foundation of every other element of Bill Johnson's leadership. It actually began to assert itself early in the process. In interviews, I consistently asked people the same first question, "What do you believe to be the role of the superintendent of schools with regard to instructional leadership and student academic achievement?"

What I noticed was that my participants opened up their answer to this question by beginning to discuss what a good person Bill Johnson was. I would, in keeping with good case study and emergent research, let them go on with their answer; when they were finished, I would then ask them to get into the specifics of exactly what Bill did, or did not do, regarding his role in instructional leadership – I had to lead them back to the question. Here are a few sample responses that give you a flavor of what participants would say in answer to that standardized first question:

I look to my superintendent for support, I look for positive encouragement – I want him to share his experiences with me – what worked and what did not work when he was a principal – I want guidelines, making sure that I am meeting what is required. What is most important to me here, as an elementary principal, is improving student achievement levels, along with keeping a safe and warm environment. I look for my superintendent to support that. What Bill does is provide me with that support.

He constantly works with building principals. It is a true partnership. Bill is the best listener I have ever been around. He is over here all the time, and really enjoys just roaming the building and watching the kids, listening to the teachers. But, when he and I sit down together to review data, or to think about academic solutions for kids, what I really notice is

how well he listens. Then, he likes to think things over. In that way, he is very deliberate. But he will call me back in a day or two, and have a great idea for how to do things. He is very respectful as well. He never says, "Why don't you do this," but rather, always says, "You know, I have been thinking about what we talked about the other day, and I was wondering what you think of this idea..."

I think it is all encompassing. I feel the most focus in our district is on student achievement and academic performance, and here, the superintendent is seen as the instructional leader. He bears the most responsibility there – he is the man. He answers to the board of education, who represent the community, concerning where we are going, and why we are improving, or, why we are not.

I see that in my position, working with him, a lot of it is facilitating, working directly with building principals to know what our academic weaknesses are and that we are accountable for helping people in our building to get better, to make sure that there is district alignment, and a process, or a plan to get better. That branches out then to include staffing, instructional planning, the day to day things that go on in our buildings as we work to try and get better. He demonstrates how much he cares about us, and about kids, in his involvement with instructional leadership.

Well, I would say the superintendent should develop the philosophy, and the environment, the climate for the district and is the head coach. As principals, we are the position players – we know what his expectations are and it is our job to try and implement them with our staffs and in our schools. I feel fortunate in working for Bill, because he is a guy who not only talks the talk, he walks the walk as well.

He is a quality guy. He creates the level of expectations for what he wants from staff and from students, and then to gives administrators the support that we need and the confidence that we need to feel like we can ask him any question and feel like we are doing what he wants.

As these opening responses indicate, the participants see in Bill Johnson as a true partner and a person that people feel they can trust and rely upon. These attributes were referred to constantly in the interviews, and as I did my member checks and re-checks, I would get strong, positive feedback from the participants in terms of this finding. Over and over again, the people in the field who work on a regular, often daily basis with Bill, will state that everything he does is based upon a foundation of trust, honesty, integrity

and a desire to make decisions in light of his strong beliefs about what is best for the children and young adults that are students in his school district.

The sense that his leadership team and his school board have about Bill and his approach to leadership is exactly what he wants and expects from himself. The leadership Bill pursues comes from experience and from his reflection upon that experience. John Maxwell, a leadership researcher, states, “Experience isn’t the best teacher. Evaluated experience is the best teacher. Learn from mistakes and victories alike. Draw upon experiences to grow and gain wisdom,” (Maxwell, p. 2).

This very accurately describes the deliberate and career-long approach Bill has taken to leadership. He believes strongly in thinking back over previous situations that he has encountered, and seeks to have more depth in understanding some current situation from deliberating on past experiences that he believes will have relevance. At one point in an interview, Bill stated,

Some people learn and listen a lot better than others. I think I am one of those. I pay attention to what has occurred and what is happening, pay attention to the opinions of people I trust, and then make my decisions based upon what is the best thing to do.

I look back on it and there are a lot of things I would do differently – you learn as you go through it. But, I’ve tried to never make the same mistake twice. Once and awhile I have, but I have really tried not to.

As a superintendent, I rely on previous experience as a classroom teacher, and as a principal in the middle and high school to play a large part of forming my beliefs, but when you get to the situation where you are actually superintendent you don’t get that opportunity to be hands on. So, what you have to do as superintendent is instill in people the belief in the same principles and beliefs and sense of direction of things that I want my principals and my director of curriculum to work with, with their staffs and in their schools.

As Mike Wayford, who eats lunch with Bill every day, noted to me, he will often see Bill sitting in his office, either one or two pieces of paper on his desk or perhaps nothing on the desk, but with the door closed, just sitting there, thinking. "Then," Mike said, "I know that something is on his mind, and he is going through all the possibilities."

This is exactly the standard Bill holds for himself. In our first interview together, he said, "Every single decision I make affects hundreds of people. It affects kids, parents, teachers. Usually, there is a significant cost involved. It can be thousands, even millions of dollars. So, you have to really think things through." Mike Wayford was not alone in noting this quality. Michelle Raines, the president of the school board also noted,

He had a plan from the start, and he still does. Bill thinks everything through. He always has a plan for how to deal with issues, and when he comes up with a plan of action, he always has a timeline, and always some very specific outcomes that need to happen with the work.

He thinks everything through. He is never unprepared, or caught off-guard. I suppose, like everyone, things do sometimes catch him off-guard, but he never shows it. I think it is because, behind the scenes, he has thought everything through. I know, sometimes, he will call me and he does not really have a question, he just wants to know what I think. And then, I know that he is getting himself together. He values what I think, but I believe it is probably even more important to him to just hear what I honestly think, or what I believe, because that helps him with his own thought process.

This is the primary reason for Bill's daily lunch with Mike. The two have come to trust each other completely. Mike commented to me, "He will ask me about something, and I know he has already thought it through, and probably knows what he wants, but he still asks, and he still listens. He wants me to think it through too and see what we come up with together." This continual deliberation is a hallmark of Bill's

leadership style. He draws upon 30 years of experience as a classroom teacher, assistant principal, building principal, assistant superintendent and superintendent in two school districts, thinks very deliberately and self-critically through whatever situation he is confronted with, and if there is a similarity to something he dealt with before, he asks himself (or asks Mike Wayford, or Michelle Raines) whether or not it turned out well, whether or not it was a good decision.

This shows up plainly in his meetings. His standing group meetings, six times a month, are with his administrative team and his board of education: he has a planning session for each board meeting, then administrative meetings in the morning and school board meetings in the evening twice each month (he has other standing meetings with small groups or individuals, such as a weekly meeting with Carrie Chambers). In the course of the fourteen weeks I was in the field I attended every administrative meeting and school board meeting that was on the calendar during that time frame. What I noted both in my fieldnotes and in my reflective journal were two linked phenomena: that the meetings were simultaneously relaxed and low-key, while also being very crisp, to the point, and quick-moving. Both of these I came to understand, were a visible effect of how deliberate and thoughtful Bill was behind the scenes. The smooth and relaxed quality came from the fact that he was so well prepared, and that he had lived up to his own credo of, "No surprises." The crisp, focused and efficient quality came from the same source: Bill had everything ready, had given either his school board members or his administrative team all the information in advance and was himself prepared not only for what was on the agenda, but also for the possibility, always lurking in the background of any meeting, that something might come up he did not expect.

This quality of deliberation also shows up in important written documents. As I just mentioned, agendas are clear and focused for any meeting, and any additional information that is needed for the decision-making process or simply for deeper understanding, are put out in advance, in written material that is also well organized and focused. Important public documents, most notably district and school accreditation plans, are well organized, well structured, easy to read and understand, and always focused on an easily understood purpose.

This is Bill, “Walking the walk.” This is Bill, slowly and deliberately, but consistently and deeply, earning trust from the people he works with and serves. This is Bill providing focus, giving clear structure, than trusting his school board or his administrative team to make good decisions, and put good plans into action.

People are willing to follow Bill Johnson because of this deep reservoir of earned trust. Stephen Covey, in The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People refers to this as the emotional bank account:

From the foundation of character, we build and maintain Win/Win relationships. The trust, the Emotional Bank Account, is essence of Win/Win. Without the trust, the best we can do is compromise; without trust, we lack the credibility for open, mutual learning and communication.

But if our Emotional Bank Account is high, credibility is no longer an issue. Enough deposits have been made so that you know and I know that we deeply respect each other. We’re focused on the issues, not on personalities or positions.

Because we trust each other, we are open. We put our cards on the table. Even though we see things differently, I know that you’re willing to listen with respect while I describe a situation to you, and I’ll treat your view with the same respect. We’re both committed to try and understand each other’s point of view deeply and work together for a third alternative, the synergistic solution, that will be a better answer for us both (1989, p. 220-221).

Reading this passage, having listened to Mike Wayford describe his daily lunch sessions with Bill, it is almost as if Stephen Covey sat in on one of those sessions, then went out and wrote that section of his well known book. Those words describe almost exactly the nature of the relationship between the two of them, and the way they work together to create a strong school district.

Bill works hard to earn trust. He is unmistakable and open about what he believes, and he then, with great consistency, demonstrates through the accumulations of his daily actions that he is acting in accordance with those beliefs. Bhindi and Duignan, in "Authenticity in leadership: an emerging perspective," declare:

Authentic leaders earn the allegiance of others not by coercion or manipulation but by building trusting relationships. Authentic leaders are aware of their own limitations, are tolerant of imperfection in others, and help others learn, grow, mature and succeed. The touchstone of their leadership assessment is: Do those who work with them grow as persons? Do they become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to see leadership as service? (1995, p.206)

This is what the people who work most closely with Bill Johnson believe about him: that he has earned their trust, that he is a person of integrity who sees as his highest calling a desire to serve young people and their families. This trust and belief is the foundation upon which all other elements of Bill's leadership rests. His ability to put a vision of instructional leadership and accountability for student academic achievement into action through educational tools like professional development and curriculum alignment is based upon the fact that the people who work with him every day believe in him have faith in him and trust him – all of which come from his consistently acting in accordance with this deepest ethical beliefs in honesty, integrity and openness.

Theme Number Two

Caring about the kids – truly looking at every single decision through the lens of “What is best for the kids,” and proving over and over again that this is really what matters most to Bill, to the board of education and to his administrative team.

Bill knows that there is usually more than one solution to an issue, or a problem. He understands that what he thinks is best for kids may not be what everyone else thinks. But he does have a deep reservoir of beliefs about “what is best for kids,” that he draws upon as he makes decisions. These beliefs are that school is, essentially, a “home away from home,” and that all students should feel supported, cared for and nurtured. Bill believes that it is only in a caring and a nurturing environment that real learning can take place.

He also believes in accountability. Though his deeply felt disdain for *No Child Left Behind* is well known to all he works with, his dislike of the legislation has nothing to do with accountability and everything to do with what he sees as the political game of “gotcha’!” that he believes was the true intent of the legislation from the start. His desire to provide a quality education for all kids in a supportive environment is, like the trust and high regard in which people hold him as a person, an element of his leadership that he works for and has, through his actions, earned.

Over and over again, in literally every interview and member check I conducted, the people on his leadership team would say, “Bill always does what he believes is best for kids.”

This belief is put into action in many different ways, all of which are highly visible. They were visible from the start, and in fact, were a strong reason that he was chosen by the board of education to be the superintendent six years ago. Michelle Raines, then, as now, the president of the board, recalled the differences Bill made, from the beginning of his tenure:

Bill made a huge difference when he came on board. I came on the school district mainly because of the concerns I had with the last superintendent. Shortly after that, he retired, and we hired Bill. It is the best thing we ever did. He has been a great superintendent, and none of the concerns I had that caused me to run for the board of education have been evident during the time that we have had Bill here.

One of the first things he did was that he said we needed to behave and act like a district. This meant that we needed to have a curriculum review. We went through everything. He saw to it that we updated materials – our high school kids were using textbooks that were over 20 years old – and he made sure that we were following the standards and the entire curriculum supported that.

Bill believes in collaboration, and that is what he set up right away. He created the curriculum teams that still exist today, and it was Bill who insisted that these be teams of teachers, and while they had a clear outline of what it was they were supposed to do, he let them loose to do their work. He trusted them, and that meant a lot to them.

So, those curriculum committees still are at work today – it was not just a one-time thing, but it was something that he knew needed to be an ongoing thing. So, they are still at work, and keep our curriculum aligned, they keep it on track and they study it in-depth, to be sure it is providing the best possible education to our kids.

Bill went to work from the first day to make this the best district possible for kids. It is what he talks about all the time, and it is how he goes about his business.

As is the case with his principle-centered leadership and behavior there is a strong match between what Bill believes, what he says, and what he does. Believing that students must have a quality education, Bill works on those specific elements of the

educational structure that he knows he can change, and brings changes that he believes will make a difference. A perfect example of this came early in his career, as he brought the process of detailed and in-depth data analysis on a regular basis to his administrative team.

Recalls Carson Elementary principal, Terry Wilson:

We started really delving into data analysis when Bill arrived. There were charts from the state department of education, and we got to the point that we really started getting tired of seeing them, because at every single administrative meeting, he would always have these charts. But, it really made us focus. I mean, actually, we had fun with it and after awhile we kind of poked fun at him about it – but it truly served the purpose. It made us see how things all fit together as a district.

We began to think about two things at the same time – how we were doing as a district, and how we were doing as a building, and how the two of those things fit together. I mean, we spent a lot of time looking at those charts. We went through it so much that it got to the point where we practically had it memorized. I mean, it got to where we would say, “Oh my god, here we go again,” but you know what, it was a great strategy. I mean, if I want my teachers to really dig in deep and analyze their data, then it is only fair that I do it too. He took the lead by keeping those charts out in front of us, and then, when we brought them back to the building level, then I was the expert. I mean, I brought them back, and we did exactly the same thing.

We started looking at ourselves as a building, and every teacher was looking at how they did in their classroom, and how all that fit together. They began to really ask questions, to really be interested, in, “Okay, where did my kids do a great job last year, and where did they not do such a great job?”

Then, they were prepared for their own personal strengths and weaknesses, and also for the strengths and weaknesses of individual students. They really began to realize what was going on in their classroom.

Bill gave us a template for how to have those discussions, and the way he did it was by having them.

It was really like professional development. I mean, truly, we laughed about it. At one point, we were going to get all those charts and wallpaper

his office with them. By then, examining our data had become second nature.

Now, when we look at our state tests from the previous year when we all first get together in the summer, we look at them a little differently, we really know what we are doing. We know what to do. We look at all the data as a team, and we take it back to our buildings, and we look at it there as a team.

Bill put into place a series of educational and instructional steps within his first year that defined how the district would go about the business of, “Doing what is best for kids.” These steps are all still in place, and after six years of his tenure, have become the norm for how they do their business. One is a program of extensive professional development for certified and administrative staff that keeps the entire professional staff of the district informed, up to date on instructional best-practice, and able, because of an ever-growing repository of research knowledge, to deeply analyze student data.

The analysis of data over the course of the entire school year cycle is another element of instructional leadership that Bill brought into district practice that also has as its goal creating the best possible educational environment for students. An example of this was cited by Terry Wilson concerning math scores. When elementary students in 3rd grade consistently failed to do well on a specific element of math knowledge, the curriculum teams and elementary administrators got together and looked at the data to determine what was causing the problem. They discovered in their curriculum maps that the concept was not covered in time for the tests each year, so they moved the unit from April to February, giving students’ time to learn the concept before the test.

The ethic of data analysis was important, but so were two other elements of instructional leadership that Bill brought to the district: the creation of curriculum maps

that are followed by all teachers, and the establishment of standing curriculum committees to create the maps in the first place, and to examine student data and determine if adjustments need to be made to the maps. It was because they had a map in the first place – a map the very people who were doing the data analysis had created – that they were able to pinpoint the problem. It was also because they were skilled enough in data analysis to drill down beneath just the scores and find the underlying skill and were provided the support from Bill and Mike to have a strong, computer-based data analysis tool that allowed them to do this, that they were able to take clear, direct and focused action to improve students math abilities and math scores on the state tests.

All this is reflected in the careful, open process that results in the district and school accreditation plans. These plans provide a working template for actions on the classroom level, with specific changes and interventions to improve student performance. They are generated at the grassroots, and the cycle starts each year with teachers, as they draw upon what the past school year has shown them in terms of student performance, examine their goals from the previous year, and work in collaboration with their building principals to build a draft plan for the coming year. This cycle of data examination, goal setting, adjustment of goals and strategies once state testing results arrive in late July, and the following of these plans as instructional templates and guidelines all were put in motion by Bill shortly after his arrival, and have been refined since then.

The decision to expend the financial resources needed to hire a top-notch director of curriculum and instruction because Bill realized that the district had grown to the point that he could no longer dedicate as much hands-on time as was needed to continue to improve performance was yet another example of Bill “Walking the walk.” In his

decision to hire a person, and then, in his decision concerning who he hired, (a person, he told me, “Who is better at this than I am.”) Bill is demonstrating combination of humility and will that is referenced by Jim Collins in his best-selling, Good To Great:

Level 5 leaders channel their ego needs away from themselves and into the larger goal of building a great company. It’s not that Level 5 leaders have no ego or self-interest. Indeed, they are incredibly ambitious – but their ambition is first and foremost for their institution, not themselves (2001, p.21).

Bill has a healthy ego in regard to his instructional leadership – he takes a lot of pride in the many hours he spends reading research and then bringing that research to life in terms of decisions he makes for his school district. But, when he was talking to me about making the decision, he carefully asked me if I had, “...heard what I just said – I hired somebody better at this than I am,” Bill was demonstrating the qualities referred to in Collin’s research: demonstrating his quiet self-confidence in hiring someone he thought knew even more about instructional best practice and data analysis than he did, but even more importantly, clearly placing the students of his school district above his own ego, and directing his own ambition toward system improvement of which they would be the ultimate beneficiaries.

I think Bill expresses it best, when he talks about why he continues to do this work after 30 years in public education,

The bottom line that I’ve never lost sight of is that I remember why I am here. I am in my 31st year, and I still get excited. I get excited by new things. I especially get excited when I see new teachers, entering the profession who are just tearing it up they are so excited to be here. Kids and their colleagues and mentors are all working with them and they say, “Wow, this is great. These new teachers are so wonderful to work with.” This is all a part of the process of leadership. It has to fall in line you have to be that go-to person. People have to rely on you, trust you and know

you are willing to listen. You have to learn from them. You have to trust them. That is what I do.

What the board of education, building and district administrators, staff members, students and families trust Bill Johnson to do is keep in mind what is best for kids in all his decision-making. It is a core belief he holds. He makes it well known. Most importantly, he strives to apply this belief in his daily as well as his strategic, long range decision-making process.

Theme Number Three

Collaboration, trust and transparency – seeing his role as nearly constant collaboration with the board of education and his administrative leadership team and nearly total system transparency – doing everything from budget to curriculum review in full and total public view – and trusting the people on your team to be instructional leaders in their respective roles and to do the jobs they were hired to do without excessive oversight or monitoring.

Virtually everything Bill believes in as a person and a long-time professional public educator revolves around striving to be a good person and doing what is right for kids. These constitute the first two major themes that emerged in my fieldwork, through personal interviews and in the documents that Bill and the school district produce. The third theme builds upon both of these, particularly in the concept of trust. Bill strives to earn trust from his board, his entire district staff and the students and parents that he serves. His belief in trust also extends in the opposite direction: he believes just as strongly in hiring good people or, if he did not hire people, working with them

collaboratively toward a unified vision of quality education. He then believes in trusting these people to do their job.

An important element of this core belief is transparency and openness. Bill strongly believes in the “public” part of public education. He strives for honesty in communication, for transparency and collaboration, and for doing the most important business of the school district completely out in the open, with no secrets or hidden agendas.

All of this happens by working in collaboration. The concepts of trust and collaboration run together in Bill’s leadership style. He strongly desires and encourages those on his leadership team to work in constant collaboration with him and with each other. Virtually all the important work they do is done together as a team, with all the information and data they need very publically displayed, as is exemplified by the creation of school accreditation plans in open meetings and the review process for those plans including input from all members of the leadership team.

Bill’s belief in hiring good people, working to forge a common vision with your entire team, even those you did not hire and then, once those people are in place and the vision is firmly established, trusting those people to do good work, has practical implications. The most practical element of this belief is that no one in a leadership position can do all the work themselves. All leaders must trust other people to move the organization in a positive direction as they work on their own. Despite the fact that Bill visits schools regularly and in doing so stays in touch with the needs of his leaders, building staff members and students, most of the time his principals are functioning with no direct oversight from him. They are mainly on their own. Given that Bill has

established a common vision by working with the board of education, his leadership team, district staff members and his parent community, but cannot, himself, be in every building and oversee every initiative, he has no realistic option other than to entrust the discharge of that mission to other people.

There are a number of ways in which a leader can choose to supervise their staff. In a district the size of District 1 Bill is the direct supervisor of all those on his leadership team. There are no layers between Bill, Mike Wayford, Carrie Chambers and the five building principals. These people are all direct reports to Bill. He supervises them, and he is their primary evaluator on their annual performance evaluations. So, his philosophy in terms of supervision and evaluation has a direct impact on how schools are run, how the district budget unfolds, and everything that happens in the areas of curriculum, instruction and student academic achievement.

Trust plays a major role in the way Bill chooses to supervise his direct reports. His close relationship with Mike Wayford is built entirely upon a foundation of trust. The same is true for Carrie Chambers, even though they have neither known each other nor worked together for nearly as long as Bill has with Mike. Of the five building principals, Bill has hired only two and has also had the opportunity to hire Carrie in a new district position. So, his philosophy concerning hiring the best has had a chance to be exercised with just three of the seven people that form his core leadership team. Nevertheless, he has built trusting relationships with all seven people, regardless of whether he hired them or not. These seven core members of his team are who do the work of implementing his vision for the district, and carrying out his concepts and beliefs concerning instructional leadership and student academic achievement.

Therefore, trust plays a key role in the process of instructional leadership. Bill's ability to be successful rests in large part on the ability of his core team to enact his vision, mainly without direct supervision or oversight from him. What happens every day in classrooms happens mainly without direct supervision from building principals as well. Teachers spend the majority of their time on their own in a classroom with somewhere between 20 and 30 students. The type of leadership that Bill exhibits by virtue of how he sets a vision and then trusts his leadership team to carry it out extends by virtue of his example to how he wants his principals to function as instructional leaders in their buildings.

Bill is the sole employee of the board of education. He is their only direct report. They are his supervisors, and conduct his annual performance evaluation. Board president Michelle Raines is therefore in a position to see, from a systemic point of view, how Bill works with his leadership team. She comments:

Bill is hands-on, but he does not micro-manage. One of the things that he said from the beginning that is really true is that he would never ask one of his principals or one of his teachers to do anything that he would not do himself. Of course, everyone knows that he can't do it all. What that ends up meaning is that he gives people important work to do, work that he truly would be willing to do himself. Because he trusts them to do important work, to do what is right for kids, they are willing to do it. Knowing you are trusted makes a big difference to people and knowing you are doing important work makes a big difference. Bill gives people structure and a framework and then he steps back and trusts them to do the work. He checks up on people, but it is because he cares about them and the process, not because he doesn't think they would be doing it without his checking in on them.

These sentiments are certainly expressed by Bill. He commented on a number of occasions as well as during his interview sessions that he believes in, "Giving people enough rope to hang themselves, but not letting them fall off the cliff." This exact

expression was repeated by a number of his principals in describing the professional relationship they have with Bill in terms of their autonomy to run their buildings and exercise their leadership and judgment on a daily basis.

Bill strives to develop this trusting attitude first by being a person they can trust and by offering them the support they need in order to carry out the collective vision they have established for the school district. By being a person they can trust, he believes he has set the tone for what he expects across the board in terms of relationships. He thinks that he must model his core beliefs and that when he is successful at doing so he establishes the foundation of trust that will permeate the entire system.

Your role then becomes one of basically one of being the driving force, and you have to instill in them what you really believe is the best course to follow. But you also must rely on them, to a great extent, to carry this out. This is a unique situation here because we are still small enough that we don't have too many layers to go through. There is me, and then basically just my administrative team, which is my principals, my assistant principals, my director of curriculum. Then, you are at the school level, and then you are hands on. My principals are doing the things that we want to see carried out.

There is no essential activity that takes place across the district that does not end up in public. Of course there are many private conversations and issues of personnel are private as a matter of state and federal regulation. However, even private conversations such as Bill's daily lunch sessions with Mike end up being enacted out in public. While the conversations are private in the sense that both of them freely share their thoughts, and that at least some of that sharing remains private, they are almost always focused on school district business and the decisions that come out of those conversations are very much exposed in the public domain.

The curriculum and accreditation committees contain parents and community members. The conversations that are generated by committees go to school staffs or the board of education for public debate prior to enactment. The core data analysis meetings that are at the heart of the accreditation process take place in open meetings with the scores and data being examined from every school posted on the walls around the room. Every building accreditation plan is reviewed by the entire leadership team, with feedback and constructive suggestions given in another public, open meeting.

Even small details ensure collaboration, trust and openness. Bill does “reply all” on every e-mail he sends out to his board of education, and all board members do the same, ensuring that all their communications are open to the whole group. As both Michelle and Bill shared with me they do have private conversations. The nature of these is much the same as the private conversations Bill has each day with Mike: they trust each other to be honest and open and then the decisions that come from these candid conversations are shared in a very public fashion. Thus, private conversations between Bill and Michelle are aired publically via group e-mail very shortly following the conclusion of the conversation.

This sense of trust, collaboration and openness is appreciated by Bill’s board of education and by his leadership team. Michelle Raines remarks,

We see open communication across the board. This is how Bill deals with people in the community this is how he deals with everyone in the district. There are never any secrets, never any guesswork, never any wondering what he is up to, no hidden agendas – he conducts all his business right out in the open. He earns peoples trust.

The whole community, by now, knows this about Bill. He brings everyone together. His team acts like a team, and what they do is built upon collaboration and trust.

James Patterson, the only building administrator to have worked with Bill in both the districts in which Bill has been superintendent, believes that his philosophy and his actions as a leader and an instructional leader have grown and matured through his long relationship with Bill.

I feel deeply influenced by working with Bill. I have learned that leadership is about trust and that the best work we do is when we work together in an environment of trust. Something I believed before I met Bill was that trust needs to be earned but this belief has certainly been reinforced by working with Bill, because it is a belief he shares. Because I have seen him work and I have never seen him do anything that he did not feel was in the best interests of kids, I have learned to trust him. I think a lot of the things I do academically and in terms of leadership, I actually ask myself: "Is this what Bill would want me to do? Is this what Bill would think is the right thing?"

Trust is important but I also respect that he runs the district and I work for him. Because I feel he does what he believes is right for our district, I feel like that is appropriate to have that idea in mind with almost all the things that I do.

With my staff, I communicate openly and trust them to be professional and ethical. I have evolved to this point of view from working with Bill and I want to create a staff that feels the same way about me: That they trust me, they believe in me and they think that I always do what is best for kids.

The elements of his core beliefs in trust, collaboration and transparency are fully integrated into Bill's leadership. They inform the ways in which he thinks, how he acts, and his relationships with all the various people with whom he interacts. Through his consistent actions he has earned the trust of the board of education, his leadership team, the staffs in his schools and the community he serves. Bill builds upon this foundation of trust to fully integrate his core beliefs in collaboration and transparency into all elements of district work.

Analysis of Secondary Themes

In addition to the three primary themes which emerged during my fieldwork and as a result of reflection and my coding process, there were three secondary themes that also emerged. While all of these secondary themes have a strong relationship to the three primary themes they also, in my judgment, deserved further analysis as independent elements of instructional leadership and student academic achievement.

Working with the school board

Bill defines working with the school board as, “Your bread and butter,” and his perceptions have a basis in the literal reality that the superintendent of schools is the sole employee of the board of education. The superintendent is the only employee in the district who is evaluated by a group of people rather than a sole evaluator. As such, a superintendent must keep a majority of the board on his side. This is often jokingly referred to as “superintendent math”: Depending on the size of the board (usually five or seven people) superintendents say that their job depends on their ability to, “Count to three,” (or to four, as the case may be). This reflects perhaps the most basic and fundamental reality of the superintendency: Your ability to lead and to keep your job depends upon the support of a majority of the board of education. Without that majority, no initiative that comes before board review can pass, and if a majority does not vote to give a superintendent a positive evaluation and to renew their contract the superintendent finds themselves out of a job.

Given this structural reality, it is no surprise that Bill devotes a great deal of time, energy, thought and deliberation to maintaining a positive relationship with his board. Because, as he notes, “The change of even one board member in an election changes the

entire makeup of the board,” this process is ongoing and must be begun anew each time there is a board election (which happen every two years, with board members serving four-year terms).

The essential components Bill brings to the table in all his interactions with the board are in complete alignment with his core beliefs, as outlined in the three major themes that emerged from this research: He strives to be a good person and to treat his school board members with respect and dignity; he strives to demonstrate that every decision he makes, and every decision he asks them to make is in the best interests of kids; and he works with his board in an environment of collaboration, trust and transparency.

The board is composed of five members. Bill works with all five on a regular basis, and communicates most extensively with them via e-mail. All board members have an e-mail account, and Bill has these set up as a group. He responds to any inquiry or question sent by one board member to him via “reply all” and they do the same. Thus, if a board member has a question about something that is happening in the district or an item that is on the board agenda and e-mails Bill to get a response to this question, all members of the board will see the question on their e-mail, and because Bill will use “reply all” in his response, every board member will see what he had to say as well.

Their main interactions are public as a result of state law. If there is a quorum (in this case three or more board members) who meets, the meeting must be publically announced 24 hours ahead of time, with the agenda for that meeting contained on the announcement. Two or fewer board members may meet together, or meet with Bill, or any other district employee without such an announcement, but three members of the

board could not just drop by his office for a conversation about something without being in violation of state law.

This communications process is followed for all their regularly scheduled meetings. Because Bill meets with only one or two board members to plan the agenda, such public notice is not required for these planning meetings. Once the agenda is set, it is then written up and posted at the school district offices 24 hours before the meeting is scheduled to begin, because three or more board members will be in attendance at the meeting.

The internal communications that follow the planning meeting are straightforward. Following the meeting during which Bill and Michelle present items for inclusion on the board agenda, they then discuss whatever supporting or supplementary materials might be needed in order to fully inform the members of the board concerning those items that will appear on the agenda. Bill then returns to the school district offices, and with the help of his secretary, Mary, (who also serves as secretary to the board of education) creates the actual agenda and makes copies of the supplemental materials. These materials are then forwarded to all five members of the board to allow them time to review the documents and materials prior to being asked to comment or act upon them during the board meeting. The planning of the board meetings is then essentially public, since whatever is placed upon the agenda, and whatever materials are placed in the packet become public at the board meeting.

All board meetings are open to the public with the exception of those times in which the board, by vote, declares "executive session." Executive sessions are closed to

the public. Executive session is also governed by state law, and can only be called for certain reasons, the most common of which is personnel discussion or action.

Bill's belief in transparency and trust thus has a logical, if regulated expression in the work that the board does. Not regulated however is the manner in which a superintendent or a member of the board chooses to act in private. A superintendent could present a very public and open agenda to the board, but actually be doing something to undermine that agenda in their work with the district. A board member could choose to go along publically with the rest of the board, but be working behind the scenes to stir up trouble, to turn the community against the superintendent, a principal or a coach.

This is where Bill's core values come into play. He earns the trust of his board because he never engages in such duplicitous behavior. They in turn earn his because they support him both in public and in private. This demonstrates the depth of his core beliefs in honesty, transparency and openness, as well as his skill at listening, understanding multiple points of view as well as the personal discipline it takes to give extensive thought to important issues before bringing them to the board or to his staff. Because Bill does all these things, and does them with consistency, he has a relationship with his board that is positive and focused as well as open and transparent. They work together as a team to enact a vision of the district that they formed in collaboration with Bill, each other and many other people in the district and the community.

Curriculum and curriculum alignment, data analysis of student achievement results and professional development

The main thing that Bill saw when he was hired as a new superintendent in Hamilton County District 1 six years ago was that the district was not focused on academic achievement, either in the buildings or as a district. Very little was happening that was moving the district forward and on a majority of the state achievement tests students in the district scored below state averages.

Bill moved very quickly to address these issues. In his first year, he instituted curriculum committees to begin the process of reviewing the curriculum to determine whether or not it was aligned with state standards; whether the materials being used were the best and most recent available; and whether there was curriculum “articulation” or a well structured curriculum sequence that established core knowledge and concepts at each grade and that this knowledge and these concepts then built upon and supported each other as a child moved from kindergarten through 12th grade.

Knowing that teachers are the people who do the daily work with students and that building administrators needed to be the instructional leaders in their buildings, Bill structured the committees to be certain that they were composed of teachers from the building as well as their principal. He also made sure that parents from the school were on the committees so that they could play an active role in the education of their children as well as demonstrate right from the start that under his leadership all important decisions would be made openly and in a collaborative manner.

These committees worked at their buildings and also met as a large group. Bill personally supervised the regular large group meetings. Beginning with the district

reading and writing curriculum, they went systematically through the state standards and evaluated what needed to be taught in order to meet those standards. They then compared what was actually taught to what needed to be taught, and created recommendations for change in those areas where the working curriculum did not match the desired curriculum. Simultaneously they examined the materials that were used to determine if they were the best possible books and supplementary materials in accordance with research in reading and writing.

This process, begun under his leadership in the first year of his superintendency has continued to the present time and has now covered every subject. The only difference between the original work and what happens today is that Carrie Chambers now personally supervises the committee work, though Bill continues to attend some meetings and works extensively behind the scenes in collaboration with Carrie and his building principals on all issues before the committee.

Once the committees complete their work in social studies this year, they will turn once again to reading and writing, and the entire multi-year cycle will begin again.

The second big change that Bill brought to the district was the open and constant analysis of data. As noted by Terry Wilson earlier in this chapter, Bill covered the walls with data at every administrative meeting they had during his first year, clearly establishing the ethic of open and transparent examination of achievement data as a norm with the leadership team. To support this data analysis, he brought on Alpine Achievement, a private company that the district continues to employ to this day. Alpine does the “numbers crunching” through a series of statistical formulas and offers all this data to the district. The analysis is very specific and includes analysis of the individual

performance of every student. Teachers have access to their overall school analysis and that of all the students in their class or grade level, allowing them to make very sophisticate decisions concerning lesson planning and direct, personal intervention for their class and for every student. This too has become a district norm, and is most evidently seen in the open and publically accountable process that produces the annual district accountability report.

Finally, Bill understood that in order to support these changes, which at the time he arrived were big changes for everyone in the district, he would need to provide ongoing professional development for his administrative team and for all the building teaching staffs. In order to successfully enact these major changes and to continue with the ethic of responding to student data by making specific curriculum and instructional changes, all the people involved in the learning process were going to need ongoing training. Bill works hard to be collaborative in this sense as well, getting constant feedback from his team about what is needed at the building level as well as what their professional needs are and providing consistent and high quality professional development to support the entire process.

Mike Wayford is very active in this process too as it requires financial commitment in order to work. Mike consistently allocates a significant proportion of his discretionary budget to professional development, including paying the membership dues for all administrators for their professional association and giving building principals enough money to send every teacher to a professional conference every year. This is all in keeping with Bill's commitment to professional development, and it is something that Mike, by now, knows to build into each year's budget.

Through establishing a focused curriculum process; a continual data analysis process for all administrators and teachers and in providing the support that is required through ongoing professional development Bill enacted his beliefs concerning instructional leadership but also demonstrated his commitment to the best possible education for the students in the district.

Budget and the relationship to student achievement

The majority of the budget in Hamilton County School District 1, as is the case in most school districts, goes to total compensation, meaning employee salaries and the cost of providing benefits packages. While this can vary slightly from year to year, in District 1 it usually runs between 75% to 85% of the total budget of 18.5 million dollars.

Much of the rest of the budget is then consumed by what are typically referred to as “fixed costs” meaning expenses that you know in advance of any given school year you must budget for because you cannot run a school district without them. Examples of fixed costs are heating and utility bills, water bills, gasoline bills for running school buses and other district vehicles, grounds maintenance bills for athletic fields and other school district grounds, supply and copy budgets and food service.

Once the total cost of staff compensation and fixed costs are added together, a remarkably small percentage of the budget remains as truly “discretionary” usually between 5% and 8%. So there is not much room for decision-making when all these annual budget costs have been totaled up.

There are two ways to look at the relationship between the budget and student achievement. One is to say that the vast majority of the budget is already spent on student achievement, given that there are 250 district employees, and that 166 are

teachers. This means that 66% of school district employees are exclusively devoted to student achievement. The number could be said to be quite a bit higher: perhaps one-half of the 75 classified employees (custodians, secretaries, bus drivers, etc.) are classroom aides, and that for the 10 administrative employees, a very larger percentage of their time and energy is devoted to student achievement.

The other way to look at how resources are allocated for student achievement is to say what portion of the discretionary budget beyond fixed expenses is devoted to professional development. The answer to that also varies from year to year, but most years is very significant in District 1.

The most realistic way to analyze the question is to look at both in combination. This is how the equation is analyzed by Mike and Bill as they do their budget projections.

The largest ongoing expense that is incurred as the entire formula is examined is class size. The reason is simple math: when, as stated before, 166 of your 250 total employees are teachers, then determining how large or small class sizes will be is going to make a big difference in how much money you expend on teachers.

While it is not really an accurate indicator of true class size, because many teachers are not classroom teachers (physical education, special education, art, music or language intervention teachers and others are not assigned to a classroom) the simple, basic formula in District 1 would come from dividing the 2,800 students by the 166 certified teachers, meaning there are 16.8 students for every certified staff member.

The actual way to look at class size can only be computed building by building and arrived at by looking at the total student population in the building divided by how many classroom teachers are in the building. This means that the reality on the ground of

class sizes will vary, not only building by building but, grade by grade. For instance, a building may be assigned three first grade and three second grade teachers, but there are 74 students in first grade, meaning class sizes of 25, 25 and 24, while there are 68 students in second grade, meaning class sizes of 23, 23 and 22.

This same problem is encountered at the secondary level, but has a different flavor. There, because you have core classes and elective classes, it is even harder to actually predict what size a class may be. It would not be uncommon for a high school to have a class-size ratio of 25 students per classroom teacher, but find 30 students in a required English class and 15 students in an advanced chemistry class.

Given all these factors, what Bill and Mike do, with the blessing of the board of education, is try to keep class sizes as small as possible. They believe that smaller classes make life more manageable to teachers and offer a better atmosphere for learning. They also strive to follow a formula for the allocation of classroom aides: elementary teachers know that if their class sizes go above 26, they will get an aide to help them.

It is this dedication to providing the smallest possible class sizes that keeps total compensation consuming 80% or more of their annual budget. Were Bill and Mike not to believe in keeping class sizes small, they could reduce the total number of certified and classified staff members who work directly with students and realize considerable savings by doing so. But, they strongly believe that this devotion to small class sizes is best for kids, best for teachers and because it builds moral and contributes to employee stability as well, that the overall picture is clear: this is money spent on student achievement.

While administration staff is a very small percentage of the total staff (2.5%) Bill and Mike did make a decision to expand from nine total administrative staff members to 10, with the addition of a director of curriculum and instruction. In a medium-sized district such as District 1, the addition of a full-time administrator who is exclusively devoted to student achievement is a very significant commitment.

Add in the strong commitment to professional development that comes from the small pool of discretionary funds, and Hamilton County District 1, under the leadership of Bill and Mike, uses the vast majority of available resources to positively impact student achievement.

It is important to note that the budget is strongly overseen by the board of education. Bill gives a detailed budget summary at every school board meeting, and the annual budget is reviewed in its entirety by the board prior to approval. Thus, the philosophy of placing as much of the available budget as possible toward student achievement is a perspective that is shared by the board of education. Once again, the collaborative, open and transparent nature of work in District 1 is shown, as well as the overall commitment to students and their academic achievement.

Thematic Analysis in Light of Relevant Research Literature

In my review of relevant literature I noted that very few studies had been conducted that attempted to closely examine the relationship between the superintendent of schools, instructional leadership and student academic achievement. However, one study in particular focused exclusively on this question: The Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning Center (McREL) released a working paper on the topic in 2006. This paper represented their initial findings in what will become a book on the subject

entitled *Leadership at the Top*. In this meta-analysis, McREL examined 27 quantitative studies conducted since 1970 to study the influence of the superintendent and other district level leaders on school achievement. I would note that of the 27, only 4 were conducted in the period since the passage of NCLB. It is the finding of the McREL study however that superintendents can, if they engage in certain specific behaviors and leadership practices, have a positive influence (a positive correlation of .24) on student achievement (Waters & Marzano, 2006).

The research questions utilized in the study were as follows:

- What is the strength of relationship between leadership at the district level and average student academic achievement in the district?
- What specific district level leadership responsibilities are related to student academic achievement?
- What specific leadership practices are used to fulfill these responsibilities?
- What is the variation in the relationship between district leadership and student achievement? Stated differently, do behaviors associated with strong leadership always have a positive affect on student achievement? (p. 6).

Of the 27 reports examined in the meta-analysis, 14 contained information about the overall district leadership and student achievement. The computed correlation between district leadership and student achievement was .24 (95% confidence interval: .19 to .30). In addition, five district level leadership responsibilities had a statistically significant ($p \leq .05$) correlation with average student achievement. They were:

- A collaborative goal setting process
- Non-negotiable goals for instruction and achievement
- Board alignment with and support of district goals
- Monitoring the goals for achievement and instruction
- Use of resources to support the goals for achievement and instruction (p. 3-4).

A finding that appears contradictory was that “building autonomy” increased student achievement, while “site based management” seemed responsible for a decrease

in student achievement. Waters and Marzano indicate that this is tied to their earlier findings, in that superintendents who establish clear and non-negotiable goals see student achievement rise. Thus, while buildings have autonomy in districts where student achievement rises, they must work within non-negotiable boundaries and board policies: they are not out there on their own, doing whatever they think is best for students (Waters & Marzano, 2006).

I return to this study to examine the five specific attributes in the McRel study that contributed positively to student academic achievement and compare them with the findings that emerged in my study of Bill Johnson and District 1.

A collaborative goal setting process

This is certainly a strong match with the reality of District 1, particularly seen in the open and collaborative process that lead to the annual creation of school accountability plans. These plans are the working documents that create goals for improved achievement and specify the instructional practices that will be utilized to attempt to meet or exceed these goals. The entire process is collaborative, from the initial examination of data, to the creation of draft plans, the finalizing of plans in light of state test scores, and the process of implementation. At every stage of the process there is collaboration, and in some stages of the process this collaboration encompasses the board of education, parents, and community members as well as teachers, principals and district level administrators.

Non-negotiable goals for instruction and achievement

This specific element of superintendent leadership is also evident in District 1. The collaborative accountability plans are the result of detailed analysis of student

academic achievement results, and the actions specified in the plans are equally detailed. In listing exactly who is responsible for each specific action to be taken, in including a timeline for the meeting of each goal, and in reviewing the progress made toward goals at the conclusion of each academic cycle, it is clear that these collaboratively developed plans must be fully implemented in compliance with the specific instructional practices and materials specified in the document.

Board alignment with and support of district goals

Because of the close and transparent working relationship between Bill and his board of education and the trust that has been built between them over the six years of his tenure as superintendent of schools, there is an almost seamless alignment between the board of education and the goals established by the building teams of teachers, parents and administrators.

In addition to the fact that the board is routinely updated through the year concerning the school accreditation plans and the fact that all plans are annually reviewed and approved by the board, the board also holds one meeting each school year at each of the five school sites. I was a witness to two board meetings at school sites, and on both of those occasions, they were shown in great detail the strategies that were in use at that site in order to meet student achievement goals.

At one site, a computerized program for working on math skills was demonstrated for the board of education by students from the school. Beginning with kindergarten and going through 5th grade, one student from each grade came before the board and showed them how the program works in a classroom by demonstrating a short element of the program for the members of the board. The school media center, where the meeting was

held, was packed with parents and community members, who all cheered and applauded as one after another the young students demonstrated the program. It was obvious the board was extremely pleased with the entire display.

At another elementary school, the teachers, with help from Carrie Chambers, had created a “data wall” (actually in this case a data room) which is a technique for keeping constant track of student growth for every child in the building. In a data wall, all students are represented three times (for reading, writing and math) by a sticky note with their name, grade and teacher written on the note. The wall is then a huge chart, with the scoring levels of the state assessment represented on the wall. As students progress through the school year, their progress is represented by moving their respective sticky notes, giving a very powerful graphic representation of where a grade level stands at any given moment in terms of meeting the goals specified in the accreditation plans. The board members were given a presentation, led by teachers, of how the data wall worked, as well as describing how it had changed the dynamics of their collaborative work on teams and as a building team. Once again, it was obvious following this presentation that the board members were very impressed with the daily efforts of teachers in classrooms to improve academic achievement.

It is certainly safe to say that there is strong alignment in District 1 between the members of the board of education and district improvement goals.

Monitoring the goals for achievement and instruction

This happens on many levels in District 1. While perhaps most evident in the constant data analysis that happens at buildings and at the district level regarding the monitoring of the accreditation plans, monitoring also occurs on several other levels.

Carrie Chambers is nearly constantly involved in data gathering and data monitoring, looking closely and in-depth at annual state test scores, the wide variety of other norm-referenced assessment that happens throughout the year and working directly with teachers to examine and analyze student work. The curriculum teams, while more focused on just one specific area of curriculum and assuring it is aligned with state standards are still essential to the meeting of goals: the work on alignment has an impact on student achievement, as was clearly seen in the moving of when math concepts were taught during the year when math scores across the district were low in the same skill set.

What is evident is that all goals are the result of rigorous data analysis and a desire to improve, that the goals and the specific strategies to achieve them were arrived at in collaboration and that monitoring of student progress toward individual goals as well as building and district progress toward accreditation goals is constant and an ongoing component of the improvement process.

Use of resources to support the goals for achievement and instruction

In their choices to keep class sizes as small as possible and to put as many classified aides into classrooms for academic support, Bill Johnson and Mike Wayford place as many of the district resources as possible in the service of student academic achievement. This decision means that the vast majority of the budgetary resources of the district go directly to support those people – teachers and classroom aides – who work with students every day on academic achievement.

In addition, there is the allocation of significant resources toward professional development. This comes in the form of professional development days for teachers, when they do not have students in the building, but are on contract with the district, and

spend the entire day learning and applying what they have learned to lesson planning and unit creation. Teachers and administrators are also encouraged to go to at least one professional conference each year, and money is allocated in the budget to allow every single teacher and administrator the ability to do this.

In addition to economic resource allocation, there is an ethic of spending time with data analysis, team planning, curriculum study, and instructional research. Nearly every administrative meeting has a component of student academic achievement, teacher or administrative professional development as one or more agenda items. The school board is also regularly updated on academic progress, as well as holding meeting in schools to see first-hand exactly what is happening in classrooms and with professional development efforts.

To the degree to which it is possible, financial resources are maximized toward student academic achievement. There is also a strong and continuous focus on data analysis and professional development that permeates the entire district culture from top to bottom.

Thus, when compared to a research study that found five statistically significant relationships between elements of superintendent leadership and student academic achievement, Bill Johnson and Hamilton County District 1 are in very strong alignment with each of these five factors. In addition to alignment with the five factors, the other element of improved academic achievement, "Autonomy at the building level," is also strongly evident in District 1. Bill Johnson steadfastly believes in setting clear goals and then trusting his building principals to enact those goals at the school level.

Student Achievement in Hamilton County District 1

When Bill arrived in District 1, there was very little focus on student academic achievement. He knew he had to make changes, which have been detailed in this analysis and in Chapter Four of this dissertation. The specifics of historic achievement in District 1 are shown in the chart that follows:

Table 1.1

Year	Content	# of grades 3-10– above state average
2002	Reading	1/8
2003	Reading	1/8
2004	Reading	0/8
2005	Reading	1/8
2006	Reading	4/8
2007	Reading	3/8
2008	Reading	3/8

Year	Content	# of grades 3-10– above state average
2002	Writing	2/8
2003	Writing	0/8
2004	Writing	1/8
2005	Writing	3/8
2006	Writing	3/8
2007	Writing	4/8
2008	Writing	4/8

Year	Content	# of grades 3-10– above state average
2002	Math	1/6
2003	Math	0/6
2004	math	0/6
2005	Math	3/8
2006	Math	2/8
2007	Math	0/8
2008	Math	2/8

Year	Content	# of grades– above state average (5,8,10)
2002	Science	0/1
2003	Science	0/1
2004	Science	0/1
2005	Science	0/1
2006	Science	0/3
2007	Science	1/3
2008	Science	0/3

Hamilton County School District 1 Historical Data – Scores Above State Averages

As the chart demonstrates, the district was performing significantly below state averages prior to Bill's arrival. In 2002, one year before he arrived in District 1, the students were at or above state averages in 4 areas. The next two years – his first two in the district, students managed to beat state averages in only one and two areas respectively.

However, in his third year, changes began to take place and students began to score at or above state averages in seven areas in 2005, nine in 2006, eight in 2007 and nine once more in 2008. This also demonstrates the flattening of scores after a strong surge upward that led Bill to believe he needed to hire Carrie Chambers.

Not seen in this chart is how far below state averages students were when Bill arrived. In reading, across the eight tested grades, (third through tenth) the district averaged 8.0 points below the state average in 2002, with sixth grade 16.0 points below and tenth grade 15.0 points below state averages. By 2008, the district averaged just 0.875 points below the state averages across the tested grades, the lowest score coming in tenth grade, where students were 8.0 points below the state.

In writing, in 2002, students averaged 7.5 points below the state across all tested grades. Sixth grade was 17.0 points and tenth grade 16.0 points below the state average. By 2008, students across the district exceeded the state averages by 1.5 points across all

tested grades, with the lowest score in ninth grade, where students scored 7.0 points below.

(Math was not tested across all grades until 2005, and so does not provide as valid a comparison).

These statistics demonstrate that there was a lot of catching up to do when Bill arrived. It was not just a matter of meeting or exceeding state scores, it was a matter of doing some serious catching up before the students were even within striking range of state averages. Bill accomplished this in his first three years. Then, believing that there was still room for improvement but that he was no longer able to devote the proper time to the effort, he hired Carrie Chambers as a full-time instructional and curriculum director.

Conclusions

Dr. Bill Johnson is a person of strong core beliefs. These beliefs are a powerful element of his professional behavior because they define who he is as a person. He strives, each day to live the “Golden Rule” and “Treat others as he would be treated.” He believes in being a role model, and “Walking the walk” by living his ethical beliefs and acting in accordance to his devotion to honesty, openness and a deeply caring attitude for students, their families and the people who work for him. Bill Johnson models professional discipline, giving many hours of thought to important issues, seeking the help and guidance of people with whom he has built strong and trusting relationships, and striving to see issues from all sides before making a decision. He works through his ethical and honest conduct to earn the trust of the people he serves, and in turn, extends his trust to them, offering them many collaborative opportunities to work in partnership

with him to shape the destiny of the school district. He maintains open and fully transparent relationships with his board of education, his leadership team, the community and the student for whom he holds responsibility. Bill is an attentive listener, who strives to incorporate what he learns from other people into his own repertoire of leadership skills. He is a life-long learner, who strives to incorporate research and life wisdom into his daily life, and tries his best, "Not to make the same mistake twice."

Perhaps most importantly, he cares for people on a personal level, reaching out to them in times of personal struggle and need, offering support and guidance when people are experiencing tough times in their life outside of school.

It is the central finding of this case study that the personal and the professional are inseparable for Bill Johnson. His core beliefs are what inform his actions as superintendent of schools. His leadership and his instructional leadership are completely intertwined with these core beliefs. At the heart of his desire to improve the lives of the 2,800 students that parents and the community have entrusted to his care is the fact that he loves them and cares for them, and is willing to do all he can to create educational opportunities for them in Hamilton County School District 1.

The findings of this case study suggest that these core beliefs are the foundation upon which all other leadership rests for Bill Johnson. It is because of the trust people have in Bill and the high esteem in which they hold him and his judgment that they are willing to follow his leadership. He has proven through his consistent actions that he is an intelligent and well-read instructional leader: the changes he brought to the district created positive changes in academic achievement.

He also “Walked the walk,” of his beliefs about leadership in turning over a great deal of the day-to-day responsibilities of instructional leadership when he felt he had taken the district as far as he could and that more time, attention and expertise was needed to further improve student academic achievement. In hiring a person in Carrie Chambers whom he felt was more knowledgeable than himself for the job of instructional leadership, he was truly “Putting kids first” and his own ego a distant second.

Finally, Bill Johnson has improved instructional practice, elevated professional development and overseen a strong, positive change in student achievement without sacrificing his core beliefs about creating a school environment that is warm, welcoming and supportive to students and staff alike. Despite his strong negative feelings about No Child Left Behind, he has proven that a school district can comply with the terms of the federal legislation while maintaining the deeply humanistic and personalized atmosphere of caring and support that is so prized by Bill Johnson, his school board and the district staff who operate under his leadership.

Suggestions For Further Research

As noted in my review of relevant research, there are few case studies that have as their purpose the examination of the relationship between instructional leadership on the part of the superintendent of schools and student academic achievement.

Further case studies that explore superintendents in a variety of settings from large urban and suburban districts to small, isolated rural districts would further educational understanding of how an individual superintendent of schools exercises instructional leadership to attempt to have a positive effect on student academic achievement.

It would be particularly helpful to see in what ways the personal and leadership styles of these superintendents, as well as the differences in situations that they face, might compare to the leadership and personal style of Dr. Bill Johnson.

Additional survey work of superintendents throughout the country would also be helpful research. Examining the pressures of time and responsibility in a fashion similar to the 2007 Bresdeson and Kose research of mid-western superintendents would continue to provide better information on the specific ways in which superintendents attempt to balance their complex lives.

Finally I believe that very interesting research could be done in either the quantitative or qualitative methodologies that explore the personal cost to the lives of superintendents caused by their long hours, their need to be singularly committed to their work and the highly public demands of their position.

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