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All Odds Against Them

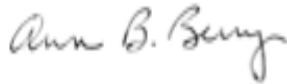
AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Bruce C. Labs for the degree of Doctor of Education in Learning, Leadership &

Community presented May, 2019

Title: All Odds Against Them: The Superintendent's Leadership in Rapid and Sustained System Improvement in Small, Rural, Impoverished, School Districts

Abstract approved:



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This research is an examination of the instructional leadership practices of effective rural superintendents who oversee school districts in small, rural school districts in the most northern New England states of Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont. The study looked at the successful leadership practices of school district superintendents who have maintained a path of growth and improvement in districts that were small, rural and impoverished, however, they have overcome these limiting factors to show improvement in student achievement and instruction. The purpose of this study was to identify these successful leadership practices and to compare them to those identified in the meta-analysis done by Marzano and Waters in 2009. It is important to discover why these

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districts improved and identify factors that might account for their success as compared to other districts with similar demographics. There is value in studying the leadership in schools that have needed improvement and become successful and sustained their turnaround over time. Such information will provide a model school leaders can learn from and replicate in their own efforts in future school reform.

A multiple case study approach utilized several steps to gather information from four cases selected using the model proposed in a case study done by Masumoto and Brown-Welty in 2009. This current study employed a multiple case study design using interviews with four superintendents, staff members (i.e., teachers and administrators and other educational professionals) at both the building level and at the district level during site visits to each school selected. Interviews were used as primary source data and were compared with documents related to the school district's work. Results indicate that the factors identified in prior research related to effective district leadership, collaborative goal setting, establishment of nonnegotiable goals for achievement and instruction, creation of school board alignment and support of goals, and the allocation of resources to support the goals for achievement and instruction were present in these successful turnaround rural districts (Marzano & Waters, 2009). In addition, the research identified two new factors, high expectations and climate and culture that appeared to play an important role in the improvement of the districts with increased student achievement despite their challenging demographics. Recommendations as a result of these findings for rural district leaders are discussed.

All Odds Against Them

All Odds Against Them: The Superintendent's Leadership in Rapid and Sustained
System Improvement in Small, Rural, Impoverished, School Districts

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All Odds Against Them

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I understand that my dissertation will become part of the permanent collection of the Plymouth State University, Lamson Learning Commons. My signature below authorizes release of my dissertation to any reader upon request.

Bruce C. Labs

All Odds Against Them

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I am extremely grateful, to the many people who supported me and encouraged me through this work. I began this journey in the end of my career and to this day I do not know how, with my busy schedule as a practicing superintendent in a difficult and very demanding school district in Vermont involved in a merger of two SUs an eight district mergers, I have managed to finish. I don't think that I can possibly acknowledge all of the people who have been supportive to me in this effort and have allowed me the time and energy to complete this work.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The accountability movement over the last fifty years has had a meaningful effect on leadership in the United States as well as internationally. “The high expectation of each country’s educational provision places enormous responsibility on those charged with leading and managing schools. Evidence suggests that in trying to meet these expectations school leaders are taking on more and more roles” (Mulford, 2005, p. 140). Since the advent of NCLB in 2002 building leaders have experienced higher demands in all aspects of their jobs (Gosnell-Lamb, O’Reilly, & Matt, 2013). One could argue that meeting the demands in the administration of all of the aspects of NCLB takes good management skills and their work is being evaluated by the results of the test (Gosnell-Lamb et al., 2013).

Problem Statement

As an outcome of all of these imposed changes by the federal government, the forced accountability on local schools and local districts, the millions upon millions of dollars spent to implement mandated improvements, some schools have shown better outcomes in terms of increased student achievement and some have not (Harrington, 2011; Lips, 2007). While some schools have benefited from the money spent and the accountably demanded by this new approach to educational policy, it is important to understand the pressure these changes have imposed on leadership.

Purpose of the Proposed Research

It is important to realize how the change to demanded accountability has played out over the thirteen years of the law for the schools that have turned around and shown improved outcomes. In looking at these school districts that have gotten better over time, it is important to realize that rural districts often have more limited resources to call upon to initiate and sustain such a change. Every school is different, therefore, it is important to find out why schools that are rural, isolated, and impoverished areas have improved. There is value in studying the leadership in schools that have needed improvement and become successful and sustained their turnaround. Such information will provide a model school leaders can learn from and replicate in their own efforts in future school reform.

Historical Background for the Accountability Movement

The rise of the school accountability movement in the United States can be traced back fifty years ago to the early confrontations in the 1960s between community groups lead by parents who wanted to have a greater voice and a more significant role in the curriculum that was being taught to their children and in the selection of the teachers teaching that curriculum (Buder, 1988). There is a good deal of literature documenting that this movement to accountability was not only something that took place in the United States, but also spread into Great Britain in the 1980s (Archer, 2006; Gipps 2003;"National Testing of Pupils in England, Wales and Northern Ireland," 2008; Priestland 2013). School reform is a persistent topic garnering national attention from the 1960s to today. Current improvement efforts such as NCLB have been shaped by this history. NCLB, in 2001, was groundbreaking in many ways because it ushered in, for the first time, test based accountability. The federal government dictated to districts and

building leadership that all students must make sustained and incremental improvement in reading and math or each school would face serious structural repercussions. This was a change from the way it had been before in the United States. In the past, the federal government left it up to the state and local government to make changes as they saw fit. Now the federal government could insist that each school organization perform to a standard of incremental improved test scores over time or face changes. This could mean structural changes to each local school organization and leadership within district, and forced curriculum changes on a timeline. Most of all, for the first time, this law launched an effort by the federal government to force schools to change and, in so doing, inserted themselves in having a responsibility, power, authority, and a voice in how the local schools are run (Spring, 2008).

This new role in accountability played by the federal government has changed the leadership roles of both building and district leadership, as leaders now must deal with the federal government in a new position of authority. The law, as it was written, demands continued improvement of all students according to imposed state benchmarks and a timetable that sets the bar higher and higher for each annual testing cycle (Jerald, 2003). These imposed mandates have changed the demands and the focus of each school. The mandates have forced schools to quickly come up with answers or a plan or face the consequences. These consequences vary from district to district and school to school. Penalties could involve imposed training, a forced change in building leadership, structural overhauls of programs, and or allowing students to attend schools that show better test outcomes (Gosnell-Lamb, O'Reilly, & Matt, 2013). These changes have also

left parents demanding improvements and local school boards looking for answers from their leaders.

The Effect of the Accountability Movement on School Leadership

On the other hand, leaders build relationships with students and teachers to promote student success. However, those administrators who function as good managers usually work towards a goal of efficiency and doing their jobs the right way without necessarily building relationships with students or coworkers. One study done in 2013, has shown that building leaders spent more time being instructional leaders in the early years of NCLB (i.e., 2002). The study maintains that their time has been used since 2011 managing and accomplishing the Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) and all of the other tasks associated with managing the test (Gosnell-Lamb et al., 2013). The finding of this research suggests that the role of the building instructional leader has diminished since the advent of accountability in schools in the United States.

The Superintendent As Instructional Leader

The superintendent's role as an instructional leader, especially in the era of accountability and NCLB is an important part of the job to discuss. One of the most important tasks for a superintendent to figure out how to accomplish is their role as instructional leader for a system. It is especially important that superintendents understand how to prioritize their role of instructional leadership. At the same time, they need to connect current research to student learning so that staff can apply best practices in assessment strategies (Petersen & Barnett, 2005).

In 1993, The American School Board Association Commission on Standards initiated standards for the superintendent position. The standards covered a range of

topics including leadership and district culture, organizational management and values, and ethics of school leadership. The authors of these standards included instructional management as one of the topics for focus (Petersen & Barnett, 2005). Although the topic is thought to be vital to the job, some believe that the work that the school superintendent does is so fragmented and immersed in politics and conflict that instructional leadership is the goal that can never be accomplished (Petersen & Barnett, 2005). Those superintendents of rural school districts in high poverty areas who are working to deal with the recent movement toward greater accountability, “quickly learned that little quantitative educational research has been published about rural poverty. This research driving school reform often draws exclusively from urban populations” (Tine, 2016, p. 38). This means that rural administrators have to apply rules that were made for urban school systems, full of directed interventions that were not designed to fit rural schools (Tine, 2016). The effect is that the rules are cumbersome and burdensome especially on small rural systems. The research shows that the lack of funding for mandates legislated by NCLB, a demand for accountability, poor school performance and a public dissatisfaction of public schools, have added to the considerable stress experienced by administrators (Hawk & Martin, 2011).

In order to better understand the influence of the superintendent on turning around student achievement for a district, the following question arises: What are the leadership qualities of effective superintendents who are in charge of rural districts with rapidly improving student achievement scores and a positive school culture, despite challenging district demographics (e.g., low social economic status of district families, high incidence of single parenting etc.)?

Turnaround Schools Defined

When the NCLB was signed into law in 2002, districts and schools were labeled as failing if they failed to make AYP to improve their performance. These identified schools faced an increasing set of pressures, to make corrective actions to replace each school's leadership as a result or to restructure the school itself.

In August 2009 the Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, announced that the federal government was making available 3.5 billion in funding for the country's lowest performing schools (Zavadsky, 2012). This announcement would make available an unprecedented amount of resources for the purpose of increasing graduation rates, reducing dropout rates and improving teacher quality for the students they serve (Zavadsky, 2012). On March 1, 2010, President Obama's administration appropriation funds, in the form of grants aimed at improving struggling schools in the biggest and most difficult areas like Los Angeles and Chicago (Parsons, 2010). In order to qualify for the money the schools must have state test scores in the bottom 5% or high school graduation rate of 60% percent or lower (Parsons, 2010). The money, made available, targeted mostly very poor inner city schools in order to improve instruction and teacher effectiveness (Parsons, 2010).

These investments hoped to try to drive changes in state and district level policy by offering these massive sums of money. In at least nine states there were changes in legislation to link teachers' evaluation to student achievement in an attempt to connect student improvement to teacher instructional performance (Kutash et al., 2010).

Turnaround schools were those schools that overcame poverty, poor attendance, high

dropout rates, and poor student instruction. These were the schools that improved beyond all expectation and sustained the schools' improvement pattern dramatically over time.

The Use of Data as a Leadership Strategy to Improve Instruction

In some cases there must be drastic measures employed to try to fix a school system with a history of having a very poor record of effectiveness over a period of time. The use of data can help to inform the need for change and it can be used to lead the change as a tool to inform decision-making. During the NCLB era the student testing that was being done was very limited for the type and the amount of information it could provide. However, it was being used to draw a wide range of inferences. Some of these inferences were appropriate and some, perhaps not (Conley, 2014). The ones that were not appropriate were the inferences made about the efficacy of the schools that these students attended (Conley, 2014). Having data in schools is not something new. Schools have had enrollment data, test data, budget and financial data for many years (Venables, 2014). With the mandate of No Child Left Behind the use and reliance on data and decision-making using data has gone to a new level. Along with having the right leadership in the school and aligning the curriculum there must also be a way that programs are monitored (Zavadsky, 2012). It is important for school leaders to collect the right data using appropriate systems and then make sure there are data teams in each building to make changes in the instructional approaches based on the reflections of the data that is being collected. There must be a culture constructed to make the data useful and considered when making decisions (Zavadsky, 2012). There should be a variety of data collected on both the students and the school (*Using data to improve schools*, 2002). Especially in these days of tight budgets and limited resources, there is an ever-increasing

need to look at accumulated data information to make informed decisions (Venables, 2014).

The Relationship of Turnaround Schools and the Role of District Leadership

The use of data by school leaders as a tool for the improvement of student achievement is a powerful method to be applied when turning around a school or school district. The process of contemplation and strategic thinking about how to begin a turnaround process can be first approached by careful considerations and a formal assessment of the current conditions that exist within the school. Data should be gathered that reflects the current condition of student learning as a way of thinking strategically and realistically about a school's current condition. A decision has to be made about what is important to work on, and more importantly, a prioritized list of what projects and reforms should be undertaken. This is foundational to the success of reform and must be recognized as vital to the work while other projects might have to be addressed in the future and can wait (Szachowicz, 2013). There is a very close relationship between academic achievement and the elements of instructional resources, teacher quality, funding for programming, and the existence of poverty in a system and in a community (Clayton, 2011). All of these things must be kept in consideration when getting started and figuring out what is important to begin work on.

The role of the superintendent, as district leader, is a different role than those of the building administrators. The role of the superintendent as district leader and as instructional leader often includes being involved in staff selection and the recruitment of quality professionals to staff positions to serve populations of children. These roles of selection and recruitment can be seen as managerial tasks but actually are as vital to the

organization in another way. They are important in selecting the next generation of dynamic talent to improve instructional programming (Hoyle et al., 2005). It is very important that the district leadership be able to create and shape an environment that can identify the areas that must be addressed and that can only be done by looking at objective student data. This is a shift from the past practice of using the textbook in order to teach content and coverage of the curriculum to that of a system that identifies the instructional needs of students. This is an important change in thinking and an important distinction to make when changing the approach to a school's turnaround efforts (David & Talbert, 2012).

Constant Factors of Effectiveness in Turnaround Schools

School improvement does not happen in a vacuum and there are many elements that must come into play for a school to be able to turnaround. There has to be proof that students need to improve in an area in order for it to happen and for the staff to take notice and commit to doing something about it. The staff has to take ownership of student performance for something to change (Szachowicz, 2013). In the wake of NCLB there are still many underperforming schools and many students in many schools who are still struggling (Zavadsky, 2012). There are several important elements that have to be considered in order for a school to have success at having a sustained effective turnaround effort. There must be clarity around the area of teaching and learning that needs to be focused and improved. There must be a teaching staff with the expertise and skills to deliver instruction with consistency and fidelity using many different methods in order for staff to make the content compelling (Zavadsky, 2012). The instruction has to be monitored in order to be effective using data (Szachowicz, 2013). "What gets

monitored gets done (Szachowicz, 2013, p. 45)!” Unless the work by teachers in building students’ fundamental skills, during the literacy and numeracy remediation sessions can be done with fidelity many students will get shortchanged (Szachowicz, 2013). The reality is that while one teacher is strong in instruction of one concept or one skill area others are weaker and must be held to a level of accountability. Hiring new staff with background of being able to teach skills to students is also very important. Monitoring instruction across a school and perhaps across a district is very difficult, particularly if the effort is across a larger multi-location system involving several schools (Hess, 1999). However, in the places where district efforts have been successful it can be attributed to sticking to the plan for years with meaningful returns becoming evident after a significant amount of effort over time.

Leading in Rural Districts

Of the approximately 100,000 schools in the United States, one third of them are considered rural (National Association of State Boards of Education, 2016). Over 33,000 rural schools in the United States enroll almost 12 million students in them (National Association of State Boards of Education, 2016). Leading as an administrator in a rural districts has unique challenges that are much different than leading in an urban or suburban environment (Surface & Theobald, 2014).

It’s been documented that there are many significant challenges that are evident when looking at rural districts and their schools. According to the National Association of State Boards of Education (2016) there are a high percentage of children living in poverty, especially for those children who are minorities. There is often an insufficient amount of funding to establish and maintain programing for rural students. Schools in

rural areas have a difficult time recruiting and retaining teachers. Technology, especially access to broadband, is usually lacking and uneven. The reality of rural communities and the schools within them is that they are often isolated from one another. This isolation among rural communities makes collaboration between schools in rural communities very difficult.

Literature on Rural Leadership

Despite the prevalence of rural districts in the United States, there has been very little work done to study the effectiveness of the leadership in rural schools (Barley & Beesley, 2007). There have been very few research studies done in rural schools investigating the effectiveness of district or building leadership and school turnaround. This is especially true for schools that were high needs that have become high performing schools (i.e. beat the odds schools) and those that have not made a significant turnaround that are high-needs and continue to be low-performing (Barley & Beesley, 2007). Furthermore, there are few studies within the research literature about district leadership practices in rural, high needs, high performing schools. Little has been done to uncover the inner working of school leadership within rural districts whose leaders have been able to turn around student academic performance while at the same time, fulfilling daily roles and responsibilities of the day to day business of a school district. The research is even scarcer as it relates to the leadership in school districts that are rural and in communities with high poverty, high dropout rates and scarce resources to support budgets.

Summary

Given the themes identified in the literature on effective leadership in turnaround schools and the lack of literature done on rural schools several overarching questions arise: Why, does this turnaround happen in rural districts? How does it work now in the ways that are more effective than before? How do the educational leaders lead the change?

To answer these questions the researcher identified districts with the following inclusion criteria: (a) Smarter Balanced Assessment data that indicated rapidly improving and sustained student achievement scores (i.e., reading and math) obtained in the past 14 years since the No Child Left Behind became law; (b) challenging district demographics (e.g., low SES of families, high percent free and reduced lunch, (c) a superintendent who was in a leadership role at the time preceding and during the achievement turnaround (d) the district was located in a rural region of Maine, New Hampshire, or Vermont.

To guide the research three research questions were identified.

- What are the qualities of effective leadership (i.e., superintendents) for rural districts in Maine, NH, and VT who have rising and sustained student achievement despite challenging district demographics?
- Are there any common characteristics between these educational leaders?
- What are the perceptions of principals and teachers of important leadership qualities and school culture in these improved schools?

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The rise of the school accountability in the United States can be traced back fifty years ago to the early confrontations in the 1960s between community groups lead by parents who wanted to have a greater voice and more significant role in the curriculum that was being taught to their children and in the selection of the teachers teaching that curriculum (Buder, 1988). Two incidents took place in New York City schools, one in 1966 at the Harlem Intermediate School 201 and the other in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville section of Brooklyn in 1968 (Goldberg, 1966-67; Podair, 2002). The United Federation of Teachers in opposition to decentralization and local community control initiated a teachers' strike that lasted almost 2 months in 1968. There is a good deal of literature documenting that this movement to accountability was not only something that took place in the United States, but also spread into Great Britain in the 1980s; (Archer, 2006; Gipps, 2003; "National Testing of Pupils in England, Wales and Northern Ireland," 2008; Priestland 2013). School reform is a persistent topic garnering national attention from the 1960s to today. Current improvement efforts have been shaped by this history. This review seeks to chronicle the events leading up to the current educational movements, the pressure that these changes place on school administrators. It will also document the research that has been done on the type of leadership needed to make such school reform successful.

The 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was groundbreaking in many ways because it ushered in, for the first time, test based accountability. The federal government dictated to districts and building leadership that all students must make sustained and

incremental improvement in reading and math or each school would face serious structural repercussions. This was a change from the way it had been before in the United States. In the past, the federal government left it up to the state and local government to make changes as they saw fit. Now the federal government could insist that each school organization perform to a standard of incremental improved test scores over time or face changes. This could mean structural changes to each local school organization and leadership within district, and forced curriculum changes on a timeline. Most of all for the first time, this law launched an effort by the federal government to force schools to change and, in so doing, inserted themselves in having a responsibility, power, authority, and a voice in how the local schools are run (Spring, 2008).

This new role in accountability played by the federal government has changed the leadership roles of both building and district leadership, as leaders now must deal with the federal government in order to obtain the much needed funds to support districts with ever-growing student needs. The law, as it was written, demands continued improvement of all students according to imposed state benchmarks and a timetable that sets the bar higher and higher for each annual testing cycle (Jerald, 2003). These imposed mandates have changed the demands and the focus of each school and forced schools to quickly come up with answers or a plan or face the consequences. These consequences vary from district to district and school to school. Penalties could involve imposed training, a forced change in building leadership, structural overhauls of programs, and or allowing students to attend schools that show better test outcomes (Gosnell-Lamb, et al., 2013). These changes have also left parents demanding greater transparency, meaningful

improvements while local school boards pushed for answers and defensible strategies from their leaders.

As an outcome of all of these imposed changes by the federal government, the forced accountability on local schools and local districts, the millions upon millions of dollars spent to implement mandated improvements, some schools have shown better outcomes in terms of increased student achievement and some have not (Harrington, 2011; Lips, 2007). While some schools have benefited from the money spent and the accountably demanded by this new approach to educational policy, it is important to understand the pressure these changes have imposed on leadership. It is important to realize how the change to demanded accountability has played out over the thirteen years of the law for the schools that have turned around and shown improved outcomes. It is important to find out why they improved. There is value in studying the leadership in schools that have needed improvement and become successful and sustained their turnaround. Such information will provide a model school leaders can learn from and replicate in their own efforts in future school reform.

Historical Background of No Child Left Behind

In the early 19th century each state in the U.S. began funding the state-chartered and tax supported school districts and elected boards to act as trustees to oversee schools in each local district. The purpose of this elected board was to ensure that students who attended public school were housed, taught, and had materials to achieve the goals of the community (Cuban, 2004). As the population increased in each state selectmen separated general town governance from school governance in an effort to be more efficient and more effective (Land, 2002). With industrialization, especially in New England, there

was rapid growth in cities in the northeast part of the country. Boards found their responsibility of oversight increasingly difficult as the number of students and schools increased (Cuban, 2004). In Boston, the elected school committee for 7,000 students in 19 schools began submitting questions so that oral examinations could be conducted to make sure students in all subjects studied were held accountable (Cuban, 2004). This was a way of checking to make sure that teachers were teaching, students were learning, and the money was being spent wisely and was adequate for the care and benefit of students to promote education (Cuban, 2004). The Massachusetts system of changing and making separate school committees for education began to spread to other regions of the county. From the mid 1800s to the 1900s as the use of local boards grew, their work was focused on oversight and managing education (Land, 2002). School board members in the urban areas were delegates elected from wards (or neighborhoods). The first centralized school boards were modeled after corporate boards and mainly dealt with policy and didn't get into the day to day leadership of running the school. Even though the U.S. has grown over the last 150 years in population and complexity since these school boards were first created their role and responsibility has really not changed. In their purest form when they were first formed, they are supposed to hire and help direct leadership for schools and to develop policy to guide and direct the operations of the schools.

The Community Control Movement in New York City

The leaders of the 1960's community control movement in New York City wanted first to gain control of their schools so that they could have a say in who was teaching their children and also what was being taught to their children (Spring, 2008). Community leaders in New York wanted to assume a greater role in the leadership of

their community schools specifically curriculum and instruction. Community control, however, threatened the power of unions, educators, and school boards. At the same time that this conflict over community or school control and authority was being discussed in New York City there was another leadership philosophy for how to run schools being practiced in other parts of the country. This other philosophy held that it was important to have professional educators or “experts” run the schools. In the early seventies, Leon Lessinger, in his writing, promoted that accountability is a mixture of education and business. In both there is a need to get things done showing performance as an outcome (Lessinger, 1970). Lessinger promoted a philosophy that conflicted with the community control because Lessinger outlined the need to have highly trained experts in control and overseeing and directing the educational system (Spring, 2008). He likened education to a medical professional model where highly trained staff is directing the work. In his model Lessinger, believed that the schools should also be run like a business, making difficult decisions to achieve efficiencies. On the other hand, community control movement was a democratic movement that threatened to take the power and control away from the experts. These communities felt it was necessary to push against what they called racist teachings in the schools of these neighborhoods. It derived its power from parents and community utilizing sit-ins, walkouts, picket lines, and other forms of civil disobedience. These actions demonstrated community unity of purpose and the ability to apply political pressure to bring about political changes (Spring, 2008).

Accountability in England and Ireland in the 70’s, and 80’s

The United States was not the only place in the world that accountability efforts were taking place and discussions and efforts about how to obtain better student

outcomes were taking place. A similar movement to what had taken place a decade before in Harlem and in Brooklyn in New York City in the 60's, was also spreading in England in the 1970s (Wilby, 2013). The same efforts to lessen the power, authority, and influence of the administration in schools by community pressure groups resulted in the rise of teachers' unions, and the local educational authorities. There was an alternative emphasis being expressed in England that asserted the importance of the interests of parents and children by community groups.

In his book, *Every Kid a Winner*, Leon Lessinger talks about the concept that all children can succeed if they have "adequate technology of instruction we can lead them toward mastery and a certified sense of accomplishment" (Lessinger, 1970, p. 37). These lofty goals are similar to the goals set in No Child Left Behind (The United States Department of Education, 2002). Lessinger talks about, "the entire system setting goals and holding others accountable for results" (Lessinger, 1970, p. 135). This change is similar to the realities that No Child Left Behind presented on school systems nationwide when it was created in 2003. The new law demanded, for the first time, accountability from the system for all children and orchestrated consequences for schools where goals and benchmarks were not achieved.

In 1972 in Europe, Ireland introduced national assessment in reading for the first time. This new development set off conversations about standards for reading. (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency [EACEA P9 Eurydice], 2009). In 1978 the Waddell Report was released in England. This report, for the first time proposed a system of examinations for students aged sixteen or older when they exited the school system (Waddell, 1978). Margaret Thatcher became England's Prime Minister in 1979

after having served as Education Secretary for four years before. She favored a more comprehensive and accountability within the school system putting the parents in a new role of being customers (Wilby, 2013). In December of 1987 a comprehensive study on assessment and testing was introduced, chaired by Professor P.J. Black, known as the Black Report. It was an attempt to develop performance criteria and attainment targets for students. The report, for the first time, discussed the development of a national curriculum for English schools. The Black Report promoted clear objectives and a way of assessing those objectives. It also created a common language to communicate strengths and weaknesses to pupils, parents, and teachers about each student's level of achievement (Black, 1987).

In 1988 The Education Reform Act was introduced in England. This law expanded national assessment across grade levels over the years following its introduction. The goal was to promote criteria referenced, performance testing for all students. These were published for student's ages 7, 11 and 14 year old annually for the subject areas of English, math and science. The Education Reform Act maintained exit examination for students at age 16 (Gipps, 2003).

Assessments have been used, "to assess student understanding, inform instruction and identify students for academic advancement. However, in the latter half of the 20th century signified a shift in the type of test administered, illustrated by a sharp rise in the use of large-scale standardized tests" (Smith, 2014, p. 3). Testing was also being expanded in many of the industrialized countries from 1974 to 1999. Of the twenty-one industrialized countries in the world 18 of them had moved to some form of standardized testing by 1999 (Phelps, 2000). "Comparing statistics on the addition or deletion of

large-scale external test in 31 countries and provinces from 1974-1999 reveals a clear trend toward adding, not dropping, testing programs”(Phelps, 2000, p. 19).

The ESEA Authorization 1965 to 2002

Our nation’s political leaders realized that we needed to move toward a greater emphasis on educational programs and took steps to address the need in a comprehensive way. The Gardner Commission was formed in 1964 by President Lyndon Johnson. It was a commission on education that took its name from the chair John W. Gardner, the current president of the Carnegie Corporation. President Johnson orchestrated his famous War on Poverty and he wanted to link spending on federal education to the funding programs for the poor and most needy. This spending was to be given out in categories for low-income children (Thomas & Brady, 2005). In 1965 the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) was passed. The law is formally known as Public Law 89-10 and created the Title One program (Boyle & Lee, 2015). With it, for the first time one billion dollars in federal aid went to mostly high poverty districts around the country (Thomas & Brady, 2005). While Title One funds were supposed to be directed to high poverty there was a debate about whether or not the money should also help special needs and poor performing students as well. The ESEA of 1965 used the terms of “economically disadvantaged” and “educationally deprived” to describe the students who would be served by this law (Boyle & Lee, 2015).

After the Russians launched Sputnik in 1957 there was a wide spread concern in the United States that the country was falling behind. However, there was no real way to evaluate this concern. “That event was really a catalyzing event in American consciousness”(Boyle, 1997, p. 1) All schools and school systems were in control of their

own curriculum. The American College Testing Program (ACT) and the College Entrance Examination Board (CEEB) had just started to test students planning on attending colleges and as a result were only taken by a small group of select students (Beaton., Rogers, A. M., Hanly, M. B., Kolstad, A., Rust, K. F., Sikali, E., and Jia, Y. 2011). The National Defense Education Act of 1958 was created as a way of keeping up a competitive advantage in science. There was a wide spread feeling at that time that the United States was not producing enough scientists for the nation's and worlds research and development in the field. The assessment, as it was constructed, required three days of seat time for students to take it (Beaton et al., 2011). Testing has been a standard for a long time to assess what students know and are able to do. Tests have also been used as a means to help teachers understand and select concepts that need to be taught next when students are ready to move to the next level of any curriculum concept. Testing has served to identify students with superior grasp of concepts of the curriculum (Smith, 2014). Testing practice has continued to evolve as the country has debated the best ways to assess how students' ability and skills can be measured.

The Implication of ESEA Reauthorization 2002 to Present

As an outcome of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, President Johnson formed the Office of Education. This new office was to be a part of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Its purpose was to develop a report on the Equality of Education Opportunity. The report was to be delivered on July 1, 1966. Testing began using the Equality of Educational Opportunity Survey (EEOS). It was the intention of the Office of Education to test a million students in grades 1,3,6,9, and 12 in the fall of 1965 (Beaton et al., 2011). Students were given as many as ten achievement and aptitude tests, depending

on the grade level tested. The testing required a full day of student time. The report that was the outcome of this testing was known as the Coleman Report, named after its principal author. The report was formally called the Equality and Educational Opportunity Study of 1966 (Beaton et al., 2011).

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) was the attempt at testing with a national sample. The effort fell short of the desired results the Office of Education had intended as only about 65% of the intended students were tested. There was resistance in some states and an expressed unwillingness to participate. In other schools there were students who did not participate for various reasons (Beaton et al., 2011). However, there were fairly important steps taken in this initial effort to test on such a wide spread scope and scale (Beaton et al., 2011). This NAEP test took some very important beginning steps in national testing efforts. The test in this first application allowed for regional reporting for student African American and Caucasian students. It provided national reporting of Hispanic, Native American, Asian, and Other students. This was a multiple-choice test, accompanied questionnaires required to be filled out by the principal, teacher, and student. The questionnaires, when filled out by the study participants, set up opportunities for the correlations of student achievement and race on a national scale (Beaton et al., 2011). The first NAEP tests were given in the subject areas of citizenship, science and in writing. Students were tested by age, not by grade level, and included seventeen year olds who were in school in the spring of 1969 (Beaton et al., 2011). The NAEP testing became known as the nation's report card because it was at the time the only assessment that was taken nationally by a cross section of students (George W. Bush Institute, 02-05-2015).

The accountability movement continued during the early seventies when more and more states and local communities were forced to publish their achievement scores. In many schools, students were required to take an ever-increasing number of assessments to meet these demands. Along with the increase numbers of assessments for students, teachers had to incorporate an increased emphasis on behavioral objects within their lesson planning (Spring, 2008).

Publication of the Report, "A Nation at Risk"

The need to continue to show accountability for the students in nation's classrooms was a theme for political leaders in the elections that followed. President Ronald Reagan was elected in 1980 and 1984 and he appealed to the religious right for the, "restoration of moral values in the public school" (Spring, 2008, p. 470). In 1981 the Reagan administration commissioned "A Nation at Risk." Government education and business leaders spent two years examining the condition of the American school system (Garland, 2014). The report was issued in April 1983 and launched an indictment of the American school system at the time. It scolded the system for slipping from its once great past to where it was currently. It showed that Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores were dropping nationwide. There was a widespread condemnation that the fabric of the nation's education foundation. It was felt that moral character had diminished. Political leaders felt there was, "a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and people" (Ansary, 2007, p. 2). "One of the most famous lines in the report said, "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of War" (Garland, 2014, p. 3). The report was a call to war to reform our weakened

educational system and in turn threatened our economy (Ansary, 2007). At this time in history the United States had very poor relations with the Soviet Union, an era called the Cold War. There was a political attitude, promoted by the Reagan administration and the 1984 election, to confront the Soviet Union (Ansary, 2007). The report ushered in five solutions, improving content, raising standards, overhauling the teaching profession, adding time to the school day and school year, improving leadership and fiscal support (Garland, 2014). The result of this proposed new direction was a rise in “charter schools with longer school days and no union contracts” (Garland, 2014, p. 4). It also resulted in the creation of a teacher evaluation rating tied to student assessment scores. This evaluation rating was partly being used as a basis for teachers’ performance evaluations (Garland, 2014). Clearly, the implications in *A Nation At Risk* were blamed for a lack of quality in the nation’s public schools as the reason why we could not compete globally. It blamed the lack of quality in our schools for our poor productivity in world markets and a failure to be competitive with growing productive economies like Japan and West Germany (Spring, 2008). The report, and its message of mediocrity in our schools hit the press and spread throughout the nation. President Reagan, who ran his political campaign on a platform of getting the government out of education and closing the Department of Education, was now forced to change that approach. The new mission was to help education by reforming it so that the United States could gain back its competitive edge in the world again (Spring, 2008).

There were some doubts among skeptics in and around the administration regarding the crisis that had been created around the message in the *Nation at Risk* report. Some believed that the findings in it were not real, especially those democrats who

apposed Reagan. Admiral James Watkins, who was the Secretary of Energy at this time, commissioned a study to document the data to show the decline in the economy at the time. This report studied Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SAT) from the late 1970's until 1990's, which was a period of time, when scores dropped significantly (Ansary, 2007). The report also included detailed information about dropout data and postsecondary studies. It made international comparisons of students from other countries along with educational funding data and educator information (Stedman, 1999). The Sandia Report described a condition known to statisticians as Simpson's paradox (Ansary, 2007). It described a condition by commenting that "Nearly every subgroup, ethnic minorities, rich kids, poor kids, middle class kids, top students, average students, low-ranked students held steady or improved during those years tested" (Ansary, 2007, p. 3). The report showed that there was good news, not bad news, in the SAT testing scores information. Public schools were being criticized and described as failing systems in the findings of a Nation at Risk. The Sandia Report showed that there was progress made, not failure in "a national goal of extending opportunity to a broader range of the population" (Ansary, 2007, p. 4). The report also known as Perspectives on Education in America was suppressed during the 12 years of the Reagan and Bush administrations because it showed that students SAT scores, held steady or improved during those years, from 1970 to 1990 (Ansary, 2007). The Department of Education withheld this data since the report, "did not meet professional standards and that it was undergoing peer review" (Bracey, 2000, p. 4). During those years good news about schools was minimized or ignored and bad news about schools was broadcast because it helped to promote the agenda in favor of tax credits and vouchers for public schools (Bracey, 2000). There were other studies at

the time that showed that students in the US schools compared favorably when compared to international students in 27 other countries. One such study was a study that was conducted in 1992 entitled, “How in the World Do Students Read?” (Elley, 1992). The study highlighted the scores of student age’s nine and 11 in 32 national systems of education. The study collected data from 9,073 schools 10,518 teachers, and 210,059 students around achievement levels in three domains of reading literacy (Elley, 1992). On this assessment the United States nine year olds scored second in the world in reading skills among 27 countries tested and eighth among 31 countries tested of 14 year-olds (Bracey, 2000). “There was no coverage of this report. There was no press conference called and no media coverage,” (Bracey, 2000, p. 4).

The Republicans under the Reagan administration were trying to connect education to business. The administration was scapegoating education by blaming the US education system for problems in the economy and in trade (Spring, 2008). This served to keep the issue in front of the public as a major agenda item. On the other hand the Reagan administration was promising to lessen the role of the federal government. During the end of the 1980’s and early 90’s business and state leaders formed a partnership to reform education (Spring, 2008). “The federal government became a main driver for reform, and “A Nation at Risk became the blueprint” (Garland, 2014, p. 6). “A Nation at Risk overhyped a sense of crisis and business-focused mentality and turned its back on the reports best ideas about empowering teachers, raising expectations for students, and identifying and training better leaders,”(Garland, 2014, p. 6). “Fourteen months after the release of A Nation at Risk, the Education Commission of the States issued a report on new state legislation and policy aimed at education renewal” (Schwartz

& Robinson, 2000, p. 2). The report showed that, “forty- four states had raised graduation requirements; thirty states that had developed new regulations governing learning outcomes, curriculum content, and framework; and thirty-seven states that had implemented initiatives to provide more instructional time. More than 250 task forces were helping forty-six states develop comprehensive state action plans to improve educational outcomes of students”(Schwartz & Robinson, 2000, p. 2). Clearly, A Nation at Risk created a call to action and greater accountability for all public schools.

Goals 2000: Education America Act

During the Clinton administration beginning in 1992, the Goals 2000: Educate America Act was established, linking education to business (Spring, 2008). Educational reform was of national interest during this period of time. Education had moved to one of the most important items on the nation’s agenda after a Nation at Risk (Schwartz & Robinson, 2000). The act in its inception, contributed over 70 million dollars to 30 states as seed money for states to improve schools (Riley, 1994). Goals 2000 was an effort to achieve national goals by the year 2000 with the purpose of being more competitive in world market (Spring, 2008). The plan had four broad goals, “the creation of model school, national standards, voluntary national achievement test, and incentives for parental choice” (Spring, 2008, p. 472). The creation of national goals for education came from a group of governors from both parties working together. Their aim was to use the national standard as guideposts for state actions not as federal reforms (Schwartz & Robinson, 2000). A big part of Goals 2000 Educate America Act at the beginning of the Clinton administration was the involvement of big business (Spring, 2008). The School to Work Opportunities Act succeeded in influencing school accountability and expressing

the need for closer relationship ties between public schools and the needs of business. (Spring, 2008). There was an ongoing need to show that school improvement, through the steps toward greater accountability, was a key to helping the national economy continue to grow and develop. This important link between education and business continued to remain on the political agenda for the Republican Party.

ESEA Reauthorization of 2002 and “No Child Left Behind” Begins

In 2001 during the early days of the George W. Bush presidency there was bipartisan support for reauthorization of Title One. Title One was part of the ESEA that President Johnson had authorized in 1965 (Spring, 2008). The new legislation was called No Child Left Behind Act. It was an attempt to ensure that all children receive an equal educational opportunity (Spring, 2008). The law was enacted in 2002. NCLB was a far-reaching test-based accountability national strategy with the clear goal of using tests scores to gauge school improvement and student achievement. The law established a series of action steps for each school and each student in based on the outcomes of standardized test scores. There were increasing penalties for schools that did not meet annual school improvement goals (Hanushek, 2009). The NCLB Act was directed at having students become proficient in Math, Reading, and in Science according to learning standards set up across the United States authored by the NAEP. When NCLB was introduced already 44 states across the country had some form of accountability system that was test-based (Hanushek, 2009). By 2010 there were more than 5,000 schools in the U.S. that were involved in the most severe stage, the restructuring stage (Kutash, Nico, Gorin, Rahmatullah, & Tallant, 2010). In 2010 it was estimated that of the more than 100,000 schools nation wide did not make annual yearly progress (AYP). The

lowest 5% of those schools had failed to make AYP for five or more years. Many of them had high staff turnover and poor graduation rates and in some cases high rates of violence (Kutash et al., 2010).

No Child Left Behind has at its core some of the same proposed, “solutions-improving content, raising standards, overhauling the teaching profession, adding time to the school day and year, and improving leadership and fiscal support,”(Garland, 2014, p. 4) that were clearly articulated in *A Nation at Risk* in the Reagan era 20 years before. There were streamlined standards introduced in 2009 that took the original intent of the 2002 Act and streamlined it. These changes are also part of the Common Core standards currently being used by teachers all over the country. These newest changes of the law from when it was introduced in 2002 made it even more controversial (Garland, 2014). The “new ideas” encouraged “teachers rating based partly on standardized test scores; and the invention and rise of charter schools with longer school days and on union contracts,”(Garland, 2014, p. 4).

During the first edition of *No Child Left Behind* math scores improved and reading stayed the same with only small sporadic improvement. Achievement gaps did not move significantly. Federal funding was enough to address inequities in the scores (Garland, 2014). Presidents and the Department of Education used all sorts of methods including executive orders, proclamations, and memoranda to try to move their educational agenda forward. The *No Child Left Behind 2009 Race to the Top* program was a creative attempt to stimulate wide-ranging reforms in educational policy (Howell, 2015). *Race to the Top* was an attempt to offer a new leverage point to try to get states moving on policy reforms by having states compete against one another by demonstrating

evidence based strategies that improved student outcomes and thereby received funding to support their efforts. (Mathis, 2011).

After 12 years of NCLB, as the law that began in 2002 and ended in 2014, there were billions of dollars spent and very few results realized in terms of measured student achievement and school improvement. What was hoped to be a solution for the issues in education exposed by “A Nation at Risk” in 1981 continued in NCLB when it was written in 2002. “Before A Nation at Risk the federal governments role was minimal” (Garland, 2014, p. 5). President Ronald Reagan had campaigned on a political platform at his election of less government intervention, not more. Reagan even wanted to close the federal Department of Education. Accountability efforts started with the ESEA of 1965. ESEA was supposed to be a program that was a piece of the \$1 billion dollar Great Society Program created by the Johnson administration (Marshall, 2012). It was suppose to be an effort to try to close the achievement gap between low-income students and their peers (Marshall, 2012). It became a 600-page program under the Bush and Obama administrations. Its cost annually was \$25 billion to taxpayers (Marshall, 2012). The legislation should be judged simply by asking the question, “does it improve teaching and learning and does it do it for all children”(Desimone, 2013, p. 59). Whereas reforms before NCLB were an effort to aid state and local districts by providing resources to help struggling learners and close the achievement gap between students in poverty, the NCLB law changed the landscape by ramping up “the federal role with an accountability system for schools driven by quotas and sanctions” (Mintrop & Sunderman, 2009, p. 354). Over the 12 years of NCLB there were gains in the area of “math achievement for 4th graders and these gains were concentrated among, African American and Hispanic,

students who were eligible for subsidized lunch” (Dee & Jacob, 2010, p. 1). “There were smaller positive effects on 8th-grade math achievement” (Dee & Jacob, 2010, p. 1).

These 8th grade gains were concentrated in students eligible for subsidized lunch. There were no meaningful gains for 4th and 8th graders tested in reading achievement (Dee & Jacob, 2010).

The History of the Superintendent Position

The need for the position of superintendent of schools became evident around the early 1800s with the intent of making school systems run more efficiently. The first state superintendent of schools is credited as being established in New York in 1812. The education of the people is not mentioned in the Constitution so the support for education and accountability has always been within the jurisdiction of the states. It is by the very nature of the fact that there are so many states that the governance and aid generated by fund formulas in each state differs widely. Communities appointed schools superintendents using volunteer committees. The job of these first superintendents was to manage and oversee the funding from the states that came to the volunteers first known as school committees and later called school boards. Once New York hired the first state superintendent to handle the accounting for the money that flowed from the state for schools, other states followed by employing their own state superintendents. The beginning job for these state superintendents was to collect data and to distribute state funds. At least 13 cities had hired district administrators by 1850 (Kowalski, 2005). As the amount of communities that received state funds for education increased, more and more superintendents were hired to account for the funds. Over the years State Departments of Education have been created and have evolved. They now oversee the

“establishment and enforcement of minimum standards and equalizing educational opportunities through the distribution of state funds”. By 1900, most school districts had established the district an administrator position to deal with, “the development of larger city school districts, the consolidation of rural school districts, and expanded state curriculum, passage of compulsory attendance laws, demands for increased accountability, and efficiency expectations” (Kowalski, 2005, p. 3). Some saw the role of this person as the “ school boards clerk” and they, “gave the person in the position simple clerical and practical tasks” (Kowalski, 2005, p. 3). Over the years the job and the role of Superintendent of Schools has increased to the very important positions in districts around the country. The peak of the number of superintendents around the country was in 1960 when there were more than 35,000 superintendents nationally. Superintendents have become a required part of the educational landscape for years in every state.

The Evolution of the Role of the Superintendent

In the literature the superintendent’s position has evolved over the years into the role it is today. From a job focused on collecting data and the distribution of state funds in the 19th century, it has become much more complex. There are variations of superintendent’s duties such as the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) for each school system but generally the primary duties are as follows:

- Operational oversight of the school district.
- Maintaining focus on the school board’s mission, and developing an education work plan to achieve the mission.
- Ensuring quality of education and equity of opportunities within the system.

- Management of services, program and resources, for quality of learning and for the implementation of school board's and district education plan and budget.
- Making day-to-day decisions consistent with the policies set by the school board and within guidelines as set in the regulations of state statute and policy.
- Hiring all non-licensed staff and recommending all licensed staff to the school board for approval.
- Creating a robust comprehensive local assessment system that is implemented system-wide
- Preparing of all reports, such as the continuous improvement plan, the budget and district fiscal and student learning performance reports to allow the School Boards to evaluate its implementation of their mission and progress toward their goals (Act 46, 2016).

In recent years the job of superintendent is not as well defined as it once was in the 20th century when it was evolving. Superintendents are typically responsible as the chief executive officer of the schools district. Responsibilities include the recommendations of policies and the oversight of the annual budget, managing business affairs including bids, contracts, facilities, and transportation for the school district or supervisory union (Pardini & Lewis, 2003). Superintendents provide information so that boards can make informed decisions. They oversee the current educational decisions being made each day and the organization and oversight of professional training and

programing for teachers and support staff to continuously to improve teaching and learning in the school district (Pardini & Lewis, 2003).

Climate of Pressure

The position of superintendent changes with the politics of the district from day to day and week to week with a variety of missions and agendas in a changing political climate. Often there is a clash with members of community due to their understanding about the need for changes to be made in the local and established educational system and the promotion and acceptance of change from the status quo (Kowalski, 2005). Most recently there is new imperative since the creation of NCLB that all children must be taught and that all students can learn. There is an art to the position of persuading people to do things that are often a change from what they did in the past while at the same time maintaining a relationship within the community in an uncertain political landscape. All of the uncertainty that takes place is related to a climate of pressure in an atmosphere of raising tax dollars. Often the job includes having to convince taxpayers that leaders are moving the system toward improvement while insisting on high standards. To continue to show improvement and accountability is an enormous responsibility in leading and managing schools (Mulford, 2005). This move to accountability is a contributing factor to the climate. It influences educational leaders by causing them to have to be flexible in a changing responsibility landscape and accepting new roles in order to get the job done (Mulford, 2005). In rural school districts positions there have unique factors that contribute to the expectations on superintendents. These factors are: “(a) a rural community often defined by poverty and economic loss (b) a rural administrator

overburdened with a wide range of responsibility, and (c) a rural leader forced to serve in a uniquely public role” (Forner, Bierlein-Palmer, & Reeves, 2012, p. 2).

Role, Responsibilities and Expectations of Superintendents

The role of the district leader or superintendent has changed over the years. The superintendent in the 19th century was seen as an educator, but as the 19th century ended the role of the systems leader also changed. As the complexities of the work in size and scope increased the responsibility of the work also increased (Hoyle, Bjork, Collier, & Glass, 2005). In the 1960s and 70s the role changed again to be one of, “a teacher-scholar (with expertise in educational and instructional leadership), an administrative chief (with expertise in scientific management), and a negotiator-statesman (with expertise in statesmanship, conflict resolution, and community support)” (Petersen & Barnett, 2005, p. 108). In 1983 with the release of *A Nation at Risk*, the call for reform reemerged and the expectation on the superintendent was to lead the reform (Hoyle et al., 2005). *A Nation at Risk* was a call to action and a call for change.

The role of the superintendent is very diverse and that may contribute to the fact that there is so much instability in these positions. It can be categorized into five broad areas that generally define the characteristics of the position (Bjork, Glass, & Brunner, 2005). These areas are outlined below:

Superintendent as teacher. This is the scholar role envisioning the superintendent as a master teacher and the person who can articulate the primary work to be done for curriculum and instruction. In this role the superintendent is expected to provide instructional leadership and school reform.

Superintendent as business manager. In this is a role there are expectations of the oversight of personnel and management of affairs of the school district. In this role there are assumed responsibilities for budget development and ultimate responsibility for operations and for human resource management in each district.

Superintendent as statesmen. In this role the superintendent organizes efforts working with the school board to engage in local political conversations with the community-based interest groups that attempt to influence board decisions. This role is one that expects adherence to district policies and district organizational rules.

Superintendent as a social scientist. In this role the superintendent is a person whose responsibility it is to make sure that students are making meaningful and measureable gains in learning in order to have a chance for a better life. This is the instructional leadership and change agent part of the position that ensures that teaching and learning are taking place and that all students are improving their knowledge and skills.

Superintendent as communicator. In this role the superintendent speaks for the organization and manages communication so that it flows within the school district. There is constant communication with individuals within the organization promoting and encouraging and influencing the goals and initiatives of the school system as it pertains to improvement (Bjork et al., 2005).

Threats to District Leadership

Given all of the responsibilities and demands placed on the shoulders of the district superintendent it is no wonder that there is high turnover and a decreasing pool of superintendents available to do this work (Hawk & Martin, 2011). Stability in the central

office position is directly correlated to the school board's degree of patience in allowing the five to seven years it often takes for an initiative to come to fruition under the same superintendent's leadership (Sparks, 2012). It is very clear that the mandates of NCLB and high stakes testing have been focused on results and output and have brought an enormous amount of pressure to improve scores and do it quickly or structural, programmatic and professional development would be threatened. The redirection of Federal Title One money would also be threatened (Petersen & Barnett, 2005). All of this has placed an enormous political pressure on schools. At the same time there has been a lack of equal consideration placed on making sure there is a rich curriculum and excellent instruction that gets kids excited about content. These efforts using NCLB fail to address the goal of promoting better instruction. They tend to narrow the curriculum to the areas of the test reading, math, and science. Teachers structure the day to try to boost especially those subject so there is marked improvement in test scores in those areas, at expense of the other curriculum (Petersen & Barnett, 2005).

Attrition of District Administrators

The position of Superintendent of Schools is a job that has very little security with it when compared to similar leadership jobs in the private sector. Each year there seems to be fewer and fewer quality candidates willing to move up into this position (Byrd, Drews, & Johnson, 2006). "In a study published in December of 2012, found in 90% of the 100 California Districts studied that 43% left within three years" (Sparks, 2012, p. 1). On the other hand, in the case of the 10 percent of the largest districts, each with the populations that have 29,000 students or more in each of them the superintendents left within the first three years (Sparks, 2012). Many of these jobs that are high profile on

the surface, are full of political pressure and complexity. This complexity causes it to be difficult to accomplish anything when looking closely at a particular position and its expectations (Sparks, 2012). A study of 292 superintendents in North Carolina in 2002 (Byrd et al., 2006) found that superintendent turnover averaged 6 to 7 years regardless of the districts size or region of the state. In 2003, the Council of Great City Schools (GCS), a group composed of the largest and most diverse school districts in the United States, surveyed their membership and found that the average length of tenure for urban superintendents in their group was four years (Byrd et al., 2006). This was an increase from a similar survey done the year before in 2001 by GCS which found that the tenure by its membership was 2.75 years (Byrd et al., 2006). Another report by the Council of Urban Boards of Educations collected information from around the country and reported the average tenure rate was between 4 and 5 years (Byrd et al., 2006). Researchers in the California study reported that the number one reason superintendents moved from their position were dysfunctional school boards (Sparks, 2012). The boards that are considered well functioning boards are more likely and more comfortable working with their superintendent, which contributes to stability of the job (Sparks, 2012).

Attrition of District Leaders in Rural States

In rural districts school boards must be patient in order to give the necessary time for change through improvement of instruction, curriculum, and leadership to take place. It takes time and a considerable amount of effort to turnaround a school and even more vigilance to sustain the changes necessary over that time. In rural states it is not always easy to find and retain people to lead this school improvement. There appears to be a

direct correlation between those boards that do not function well with the superintendent and the stability and turnover of the position.

In many rural districts in the country, like the small rural state of Vermont for example, there is a critical shortage of competent people who want to lead districts. More than one third of the superintendents left their jobs in 2014. In July of 2014, 20 of the state's 59 superintendent's positions turned over (O'Gorman, 2014). Some of these superintendents are retiring while others are moving to a supervisory union in Vermont where they believe that they can become more effective in their work. Superintendents who are moving to a new position and are considering staying within the state are moving into what they consider to be less challenging districts around the state (O'Gorman, 2014). Higher salaries offered in other states lure a smaller number of superintendents. Others have suffered through scandal and are leaving because to stay in a too difficult situation would be a challenge and undermine their work in the future and become too difficult (Freese, 2016). This high rate of attrition is an important consideration. In the words of the Secretary of Education for Vermont Rebecca Holcombe, "Why should we care? Research shows length of tenure is associated with student gains. It's just destabilizing at every level of the system when you have turnover at the top" (Freese, 2016, p. 2). It is obvious that the pool of applicants is very shallow and continued movement does not help to increase the number of applicants available for each of the jobs posted. Jeff Francis, executive director of the Vermont Superintendents Association said, "The pool of qualified applicants interested in becoming a superintendent is diminishing on an annual basis" (O'Gorman, 2014, p. 1). It is important to try to hire someone and keep them in place if the supervisory union is going to improve. The pool of applicants is so

shallow that retired superintendents are coming out of retirement to try and hold things together until a more long term superintendent can be found (O’Gorman, 2014).

The loss of the superintendent in a system has the potential to affect staff morale negatively and can lead to leadership turnover throughout the system of teachers as well as administrators. However, there have been very few studies that have been done to predict how superintendent turnover affects the entire system or the type of turnover (e.g., retirement, verses resignation, verses forced resignation might affect other employees in other parts of an organization (Grissom & Anderson, 2012).

Superintendent as an Agent for Change

The idea of instructional leadership has not been easy to define. The term is probably most closely associated with “good” leadership. In this case the term can be used broadly to affect improvement in a school system to enhance “supervision, coaching, staff development, modeling and other such means of influencing teachers’ thinking and practice”(Leithwood, 1995, p. 3).

Evidence seems to suggest that there are three basic tenets of successful leadership used by superintendents when they are hired to be change agents. They devote a great deal of time energy and effort to set directions for the organization (Leithwood, Lewis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). They develop people by utilizing the most effective use of their talents and abilities. They also redesign the organization to make it more efficient and effective (Leithwood et al. 2004). Since A Nation at Risk was written gains made to improving school performance have been few even though we have doubled our spending on K-12 education when the dollars are adjusted for inflation over the years. Only one-third or fewer of eighth grade students were proficient in math

science, or reading on the 2010 NAEP test (Klein, 2011). The US high-school dropout rate has remained at around seventy percent (Klein, 2011) A recent looked at college admissions testing scores from the ACT testing program found that 76% of students taking the test were not adequately ready to engage in first year college courses (Klein, 2011).

Many recent policies, forcing accountability measures to be used to turn around underperforming schools in socioeconomic challenging rural communities fail to recognize that the research indicates that these accountability measures are less successful in vulnerable rural communities. “High-stakes testing and tight accountability measures may achieve some instant improvement in student performance but these improvements often vanish quickly” (Leithwood, Harris, & Strauss, 2010, p. 27). Most government interventions include “no excuses” and “zero tolerance” language in the accountability policy (Leithwood et al., 2010). There is compelling evidence that weak leadership in schools is a major contributing factor in school decline and that successful leadership is very important to school success. Successful schools and school systems are those which have leaders, “who actively set directions, develop people, and engage in organizational redesign” (Leithwood et al., 2010, p. 38).

Leadership Authority Delegated by the School Board

It is important to realize that as important and vital that the leadership of the superintendent is to an organization, there must also exist a well working school board as a partner in the work. The importance of building leadership and its effect on student achievement has been widely researched in the past. School leadership is second only to teacher quality in terms of importance when it comes to reforming a failing school

(Hechinger Report, 2011). However, there has been little written about the effects of the leadership of the superintendent as it relates to student achievement. If there is a positive benefit on student achievement from district leadership, it is important to understand what it is that superintendents do to make positive contributions. Studies indicate that there are district-level responsibilities and initiatives that make district leaders effective (Marzano & Waters, 2009). Marzano and Waters (2009) outline five of these responsibilities and initiatives as actions that effective district leaders should follow:

- “Ensuring collaborative goal setting
- Establishing non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction
- Creating board alignment with the support of districts goals
- Monitoring achievement and instruction goals
- Allocating resources to support the goals for achievement and instruction

(Marzano & Waters, 2009, p. 6)

In the 1980's and 90's there was an emphasis on teacher empowerment and shared decision making between the principal and the instructional staff. This was a time when an equal distribution of influence was shared to support governance in each school. The theory was, that if everyone was involved in decision making there would be accountability and follow through for every decision made. Principals display their instructional leadership when they emphasize and show their ability share to in the responsibility for improving curriculum, instruction and assessing student learning (Hoyle et al., 2005).

Superintendents show instructional leadership when they articulate a vision and mission for the children they serve. They also show leadership when they gather support

for that vision, demonstrate a shared vision by getting the school board involved in the key instructional strategies and evaluate personnel and programs throughout the system (Pardini & Lewis, 2003). There has been a new expectation of the superintendent since NCLB began with the expectation that all children be taught and that all children be evaluated to calculate their learning growth ("Superintendent of schools-history," 2016).

On the other hand, principals or building level administrative leaders are responsible for the following:

- Maintaining schools rules for student discipline
- Establishing rules and regulations for student performance as well as regulations of teachers
- Supervision of the school building plant and equipment
- Classifying students by grade level and assigning grades for coursework
- Scheduling for classes and making sure students are enrolled in those classes ("History of the development of school governance and the superintendent," 2016)

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act or ARRA was passed by the Obama Administration in 2009. This new law that expanded the government's investment was a huge expansion of the federal government's role in funding for turnaround efforts of schools that were failing in each of the states (Kutash et al, 2010). Combined with the national economy falling into recession at that time and public funding declining, this pot of money made available by ARRA was very inviting to schools. In some cases states had to wrestle with their role now that the Federal Government was taking a greater role in organization and instruction in local school.

States had to contemplate what changes would happen and the possibility of less state oversight and control if they applied for and received these competitive grants from the Federal Government (Kutash, et al., 2010). The ARRA funding created four categories or pockets of funding as follows:

- Race to the Top (RTTT) was funded in the amount of \$4.35 billion dollars offered to the states on a competitive basis. The requirement was that each state must implement one prescribed turnaround model out of the four models offered by the federal government (Kutash et al., 2010). Each state that decided to apply for the money had to complete a complex application where they agreed to meet compliance measures if they received the money. In the first round Tennessee and Delaware were the recipients.
- School improvement grants (SIG) consisting of \$3.55 billion dollars given to states according to the allocation in their Title One formula that were granted to districts on a competitive basis. These funds were given to districts that had AYP and were the district among the lowest performing districts for two years in a row (Kutash et al., 2010). AYP, was a term first introduced in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act reauthorization in 1994. This is a way of holding the states accountable for student performance under NCLB ("Adequate Yearly Progress," 2004).
- The Investing in Innovation Fund (i3) containing \$650 million was awarded to partnerships efforts for nonprofits and school districts partnerships improving principal and teacher effectiveness while working towards the improvement of student learning and closing the achievement gap (Kutash et al., 2010).

Data can be a huge help in defining the direction of effort and improvement plans. Looking at percentages in student data is less effective when pinpointing issues in curriculum adjustment or problems indicated by student achievement gaps or monitoring student achievement (*Using data to improve schools*, 2002). However if data is disaggregated it can help to assist the school to see how it is doing meeting policy initiatives and understand and identify gaps in student learning (Hoyle et al., 2005). When disaggregated student achievement data is shared with a staff it becomes very hard to refute. Data can help to enlist the staff to make the effort to change and to become leaders of the change needed to turn the school around (Hoyle et al., 2005). This process involves using all of the existing past student performance data within an organization and analyzing it so that it can be used to plan the job ahead (Murphy & Meyers, 2008).

School leaders also have to form achievement goals in order to drive district progress goals. In order to know if goals are realistic there must be assessment to find out where students are achieving and what they have to do to get better. One of the most important outcomes of NCLB are the testing programs that were developed to monitor student progress (Marzano & Waters, 2009). Assessments measuring tools, like Star 360, are at the heart of the strategy to improve student skills. They create data that can be utilized to track student progress and also give teachers the information about what students have missed and what skills they have yet to learn (Star Reading, Math, and Early Learning, 2015).

The use of data can be a very powerful tool when used as a part of a leadership strategy to turn a system around. It only helps if the use of data in an organization is built in as a habit that is used in deliberation about each problem and builds a program of

continuous improvement. Data can be used to narrow the achievement gap by looking at student skills and to develop student composition information (Venables, 2014). The goal of using a data driven approach to decision making is to show undeniable and quantifiable proof that the methods being employed are working and students are improving their learning (*Using data to improve schools*, 2002). It is most effective to set goals with the input of parents, student, staff, and administration and to have open and transparent communication about meeting the goals set for student learning for the district and for the school.

Data is also invaluable when used to improve teacher quality by doing a needs assessments of professional development concerns for a district. It can be used to find the root cause of a problem by pinpointing information to help to know how to approach a problem and dealt with it. Data can also be used to communicate information to the public and show a clear picture so that there can be remedies sought as a solution (Venables, 2014). In order to really help students to build their skills there has to be a supportive team of interventionists who provide staff training but also help to interpret tests scores for the purpose of improving instruction (Leithwood et al., 2010). These interventionist are important because they are able to help pinpoint those students who continue to score poorly and to get to the cause of their poor performance by providing targeted interventions in areas of need (Leithwood et al., 2010).

Rapid Program Improvement vs. Slow and Steady Improvement Defined

The United States Department of Education issued a report in 2010 called, *Achieving Dramatic School Improvement: An Exploratory Study*. The report was the outcome of the work of the Comprehensive School Reform Program Implementation and

Outcomes (ECSRIO) and followed research from the earlier work of the Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) program (Aladjem et al., 2010). The CSR was established as an outcome of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act 2002 (ESEA)* reauthorization legislation. In 2006, the U.S. Department of Education contracted with WestEd and the American Institutes for Research to add to the ECSRIO study. The focus of the study was on schools that made rapid improvement in student achievement in a short period of time i.e., (one or two years) while others improved over a much longer period of time (Aladjem et al., 2010). Rapid improvement schools were defined by the researchers as those schools in which the students enrolled and received test scores that were initially lower than the 50% benchmark in both reading and in math in achievement (Aladjem et al., 2010). Slow and steady student achievement for the purpose of this focused study were schools with at least three to five years of measurable improvement (Aladjem et al., 2010). The study found that there were many factors that contributed to the improvement of student achievement: leadership, staffing, school climate, instructional improvement strategies, and support from the outside including the district and state and federal government resources (Aladjem et al., 2010). Principals must have the leadership skills, support, and the resolve to change teachers' instructional practices (Madsen & Mabokela, 2014). The literature that supported the study revealed that schools like businesses can turn around quickly if they work to incorporate the elements of (a) strong leadership, (b) a focus on improving instruction, (c) development of a committed staff, and (d) work to solve the easiest problems first. In a corporate world context these are called the "quickest wins." (Aladjem et al., 2010). The study used a business literature model that confirmed it is very possible to successfully turn a program around in much less than five

years (Aladjem et al., 2010). If a school or school district is going to successfully make the turnaround, it is important that the school staff be onboard and working proactively together (Aladjem et al., 2010).

Relationship of Student Demographics to School Improvement

Changes in student demographics are important to consider when studying long term and short term change for any public policy work or for any other planning work in schools. The rapid changes in the student population will have dramatic effects on the future budget planning in schools. Facilities, organizational planning and teacher training throughout the nation will continue to change in the future.

The change in student demographics is dramatically changing the face of the educational system in the United States. If schools are going to improve they are going to have to communicate well with families in order to be successful in raising the literacy of students (Leithwood et al., 2010). Demographics in the schools in the United States are changing rapidly. The birth rate in certain populations continues to decline while for other populations it continues to increase dramatically. The current influx of non-white populations and especially those non-English speakers has caused some stress on the schools to provide services to support these students' learning.

In every part of the United States, particularly in middle and high schools, there has been a rapid enrollment of students whose primary language is not English. Many of these students come to the classroom struggling in reading, writing, and speaking. It is a common fact that while English language learners are continuing to learn the language, they must tackle content and struggle to understand its meaning. This is why it takes so much more time and effort to help these students to achieve at the level of their native

speaking peers (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). Dealing with the influx of these students while helping to improve the achievement for all students adds to the complex challenges the schools are having in every part of the country. The addition of non-English speakers in such numbers to our classroom requires focus and attention in order to sustain any momentum toward school turnaround and improvement. Research tells us that students who are learning English as a second language need help in order to be successful in school (Crouch, 2012). There is a need to identify English Language Learners (ELL) early and work with them in high quality English as a second language programming in the early primary grades so that they have a greater opportunity to be on grade level (Crouch, 2012).

Turnaround efforts in many schools have been impacted by a rapid growth of ethnic minorities lacking educational opportunities and economic resources. The Latino population in the United States along with the decline of the white population and, at the same time, the steady growth of the Asian-American population (Maxwell, 2014). The growth of the African-American population has remained relatively flat over the last few years (Maxwell, 2014). It is important to understand the impact of changing the demographics and economic conditions of communities urban and rural throughout the country (Maxwell, 2014). “Hispanic enrollment in public schools has tripled since 1968. During that same period, the Black student population has increased by 30% and the White student population decreased by 17%” (Clayton, 2011, p. 674).

Adjusting to the Changes in Demographics to Improve Student Achievement

Considering trends in the changes in student populations is important for staffing schools and serving the changing needs of student populations. The country is also growing much older as the baby boomers age and the median age for the population in this country continues to rise. In 2010, the median age in the United States was 37.2 years of age moving up 1.9 percent from the year 2000 when it was 35.3 years of age (Crouch, 2012). Trends in immigration and birth rate data indicate that soon there will not be a majority population that accounts for over 50% of the total population. “Our youngest population are the most diverse; forty-seven percent of the children younger than five belong to a racial or ethnic minority group” (Crouch, 2012, p. 1).

Generally speaking, students of color and students from low-income homes have achievement gaps that are now made visible and need to be addressed. There remains a large gap between the achievement of advantaged kids and those who are disadvantaged and now this new diverse student population is the majority (Maxwell, 2014). Even “though the projected diverse majority will remain concentrated in major urban areas and in a handful of historically diverse states such as California, Florida, New York and Texas, it is by no means an exclusively a big-city or big-state trend” (Maxwell, 2014, p. 2). Many rural and suburban communities will become the homes of immigrants from Mexico and Central America in the future as they relocate to find employment and put down roots in the smaller communities (Maxwell, 2014). These diverse and low-income students often require Supplemental Educational Services (SES) like Title 1 services or services to support English-Language Learners (ELL). As the districts have become

more diverse this has increased the poverty rate. This effect causes many more students to be now eligible for free and reduced priced meals (Clayton, 2011).

These changes in demographics have clear implications for the future planning in our schools. Minority populations, such as the Hispanics communities, benefit from high quality pre-Kindergarten (pre-K) and primary (grades K-3) programming in order to promote school readiness and to close achievement gaps as early as possible. (Crouch, 2012). The need for high quality data in order to identify learning gaps, particularly in the areas in reading and math is necessary in order to catch up students from minority and low-income families. (Gettinger & Stoiber, 2007). “ It takes four to seven years for ELL students to become proficient in the kind of language used in textbooks” (Crouch, 2012, p. 9). Students who have been enrolled in formal schooling in their first language seem to have an advantage learning a second language as opposed to those who have had no formal schooling at all (Crouch, 2012). There is also research, although it is controversial and debated by some, to show that students who are in bilingual programs that practice and support study using bilingual education, instead of English only programing, become stronger students over time (Center for Public Education, 2007).

Schools that refuse to deal with the changes in demographics as a factor have an additional obstacle that stands in the way of student achievement and therefore school improvement. There must be resources and planning or a strategy for the school to deal effectively with the English language learner populations.

The Importance of Using a Progress Monitoring for Improvement

There must also be a district wide assessment of staffing and decisions made to figure out where student needs are and what staff roles need to be in order to fit the

student needs (Zavadsky, 2012). Getting the correct staff in the correct role in a school to meet the needs of students is a very important step that leads to being successful in a turnaround effort. Moving staff around to serve student needs is a district leadership responsibility. One of the districts leader's roles, in order to provide a platform for improvement, is to get the staff on board that are open to change and to decide who has the instructional leadership to accomplish the changes necessary for instructional delivery (Grandson IV, Chisum, Cross, & Geiser, 2014). The district leadership should lead by building capacity and strengths of support, as opposed to direct intervention. The district effort should emphasize increased capacity and should put in place professional development and support systems so that training can take place in order to build a system that works for students ("Massachusetts' Approach to Building Capacity of Districts in School Turnaround Efforts," 2016).

The decision to use data and the correct type of data is an important consideration to make as a starting point for transformational change. An efficient and standardized collection process across a school and a district is partly a district responsibility with the help and influence of building level leadership. Data gives information that is factual and helps to inform the district leaders so that adjustments can be made as progress is monitored.

Framework for Instructional Leadership

There has been little work done to study the relationship between an effective superintendent and the improvement of student achievement. There was a meta-analysis in 2006 on the influence of leadership on student performance conducted by Waters and Marzano (Waters & Marzano, 2006) and the Mid-continent Research for Education and

Learning (McREL). This study investigated 27 studies and examined the relationship between district leadership and student achievement in 2,817 districts and the achievement scores of 3.4 million students (Waters & Marzano, 2006). “This analysis looked at 27 studies conducted from 1970 to until 2006 to find out the characteristics of effective schools, leaders, and teachers” (Waters & Marzano, 2006, p. 3). This work is believed to be the largest study ever conducted investigating the research on the work and effectiveness of superintendents (Waters & Marzano, 2006).

The results of the study revealed four main findings:

- The study found that district level leadership matters. It found that there was “a positive correlation of .24 between district leadership and student achievement” (Waters & Marzano, 2006, p. 3).
- “Effective superintendents focus their efforts on creating goal-oriented districts” (Waters & Marzano, 2006, p. 3). This includes collaborative goal setting, non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction, Board alignment and support for district goals, goal monitoring for achievement and instruction and the use of resources to support district achievement and instruction.
- Two studies in the meta- analysis indicated a statistically significant positive relationship (.19) between the superintendent’s tenure and student achievement. These studies also suggested that the positive effect of the superintendent’s influence on student achievement begins as soon as two years into his or her tenure.
- One study in the meta-analysis was focused on the issue of building autonomy. The study indicated that building autonomy has a positive relationship of (.28) to

building student achievement. In the same study, a negative correlation of (.16) was detected for site-based management. This seemed to indicate that site-based management was negatively associated with student achievement. The results seem to contradict themselves. In this study, however, “researchers concluded from the findings that effective superintendents might provide principals with defined autonomy. That is, they may set clear, non-negotiable goals for learning and instruction, yet provide school leadership teams with responsibility and authority for determining how to meet those goals” (Waters & Marzano, 2006, p. 4).

The Relationship Between District Leadership and Student Achievement

According to Waters and Marzano’s (2006) work there is a clear relationship between dynamic, effective superintendents and increasing student achievement in a district. In another study by Marzano and Waters (2009), researchers tried to uncover the relationship between district leadership and student achievement. Once again Marzano and Waters used studies involving district leadership and student achievement, this time between the years of 1970 and 2005. In this meta-analysis, the authors sought to find out the answer to the research question, “What is the strength of relationship between district-level administrative actions and average student achievement?” (Marzano & Waters, 2009, p. 4). The researchers found fourteen reports that included data from a total of 1,210 districts. In this study a second research question was asked. This question expressed interest in leadership behaviors. The question asked, “What are the specific district leadership behaviors that are associated with student achievement?” (Marzano &

Waters, 2009, p. 5)? The study found that there were five actions that district leaders should engage in to encourage and to sustain student academic achievement:

- “Ensure collaborative goal setting including all relevant stakeholders, central office staff, building level administrators, and board members in establishing nonnegotiable goals for their districts” (Marzano & Waters, 2009, p. 6).
- “Establish nonnegotiable goals for achievement and instruction” (Marzano & Waters, 2009, p. 6). Goals should be made so that staff work together on both student achievement and classroom instruction.
- Create Board alignment with and support for district goals. In this way the Board ensures that the goals are the most important work that they attend to assure student achievement and alignment and support of Board goals. The goals need to be publically adopted and both publically and privately supported. In this way resources needed to implement goals are planned so they can be discussed, planned for and supported.
- Successful superintendents make sure that there is a constant examination of the district’s progress towards achievement and instructional goals. These goals and the district’s progress towards them remain the primary driving force. They are regularly focused on and highlighted on as the primary indicator of student success.
- It is necessary that there be resources allocated and maintained. This is to make sure that there is the time, resources, and personnel available to carry out the district’s adopted mission. In addition there needs to be dedicated professional development so that teachers and principals are supported to

continue their work. There needs to be a continuing focus on the knowledge and the development within the mission of the school district. The ongoing work needs to focus on the improvement of skills, the accomplishment of goals, improved instruction and therefore build stronger student achievement goals.

As in the Waters & Marzano (2006) study, this meta-analysis also found that the tenure of the superintendent was related to student achievement (Marzano & Waters, 2009). Two of the studies looked at in the meta-analysis showed that there was a positive effect of superintendent's longevity on academic achievement.

In summary, these studies underscore the vital importance of board alignment and support for the hard work about to be done to begin the turnaround effort. There must also be non-negotiable goals approved for achievement and a system in place to monitor the achievement of the instructional goals (Marzano & Waters, 2009). Finally, the findings of this research suggests that it is important to use research that supports achievement and instruction at all times.

Research on Principal Leadership in Turnaround School Districts

Leadership at the building level looks much different than it looks from the district level. It is important to distinguish between these two different levels of leading in order to compare and contrast this leadership work. In looking through the literature there have been five studies done since 2000 that emphasizes the direct and indirect effects of building leadership on student achievement outcomes (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). The five studies (Bell, Bolam, & Cubillo, 2003; Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006; Leithwood, Lewis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004;

Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2005; Witziers, Gosker, & Kruger, 2003) are the most recent work on the topic in the last 15 years. The studies were conducted all over the world. Some were done in just the United States or just Canada and others looked at educational achievement and leadership in several European countries. Out of these five studies there are some consistent trends that emerge on effective leadership:

- Quality of school leadership is second only to classroom instruction in its connection and correlation to, and its relationship with, student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2006; Waters et al., 2005).
- Effective school leaders set goals and build vision for achievement and instruction and monitor those goals by setting achievement targets for the district as a whole for the schools in the districts and also for subpopulations within the districts. Goals are established collaboratively with teachers, board members, central office staff and building level administrators. All are involved in the goal setting process. Goals are monitored for achievement and instruction and resources are allocated to support the goals when they are set (Bell et al., 2003; Leithwood et al., 2006; Waters et al., 2005; Witziers et al., 2003).
- School leaders motivate staff and indirectly or directly encourage the improvement of teaching and learning students by supporting professional development and improving the commitment and working conditions of their staff (Leithwood et al., 2004; Leithwood et al., 2006 Waters et al., 2005;).
- Successful school leaders encourage staff to have input into ideas, policies and otherwise important decisions that the school is considering (Waters et al., 2005). School leaders know that if they distribute leadership responsibilities among the

staff it allows them to have greater involvement in, and influence for, the decision-making. It allows them to follow through on important school policies that direct the climate and direction of the school (Leithwood et al., 2006).

- “Educational leadership is related to school organization and cultures as well as to teacher behavior and classroom practices and these factors are related in turn to student achievement” (Witziers et al., 2003, p. 481).
- School leaders motivate staff and therefore indirectly improve teaching and learning, staff commitment, and these factors improve working conditions (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006). School leaders use their influence on classroom teachers and other staff to indirectly affect student learning (Leithwood et al., 2004).
- School leaders apply their leadership skills in different ways according to each unique situation and unique opportunity. This looks different and is somewhat unique for each leader. Each leader has to remain flexible to deal with each problem that occurs and use the leadership within the school where they need it and when they need it (Leithwood et al., 2006; Waters et al., 2005).

In conclusion in this review of recent research on effective leadership it was found that educational leaders are very important as their leadership is related to the success of the school and to improved student achievement. These leaders influence classroom instruction by motivating staff and organizing the delivery of teaching and learning in each classroom. They are seen as second to only to classroom teachers for improving student achievement in a school.

There are several important factors that must take place and must be insisted upon if a school improvement effort has a chance at being successful. These factors are “clarity on what is taught and learned; the right talent to deliver and lead instruction; an array of appropriate instructional programs; continuous data and monitoring systems; a menu of interventions to address performance concerns; and sensitivity to contextual realities, such as school and community culture, parent involvement, governance, and resource allocation” (Zavadsky, 2012, p. 21). These factors should be taken into account in all changes being considered in the school or the school improvement effort will not be successful. Having data to show why a technique or direction is the way to go is also critical if some changes are to be made especially if it threatens the traditional way of doing things (Zavadsky, 2012).

The Importance of Effective Leadership in Rural Districts

As has been previously discussed, it is hard to be a superintendent of a school anywhere in the country at any point in time. It doesn't matter if it is in a rural, suburban, or urban district, running a school district is a very challenging endeavor anytime, anywhere. “Communities regard the superintendent as a leader in the same way they do a president of a bank or mayor” (Copeland, 2013, p. 7). There seem to be at least five major themes to define the role of the rural superintendent and to explain the scope of the work.

The role of manager, which includes many sub-roles, included that of organizer, finance manager, and decision maker.

The role of planner is one which consists of planning the implementation and structure for everything including curriculum planning, scheduling of training and

professional development, strategic planning and the schedule for dealing with remediation and policy implementation.

The role of listener, and person who makes themselves available to listen to and work with students, parents, administrators, community members, and board members. A leader who makes themselves available and accessible to be in touch with, and take input from the community. This role helps to give direction for the future work of the district schools.

The role of communicator as a thoughtful and serious community leader who seeks to give accurate information and is available and conveys a sense of transparency in a forthright manner. A leader who is clear and honest with his/her communications and who brings various constituencies together and promotes public relations.

The role of being involved in the community and providing accessibility to the community members. The idea of living and working in a rural community alongside everyone else. The leader who does not drive a fancy car and is fairly unpretentious. Their children attend the same schools and their family members shop in the same stores. This role conveys strong support for the community as the superintendent is seen as a contributing member of the community (Copeland, 2013).

Uniqueness of Each Rural Program

It is hard to characterize the categorize rural schools because they differ so vastly

from each other. Schools in the eastern part of the United States, like rural Vermont are hard to compare with those rural schools in Alaska in the far northwest part of the country. There are, however some characteristics that hold true regardless of location.

The schools in rural communities usually provide the venue for the recreational and social activities for a small town. It is the place that all kinds of activities occur, as is often a source of town pride that is well used by residents. For example fundraisers for local nonprofits such as the fire department or services clubs like the Rotary Club or the Lions Club are held at the school. Sometimes the proceeds for the activity will be donated back to the school in the way of scholarships or other donations to the school. Often times these are activities that have gone on for decades and to deny use of the facilities would be politically difficult because the school is the only venue in many small towns that has the capacity to handle such an activity. Effective leadership in a rural district involves using the recourses that are allocated in the budget for the staff and the students, to move the district forward. It takes resourcefulness and planning to be successful with most rural budgets. Opportunities for additional funding sources are very seldom found and school districts are often struggling to get the most value from the dollars spent.

Advantages of Rural Living

Among the reasons why people move to small districts is to gain or retain a quality of life or to be able to raise their children in a place that they feel is safe. Many times their money can buy a larger house to live in and or acquire more land around them (Salinas, 2000). Local schools are usually the centers of small town life and because of the rural nature of communities, they are the only school that is geographically viable to attend even if school choice were an option. Rural communities often identify themselves

through their local schools and they “cherish local control of their schools to keep their community’s character and vitality in good standing”(Salinas, 2000, p. 3).

Usually in the case of small rural schools, students are bused sometimes over an hour to attend the local school because it is the only possible school to attend within a reasonable distance. The availability of bussing often makes access to the school before and after school hours for extra curricular activities such as clubs or after school programing difficult (Salinas, 2000).

Research in Rural Leadership

From examining available research there are two studies that were done that seem to closely relate to the topic. The first study conducted in that were done the state of Michigan in 2010, focused on the leadership practices of seven superintendents in districts that were rural and disadvantaged (Forner et al., 2012). This work not only identified the six leadership practices previously established in the meta-analysis done by Waters and Marzano in 2006, but it also looked into other practices that district administrators might utilize to improve their success in working in rural, low income districts (Forner et al., 2012).

This research found that the factors Waters and Marsano (2006) identified in their meta-analysis also correlated to the effective leadership and instructional practices that the seven rural superintendents exhibited in their everyday work (Forner et al., 2012). The findings of this study also revealed that the superintendents studied used a more direct approach that is much more people centered than did their suburban or urban counterparts. This more personable, hands-on approach was expected professional behavior in effective rural districts and had to be present within the interactions in school district matters. This

more direct and accessible approach by the superintendent was perceived as a necessary part of interactions and was vital for rural district leadership success. (Forner et al., 2012).

The second rural leadership study was conducted in rural California districts that have a growing population of disadvantaged, non-English speaking students living in poverty (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009). Unlike many other rural regions, these rural California districts are growing disproportionately to other parts of the country. This study focused on three high performing, high poverty, and rural California high schools. “Cross-case findings revealed that the local educational leadership had effectively employed multiple instructional, distributed, and transformation practices to improve student outcomes, and had established multiple formal and informal linkages with instructional entities outside of the school to accomplish their mission” (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009, p. 1). The contributing factors in reaching success in these three selected high schools were: “a focus on instruction, school-wide standards and expectations; strengths of teachers, and development of multiple systems of support for students with varying needs” (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009, p. 1). These schools made significant gains in student achievement by accessing community resources and tapping into greater levels of parent engagement. They were able to get parents more involved in the school (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009).

These two studies inform the field about successful leadership practices in rural high-poverty, high-achievement school districts. While this research has made a contribution they also highlight the need for further research, especially in rural areas. Additional research is needed to illuminate effective district leadership practices where there is evidence that schools that have been able to turn around against all odds and are

now showing success and significant gains in student academic performance (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009; Forner et al., 2012).

Chapter Summary

There has been a history in the United States, beginning in the 1950's and 60's, of using political efforts to try to compel the educational system in the United States to improve student achievement. For decades politicians in the U.S. have placed education and improved academic performance through increased accountability at center stage of national reform efforts (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). They have made it a scapegoat for why our economy has suffered or the United States has lost its place and fallen behind in world leadership compared to its first world nation rivals. The reaction to *A Nation at Risk* in the early 1980's and again in the early 2000's with the national political agenda of *No Child Left Behind* were efforts to direct that political agenda toward the improvement of funding for programs especially in Math and Science. NCLB shifted the focus of the nation's public schools to greater use of standardized test scores in reading and math and closing the achievement gap between the disadvantaged, minority students and their more advantaged white peers (Klein, 2015). Despite these efforts to reform education, little has changed. However, "there is increasing evidence that leadership makes a difference in schools" (Louis, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom, 2010, p. 315). In today's climate of heightened expectations principals and superintendents have a very important role to play given the expectations from both parents and school boards demanding that the school leaders improve teaching and learning ("Leadership matters," 2013).

There seems to have been an increase in interest in studying principal leadership since the year 2000. The Wallace Foundation ("The school principal as leader," 2013) has supported studies investigating the importance of principals' practice in schools and its relationship to teacher instructional practices and student's academic growth. There is empirical evidence in the number of studies done that show that principals are effective in shaping and improving the following areas that contribute towards school improvement: (a) shaping the vision of academic successful for students. (b) creating a climate that allows education to improve (c) building leadership in others (d) improving classroom instruction and (d) managing people, data, and the processes to promote school improvement ("The school principal as leader," 2013).

There have been five studies since the year 2000 that have focused on understanding the relationship between principals' leadership and academic improvement of students in the schools they lead. The five studies, (Bell, Bolam, & Cubillo, 2003; Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006; Leithwood, Lewis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2005; Witziers, Gosker, & Kruger, 2003) all indicate that principals' leadership was second only to classroom instruction in having a positive influence on student achievement in their schools ("The school principal as leader," 2013). Findings from this research reveal that effective school leaders motivate staff and set a vision for future learning within the buildings they lead. Effective principals help to set achievement targets and monitor steps to help make progress in reaching them ("The school principal as leader," 2013).

The principal's role is much different in the way that it addresses student achievement and improvement of classroom instruction. The personal nature of the

position allows principals the ability to work with data and to use resources and to match personnel with individual student to improve each students learning. Superintendents work collaboratively to improve systems, work with parents, school boards, administrators, and staff to align goals, monitor goals, and to use resources strategically. This is a different role from that of the principal's role, but each is very important.

To date two meta-analyses (Marzano & Waters, 2009; Waters & Marzano, 2006) have been undertaken to examine if there was any positive effect between district leadership and student achievement. Each of these studies was the largest study investigating the relationship on the topic. These two studies have contributed much to the work in the field of furthering our understanding of the importance and impact of district leadership on students. Both of these studies identified five areas that have the most positive effect on promoting school achievement. These five areas of effective leadership are: (a) collaborative goal setting by involving all of the district's relevant stakeholders in the goal setting process (Marzano & Waters, 2009), (b) setting direction by establishing nonnegotiable goals for achievement and instruction (Leithwood et al., 2004), (c) creating board alignment with school boards and the support of district goals, (Waters & Marzano, 2006) (d) monitoring achievement of instructional goals (Safer & Fleischman, 2005), and (e) gathering resources to support the school district's goals for achievement and for instruction (Waters et al., 2005).

Each of the meta-analysis examining district leadership, done in 2006 by Waters and Marzano and again in 2009 by Marzano and Waters, has provided insight into effective practice for district leadership. The findings are helpful because they build a knowledge base in an area where there has been little research done. These meta-analysis,

however, marginally address effective practice in rural school districts where there are additional challenges of poverty, isolation, and a lack of resources. Such scarcity of resources can force district and building administrators to have a wide range of responsibilities. Often they are asked to stretch their roles by sharing and performing tangential and non-traditional tasks, largely because there is no one else to do them. Only two studies referenced earlier, addressed effective leadership in rural impoverished districts (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009; Forner et al, 2012).

Even though the Marzano and Waters research in 2006 and 2009 was cutting edge research and has been helpful in uncovering the roles and the leadership necessary for effective turnaround, little has been done to ascertain if these same principles operate in the same way in rural areas. Rural research is underrepresented in the literature. We know little about the leadership in rural school districts and the factors that have contributed to school turnaround, let alone, helped to sustain it.

Many questions remain unanswered by the research that has been conducted to date. How have district leaders affected a change and are now finding and sustaining more successful student achievement despite the odds against them doing so? What leadership was necessary for this positive change to have occurred? What is it that district leaders contributed to that positive change and what did they do to achieve it? How is increased student academic achievement sustained in these districts? Does sustaining the positive school improvement over time depend on the leadership at the district level, or at the building level?

It is evident that answers to these questions through research in rural leadership can make a positive contribution to the literature and research thus far. Information

gathered about the components of effective leadership in school improvement efforts will also benefit impoverished rural schools, their communities, their teachers, and their leaders. It will help to inform rural leaders for the purpose of improving their leadership skills by isolating targeted, high return key leadership practices, and assist them to become effective rural leaders.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter is an explanation of the of the case study methods used in this study. As will be discussed, these methods are ideal when answering the research questions under investigation.

Conceptual Framework

This study uses a qualitative research approach with a multiple case study design. Qualitative research is focused on understanding the meaning people have constructed to make sense of the world and experiences they have in the world (Merriam, 2009). As such, this study is rooted in the conceptual framework taken from the theory, writing and the thinking of Lev Vygotsky. It is a study based on the concept that human activities take place in a cultural context and is mediated by language and other symbol systems (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). Vygotsky's ideas then are ideal as a conceptual framework for the study as it takes place in the social settings of teaching and learning and is built on the concept that there is a dynamic interdependence of social and individual processes found in schools.

Research Design

The research design used in this study is the Qualitative Research Design model as set forth by Joseph A. Maxwell. The reason that this design was selected is that it seems to be very compatible with the concepts applied within this study when working in a school setting. The research questions in this study were completely developed by the researcher who also gathered the evidence on site at each school site. The data collected was then organized as the categories patterns and themes began to emerge by going back

and forth between the database of evidence and the themes supported by the data collected. There is quality in the study that is taken from the information from the data used from each face to face interview conducted.

The content of the study is something that develops and emerges and cannot be tightly structured. It cannot be otherwise prescribed. This allows for a dynamic process where changes and shifts are commonplace as the participants respond to the questions that are asked or the recollections they talk about. The researcher records the information as they present it. It is free flowing; comments are made as the respondents think of the answers to question posed to them. In a qualitative study such as this, the respondents convey their own personal background information, culture and experience that lends itself to making meaning of the information and insight being shared with the researcher. This information helps to guide the direction of the study and shapes the pattern of the concepts being promoted and makes the study reflective and authentic and unique. The researcher makes an attempt to create a holistic picture out of a complex construct, in this case the school district being studied by using the factors involved in the account and calling upon the multiple perspectives of the individuals who are intimately involved within the organization (Creswell, 2013).

The uniqueness form of this model is that it is a somewhat flexible model that allows for collecting and analyzing data, developing and modifying theory, elaborating or refocusing on the research questions and identifying and addressing questions of validity all at the same time (Maxwell, 2013).

The model consists of five components that have been created to address specific concerns in the qualitative research study process. Using this model is appropriate when

studying multiple sets of cases is the subject of the work. Each component has a purpose and together all of them offer a comprehensive approach to the study. The five components in this interactive approach to research design consists of:

- **Goals.** Why are we conducting this study and what are the goals of this study to be addressed? What practices and policies need to be looked at and are perhaps influenced as a result of this work?
- **Conceptual framework.** What is the conceptual framework and what seems to be going on with people or within the setting that make this case important to look at?
- **Research questions.** What in each of the cases studied is there to understand in order to gain a better understanding of the participants and the setting within the context of the study?
- **Methods.** What will be the actual work and processes used to conduct the study and how will the researcher collect and analyze the data? There are four components of the design (a) What is the relationship of the participants within the study? (b) What is the setting, participants, times and places of the data collection and the other data sources used? (c) What are methods for collecting the data; and (d) What strategies and techniques will be used to conduct the study?
- **Validity.** How might the data that has been collected and the conclusions that have been formulated, be wrong? How can the conclusions of the findings be challenged and how should the threats to the validity be dealt with in the study (Maxwell, 2013)?

Using the Case Study as a Method for Research

Qualitative research is also defined as a research method that employs participant observation or case studies that result in a narrative, descriptive account of a setting or practice (Parkinson & Drislane, 2011) “ The primary purpose of the case study is to understand something that is unique to the case(s). Knowledge from the study is then used to apply to other cases and contexts”(Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013, p. 14). Participants in the case study are selected to be interviewed because they are in a unique position to witness interactions and events; what has made the case eligible to study. Each participant gives information about the case’s special attributes and case features that made him or her worth examining (Guest et al., 2013).

Case studies are used when helping researchers to understand complex problems in an in-depth, holistic, and robust way (Zainal, 2007). Using a case study design allows a researcher to examine data in a single context. Case studies can be effective in providing information in the field of education, social services, and behavioral sciences. “The value of the case study approach is that it deals directly with the individual case in its actual context” (Yin, 2016, p. 68). This allows the subjects being interviewed to state their point of view from their own personal accounts. It is a way to allow people who have knowledge of an event to express their own story from the standpoint of an eyewitness.

One drawback in using a case study approach is that it is difficult to reach conclusions when events do not happen often and evidence is rare. One way of getting around this drawback in case study research is to use a triangulation technique of gathering information from multiple sources to confirm the validity of the process used (Zainal, 2007). This study used the triangulation technique to try to verify the information

given through the use of multiple sources of information. For this reason multiple sources of data were gathered within the case study design.

The Collection of Data to Develop Profile of the District

This research study began by laying out the purpose for studying schools in small rural districts that have developed a profile of improvement in student achievement despite poverty and isolation that is difficult for other districts to overcome.

According to Robert K. Yin using multiple sources of data strengthens case study research (Yin, 2003). There are six sources that are usually available to gain insight through multiple source information. These sources are archival records such as meeting minutes, interviews of people within the organization, and direct observations taken from each site visitation. In each of the four participating schools observed there were field notes collected on each of the school sites in parking lots, hallways, meetings, and artifacts were collect such as memos to staff and administration, policy information, budget information and minutes from meetings. Limited photographs were taken and audio taping using a voice recorder was used to capture observational information and record interviews from each site visitation. A fully detailed description of each site was written including a description of the administrative structure and a program schedule for each school within each school district studied.

In Chapter 4 there is a full description for each case and an explanation given as to why the case meets the criteria for the study. The description includes (a) the size of the school (b) description of the rural nature of the community (c) description of the administration of the school (d) the makeup of the district (e) how the district is organized (f) its historical background (g) the make up of instruction and delivery of

courses (h) the makeup and diversity of the student body, and (i) academic subjects offered such as English, math, social studies, sciences, and electives.

There was a full analysis conducted of all of the cases selected according to the purpose for the investigation and the reasons why these districts were selected for study. Each one of the districts selected were the closest match to the selection criteria developed for the study.

Using a Multiple Case Study

Multiple case studies are two or more cases within the same study. They should be selected so that they can replicate each other. There are two types of case study models that are relevant and will be used within this study. “A descriptive case study presents a complete description of a phenomenon being studied. An explanatory case study presents data bearing on cause-effect relationships explaining how it is that they happened” (Yin, 2003, p. 5). For the purpose of this multiple case study, both the descriptive case study and the explanatory case study methods were combined to create a complete and thorough look of what was taking place in each of the districts being considered.

Multiple case studies are used as a research design method when the researcher wants to consider cases where real-life events are being examined and numerous sources are being used as evidence. Multiple case designs help to support the previous results that have been uncovered (Zainal, 2007). “A multiple case study enables the researcher to explore the differences within and between cases”(Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 548). The goal is to replicate data collection and analysis across cases and predict similar as well as contrasting results (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

The multiple case study approach is used when trying to compare similar organizations. In this case the organizations to be studied are school districts with similar demographics, similar struggles, and similar successful outcomes. In this study there was an overall consideration of all of the districts in the northern New England region. The researcher selected from several districts and several different research sites using these multiple cases to illustrate the different approaches that each of the district leaders used to improve student achievement. Several school districts were selected in order to compare cases and contrast cases according to each district's outcome at each site. The multiple case study approach uses a replication of effort for each case looked at in this approach (Creswell, 2013).

This study utilized a multiple case study design using interviews with staff members (i.e., teachers and administrators) at both the building level and at the district level during site visits to each school selected. There was a considerable amount of time onsite with which to collect data from the schools selected for research. Interviews were used as primary source data and that were compared with documents related to the school district's work case. These documents have been analyzed and compared to interview data to more fully understand the steps taken in the district's improvement efforts. Both sources of data have been analyzed to look for major themes and common patterns for all cases studied. There were general conclusions and inferences made to answer the central research questions under investigation within this study (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009).

Criteria and Selection of the Districts to be Studied

Identification of the districts to be investigated in the study began in September 2017. Initially, the entire number of public school districts in the three northern New England states of Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont were considered. The number of public school districts in the three states was 904 public school districts (Maine Department of Education 2017; New Hampshire Department of Education, 2017; Vermont Agency of Education, 2017).

The researcher then employed a method of identifying small, rural, and poor districts from the 904 school districts. The second criterion used to further define this group was the rural nature of each of these schools as rural a target characteristic of the research. Rural was defined as those school districts that were classified by the National Center for Educational Statistics code of 41, 42 or 43. There were 602 districts that were considered rural under this definition.

The third criterion was the size of the district. School districts with a student population of between 400 to 1000 students average daily attendance (ADM) were considered for the study. This decision was made so that there could not be large shifts in data and therefore larger variations because of changes in small groups of student as it applies to the overall population data. This size of school district criteria limited the selection to 56 districts that were both rural and had a student ADM count of between 400 to 1000 students grades kindergarten through twelfth grade.

The fourth criteria used to identify a district for the study was the poverty data of each district. To qualify for the criteria of poverty in this study a school district had to

have a free and reduced meal count equal to or above 50%. When looking at the group of district's under consideration, 27 school districts were identified as meeting this criteria.

The fifth criteria used to identify a school district for this study was the school districts drop out data for the most recent three years. Information from grades 9-12 for each of the high schools in each of the districts was examined. This criteria showed an effort by the administration and staff to try to set up programming to fit the needs of the students the system served and to place emphasis on keeping students in programs to fit their individual growth and development. After looking at this data, the pool narrowed to 12 districts. There were 7 from Maine, 2 from New Hampshire and 3 from Vermont.

The criteria of turnaround school districts had to be satisfied and this criteria narrowed the selection of districts further. School districts that were eligible to receive school improvement grants or (SIGs) over the last seven years since 2010 were identified from the remaining districts. Of this group, the districts of Mohican in Vermont and Abenaki Highlands School District in New Hampshire were identified in 2010 as districts receiving school improvement funding. There were also 7 districts in Maine that were identified. After careful consideration North Penobscot School District and Maliseet School District were districts that were included from Maine because they fit the inclusion criteria determined for the study as described in the following section.

Using a Screening Method to Find Multiple Cases to Study

The population of interest in this study was a group of rural, high poverty districts in the three states that have sustained academic turnaround. The researcher identified four districts that fit the final criteria, in other words, schools that have significantly improved outcomes when compared to others with similar demographics. For the purposes of this

study a method of criterion sampling was used to identify cases to be studied. These criterion were:

- School districts in the northern three states in northern New England: Maine, Vermont and New Hampshire;
- Districts that fall in the rural categories as defined in the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) urban-centric locale categories. These school districts are classified as rural using Federal Rural-Urban codes of 41, 42, and or 43
- Small school districts that have a average daily attendance from between 400 students and 1000 students.
- School districts that are economically disadvantaged, i.e. over 50% of the school district's students having been eligible for free and reduced meals.
- Smarter Balanced Assessment scores at or above the state average over the last two years
- School districts that have been eligible for the School Improvement Grant (SIG) over the last eight years since 2010.
- A 90% or higher graduation rate over the last five years

The following section will describe several of the criteria used for identifying districts in more detail.

Definition of Rural Districts

This study criteria relied on the (NCES) definition of rural referred to as the urban-centric classification system, which began in 2006. This system of classification is used by the United States Census Bureau to define areas that are categorized as urban,

suburban, town, and or rural regions in every state in the country. Each of the four regions are also divided into classifications contains three sub-categories (i.e., 41, 42, 43) that better define town and rural districts. These three town sub-categories are as follows: The code for rural fringe district is code 41. It is the most populated in this group of rural districts in this study. Remote town, defined as territory inside and urban cluster that is more than 35 miles from an urbanized area (i.e. Federal Urban code 42) Rural code 43 describes rural and isolated districts. These are the most remote of the districts studied.

This study did not include school districts in the urban or suburban regions of the three states studied in northern New England in the states of Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont.

School Improvement Funding Eligibility

All of the districts that were finalist for the selection process had applied for a school improvement grant or grants (SIGs) over the last seven years since 2010. School improvement grants (SIGs) are “authorized under section 1003(g) of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), are grants to state educational agencies (SEAs) that SEAs use to make competitive sub grants to local educational agencies (LEAs) that demonstrate the greatest need for the funds and the strongest commitment to use the funds to provide adequate resources in order to substantially raise the achievement of students in their lowest-performing schools”(United States Department of Education, 2017, p. 1). The data identified which districts fit the criteria for schools that have had a sustained pattern of improved outcomes. For the purpose of this research the criteria for the cases to be studied were partially defined by the definition of turnaround schools as follows: “Turnaround is a dramatic and

comprehensive intervention in a low performing school that: (a) produces significant gains in achievement within two years; and (b) readies the school for the longer process of transformation into a high-performing organization” (Kutash, Nico, Gorin, Rahmatullah, & Tallant, 2010, p. 4).

Drawing From Prior Research to Develop a Research Focus

As has been discussed at length in Chapter 2, the Marzano and Waters meta-analysis done in 2009 uncovered the relationship between district leadership and student achievement. The authors investigated the value of the relationship of these two variables using research studies on the topic that have taken place in the United States between 1970 to 2005. All of the studies indicated a correlation between district leadership and student academic achievement. All of the studies also used some standardized measures of student achievement (Marzano & Waters, 2009). Marzano and Waters’ meta-analysis findings show that district leadership behaviors are associated with student achievement. With that understanding, a second research question was posed: “What are the specific district leadership behaviors that are associated with student achievement (Marzano & Waters, 2009, p. 6)?

In response to that research question, Marzano and Waters identified five specific actions that when used by district leaders can contribute to positive student academic achievement in a school system. We know from their research that it is important for goals to be set collaboratively with all relevant stakeholders involved including central office staff, building level administration, and members of the school board (Marzano & Waters, 2009). These goals must be nonnegotiable for the entire district and must focus on student achievement and classroom instruction. Effective superintendents work to

align the board goals and to make sure the goals are supported both publicly and privately. There must also be resources of time, supplies, equipment and personnel allocated to support the attainment of the goals.

The purpose of this study was to examine how the change to demand accountability over the number of years of No Child Left Behind may have affected the leadership in some schools that have turned around and their students made significant improvements in academic outcomes while others have failed to change and shown improved outcomes. A multiple case study was used to compare similar organizations selected in this study, which had had similar demographics, similar struggles, and similar successful results. It is a study that considers all of the factors of successful district leadership research (Marzano & Waters, 2009) present in districts that have a track record of success. It is a study that looks at those school district focuses, and effective district leadership practices by examining evidence and considering how that has positively figured into the districts successful outcomes contributing to the successful instruction for students.

Additionally Marzano and Waters' research did not take into account the work of superintendents working with disadvantaged populations in rural, poor districts. There has been a body of literature about effective leadership, however that literature thus far has been used to study urban and suburban districts. Therefore, in this study there was a more narrow focus and a set of variables that were not taken into account. This study will concentrate on the leadership practices of superintendents in small, rural districts that are isolated and have high poverty numbers and are somewhat isolated in the three most northern states of Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont. Despite these hardships these

districts have shown remarkable test scores, low dropout rates, graduation rates, and have maintained growth in student achievement outcomes. Therefore, the current study also considers if there are other factors not considered by the research done by Marzano and Waters (2009) that might be unique in the district leadership profile of small, rural, isolated school districts in poor communities.

The Smarter Balanced Assessment was used to help identify the schools that fit this criteria using the first four years that this assessment has been given in all three of the northern New England states. Other testing measures had been used to assess students and school district progress before 2014 under No Child Left Behind. The Smarter Balanced Assessment has most recently been used to assess school district progress at this time. These scores are only one element being used to determine eligibility from the list above as not to have them outweigh other criteria being used in the study.

Notification of Selected Participants

Once selection of the school districts was made using the criteria, a letter was sent to the superintendents of each district introducing the study to them. This was followed up with a phone call asking for a personal visit with each district superintendent. Next face-to-face interviews were scheduled with each superintendent. During those interviews, the study was described and the possible logistics, times and dates for follow-up, were discussed. The superintendent identified a pool of school board members, teachers, and principals so that additional interviews could be scheduled. Those who participated were given a letter outlining the project (see Appendix B Participant Recruitment Letter).

The use of accounts from additional participants (e.g. principals, teachers) is an important element to this study. Participants were selected using the recommendation of the administration in the setting to be studied in order for the researcher to have the ability to be able to see and hear accounts of the atmosphere of the school. This also enhanced the researcher's ability to reflect on the experience personally while gathering data (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

Observations were done while documenting with field notes in order to record more detailed objective descriptions of what was taking place within each setting to be studied. The intent was to document and analyze the deeper values, actions and practices that set the school apart from others in terms of increased and sustained academic achievement.

Using is Interviewing for Data Collection

Interviews were conducted from February to June 2018. There were a series of two and three day visits at the four sites for a total of 12 days used to gather information to understand the relationship between district leadership practices and student achievement within the schools in the district (Marzano & Waters, 2009). The work in this study was up close and personal in order to witness the complex actions and interactions which were the underpinnings of the way and how each school system operated. All of the interviews were conducted using questions that captured evidence needed to determine if the leadership in the school districts were employing practices identified by prior research (Marzano & Waters, 2009) that resulted in enhanced student achievement (i.e. collaborative goal setting, nonnegotiable goals, school board alignment, monitoring of goals, allocating resources).

In-depth interviews were conducted in order to explore several general topics while being respectful of however the participants want to respond to each question. It is important when interviewing many people at multiple sites that the way a participant frames the responses needs to be captured so that the conversation is recorded in the way the respondent intended rather than being influenced by the researchers bias. During the interview process there was a process of careful listening employed as well as gentle probing so that careful elaboration was elicited from each interviewee. Gathering data from questioning can be a tedious method of gaining information and care must be taken to understand what respondents are trying to communicate within their answers and explanations. The quality of data gathered has to be considered because these case studies were longer and more in-depth than other interviews, and the answers given tend to be subjective by their nature. Follow-up interviews were conducted, if necessary which allowed the participants to make additional comments on the findings (Creswell, 2014). Interviews, especially when combined with observations, are a very powerful way to understand the atmosphere and the conditions that the people being interviewed deal with in their work each day.

It was expected that that in all of these interview sessions that a solid understanding of the work of the district superintendent would be elicited in the discussion and there would time set aside so that participants could describe their experiences and their observations of past work. In this case study design open ended and standardized questions were used (See Appendix C for Interview Questions). More importantly it was an approach used that communicated to the person being interviewed that the participant's views were both valuable and useful.

This being a multi-case study there was systematization of questions because there were many people interviewed (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). The interview process gathered a wide variety of information because there were many subjects across several schools. Interviews in the selected districts were conducted with: (a) the superintendent (b) building administrators (i.e. principals and department chairs), (c) parents and or community members (d) school board members and (e) other school administrative personnel.

All of the interviews were conducted using audio recording and each interview lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes long. The exception to this was the interviews with the superintendents, which were between 45 and 90 minutes long. The audio-tapes were transcribed, at a later date for convenience, making sure that all of the interview data was captured by the audio recordings and matched the notes in the written transcription. Each of the participants was furnished with the interview questions well in advance of the interview. Interviewees also had a chance to review the transcripts of the information recorded to make sure that the information that was transcribed was accurate from their perspective (i.e., participant validation).

Ethical Considerations

This study was compliant with the guidelines of expressed through the Plymouth State University's (PSU) Policy on Research Integrity, which holds the expectation of the highest degree of ethics, and integrity when conducting research studies. Steps were taken to protect the privacy and confidentiality of all subjects; considerations that should be foremost when conducting research. Permission was granted from the Institutional Review Board to begin the research prior to undertaking the formal field study. All

participants were required to fill out informed consent forms, which contained a description of the study and outlined the risks of the study, and the benefits. The form assured the participant of confidentiality and the ability to terminate participation in the study at any point in time. There was an emphasis placed on the voluntary nature of the research process and the form outlined a process for interviewees to ask further questions if necessary at a later date.

Other Sources of Data

In order to ensure accuracy, fidelity, and integrity within the process there was a careful review of documents conducted specific to the district being examined. These documents assisted the researcher in painting another part of the picture in what is taking place in the school being examined that caused it to stand out in the field and be exceptional. This review of documents was a way to see some of the values and beliefs and values of the participants (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). These documents include minutes of meetings and memoranda, logs, announcements, grant application language, policy statements, newspaper accounts, email messages of policy speeches, letters, and any other written material gained through a search for information (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). In the research phase the primary responsibilities of the case study researcher was to gather data from multiple sources where there was evidence through is a system of triangulation (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2016; Stake, 2003). This method maintains a system that holds onto a chain of evidence in order to increase information reliability. This information gathering process was conducted in an unobtrusive way and did not disturb the setting being studied (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

Data Analysis

Interviews were coded and triangulated with other information to form a truer picture of the phenomenon taking place and uncover what caused the districts in the study to be unique among other schools. By using cross case analysis, cases were compared to each other and analyzed to discover what common practices were taking place across the multiple cases. In this way the more cases that were analyzed with patterns and commonalities the more compelling the interpretations of the findings were likely to be. The value of the research would be if it leads to the discovery of recurring patterns, themes, relationships and behavior of educational leaders that lead to sustained program success (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

Triangulation of data was used in order to make sure that descriptions of each case study were objective and accurate while uncovering participant's perspectives and recollections on events in a clear, more precise picture (Creswell, 2013). In addition the qualitative research process included a method of preparation and organization of notes and other artifacts including field notes from transcripts and image data such as photographs. Substantial organization took place after each subsequent interview to reduce the data (Creswell, 2013). The coding phase of the study allowed for the information to be reduced into meaningful segments to note themes and categories (Creswell, 2013). The coding process was also used to assemble information in a systematic order and data could be arranged and classified in order to view patterns and groupings that were organized and linked. This was done to indicate similarities and differences in the district with the intent of making comparisons and categorizing information for the study (Saldana, 2016).

Causation Coding

For the purpose of this study, causation coding was used to locate and to extract information from interview data transcripts, participants' observations and field notes. This method was used to uncover what people believed about what was taking place and why it was taking place (Saldana, 2016). Most important in examining educational systems, is to ask the question why something is happening regarding peoples' beliefs and making the attempt to try to answer why it is happening. In causation coding it is important to consider all of the data narratives and to try to piece what hangs together so that the complete story can be told. In this case the researcher attempted to understand what had happened to make a schools district successful and how leadership at the district level may have contributed to the student outcomes achieved. The stories that were part of the interviews had to be picked apart and analyzed in order to accurately understand what had taken place and why. The coding process allowed the researcher to organize the concepts studied and to isolate those concepts. In addition, it allowed the researcher to compare ideas generated from the data to themes expressed in prior district leadership research and to generate the creation of categories and subcategories so that the information could be better analyzed.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The purpose of this chapter is to present evidence and factual information to answer the research questions posed at the beginning of this research. This chapter will also consider unexpected evidence that was found in this research study related to improving student achievement, and classroom instruction in small, impoverished, rural school districts. The chapter will also outline other outcomes that became evident at the time the data was gathered that might contribute to effective district leadership of rural schools in the future.

As it was stated in Chapter 1, the rationale or purpose of this study was to answer the following questions:

- 1.) What are the qualities of effective leadership (i.e., superintendents) for rural districts in Maine, NH, and VT who have rising and sustained student achievement despite challenging district demographics?
- 2.) Are there any common characteristics between these educational leaders?
- 3.) What are the perceptions of principals and teachers of important leadership qualities and school culture in these improved schools?

Each of these questions will be addressed and answered based on the information collected using the methods prescribed within the study.

In order to answer the questions that this study presented, qualitative study methods were used to gather solid descriptive data taken from interviews in four schools that met the profile developed for study i.e. small, rural, high poverty, school improvement grant, and high performing. There were a total of 12 days used to visit the

four sites and interview the 43 professionals identified for the study. In identifying the districts for final consideration it is important to note that while they all met each of the selection criteria, each of them was also a little different from each other. Although they have similar characteristics as each of them were successful based on the criteria selected, each of them also had characteristics that set them apart from one another. Table 4.0 describes how each of the four districts met the criteria of rural, small, high poverty and all had high graduation rates. The rural code is an indication of how isolated the rural region was that the school district was located in. The higher the number, the greater the isolation that exists for these districts. Each of the school districts had to have been eligible for School Improvement Grants or at least qualify for one in the last eight years (i.e., since 2010). The North Penobscot District qualified for two grants over the eight-year period. Districts also had to have a 50% or higher free and reduced meals percentage, as qualified by the state and federal government statistics. This percentage reflects that over half of the families in the district had low family income when compared to other families in the state. Table 4.0 also shows a high percentage of students graduating after twelfth grade from these small, poor, rural districts school district that were identified for the study.

Table 4.0

Demographic Information for Each District

	Rural Code	2017 Enrollment	School improvement grant	Free and reduced meals average of 2014-15, 2015-16	Graduation rate 2014-15 2015-16
Maliseet School District RSU# 105, Maine	43	676	2012	68.8%	90.9
Mohican School District, Vermont	41	797	2010	53.3%	89.0
North Penobscot School District, Maine	42	664	2010 & 2016	67.9%	95.3
Abenaki Highlands School District, New Hampshire	41	582	2010	53.7%	95.2

In Table 4.1 below, additional criteria is displayed for the four schools that met the profile developed for study (i.e. low dropout rate, high performing). It is evident that the North Penobscot School District in Maine displays lower scores than the state average for the years 2015-16. This school district contains five schools within it and only one of the five schools performed is significantly lower than the state average for the 2014 to 2016 years or they would not have qualified for the school improvement grant in 2016.

However, it was also noted upon investigation there were other schools in the same district that showed strong test scores year after year. The district's drop in scores was attributed to the very low scores in a very narrow time frame in one out of five schools in a district. This drop in scores should be seen as somewhat of an outlier. For the other inclusion criteria (e.g., poverty and drop out data) North Penobscot was consistent and met the criteria. Likewise, if the Smarter Balanced Assessment were still given in the state of Maine there would have been a larger array of years available where more years of testing data could have been compared. If this were the case it would be far more likely that North Penobscot would exhibit a far different picture.

Table 4.1

Data for District

	Average drop out rate 2014-16 (Average State 2014-16)	Average Smarter Balanced proficient and above Math, District 2014-16 (Average State 2014-16)	Average Smarter Balanced proficient and above Reading, District 2014-16 (Average State 2014-16)
Maliseet School District RSU# 105, Maine	1.7% (2.5%)	46.5% (49.5%)	42.08% (34.8%)
Mohican School District, Vermont	5.5% (2.9%)	41.3% (49.0%)	41.9% (54.7%)
North Penobscot School District, Maine	1.9% (2.5%)	28.4% (37.2%)	34.8% (43.6%)
Abenaki Highlands School District, New Hampshire	2.3% (2.2%)	63.5% (50.3%)	59.0% (40.0%)

Participants by Position

There were a total of 43 participants interviewed in this study. Four of these were superintendents. Over half or (53%) of the people interviewed were classroom teachers (see Table 4.2 below). There was a smaller percentage of building administrators and professionals in supporting roles interviewed (16% and 11% respectively). In addition four school board members were also interviewed for the study.

Table 4.2

Summary of Interviews by Position of Participant

Position of interviewee	Individuals interviewed	%
Teachers	23	53.49
Principals	7	16.28
Professionals in Supporting Roles (Guidance, Special Ed, Technology)	5	11.63
Superintendents	4	9.30
School Board members	4	9.30
Total	43	100.00

Case Description

In each of the case descriptions of the four school districts visited the researcher maintained strict confidentiality by making sure that each superintendent was named with a pseudonyms and that the school district location could not be verified or identified as to the exact location, rather only the county location of the state that the case was located in. Each of the superintendents being studied has far different style and experience in the field and also within the job of Superintendent of Schools.

In order to describe each case the description must contain the following information: (a) a brief description of the superintendent described within the study, (b) a brief economic, demographic and geographic description for the local community and the region, (c) a brief characterization and relationships between each school and its community as related to by the superintendent, (d) an overall assessment of the

superintendents opportunities, and successes in his or her current leadership tenure within the district, and (e) a brief description regarding the school districts future challenges and future prospects in the years ahead.

In order to protect the identity of each of the school districts in the study and to not allow the landmarks of the towns to be recognized, Indian tribal names that were indicative of the state and region where those tribes settled in colonial America region in Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont (New Hampshire, Abenaki Maine, Penobscot and Maliseet, and Vermont Mohican) were used to substitute for the names of the towns and the landmarks in the study. Fictitious names were substituted using colors for the last name (Mr. Robert Brown, Mr. Todd Green, Ms. Susan White, and Dr. Jonathon Gold) to identify the superintendents in each of the supervisory districts studied.

The use of the Native American tribal names identifies the rich history of Native American settlements the northern New England region. It is difficult to move around the three states especially in Maine and not see many towns and natural landmarks in the region without noticing the Native American heritage names of the Abenaki, Penobscot, Mohican, and Maliseet tribes. The color names that are substituted for the names of the superintendents were randomly selected and had no particular significance for their use. In all of the school districts that were visited there was an obvious love of children expressed by each superintendent and by the staff members whose interviews were this part of the study. Many of these talented people expressed that they could not see themselves in any other type of industry and they were happy and content doing this work on the behalf of the children they serve. The administrators in the study expressed they were interested in seeing the district that they served in work best for the students

and the community. They expressed confidence in their work and each of them had a good idea of the strategy they were pursuing to affect positive student outcomes in the Supervisory Union. They were all very happy and content where they were working. The superintendents all expressed need for more resources. They also seemed to be content with the reality of what little money they had to work with they knew that the current reality in the district they served was probably going to stay the same because of the heavy tax impact currently on school districts in the these three New England states at this time. Each superintendent said that the work was stressful, but the contribution each of them made everyday for the children in their district was most important to them. Each of them expressed of appreciation for the school board and for the staff they worked with in every interview that was conducted in all four school districts in each of the three states.

Case One: Superintendent Robert Brown, South Maliseet, Maine

Mr. Robert Brown is a very large imposing man with a very deep voice. He was not at all imposing when it was time to interact with him for the first interview, rather he was soft spoken and kindly in nature. He admitted that his size is often off putting for some people he meets for the first time and that once they get to know him, he is far less threatening. He admitted that he is not always easy going, and that he can remove staff if they are not fulfilling their responsibilities. Mr. Brown is an experienced superintendent having served in one other RSU in Maine before coming to Maliseet. He had currently been serving in the Maliseet district for one and a half years. Throughout the conversation with the interviewer it was very obvious that he was aware that the SU is breaking in half and because of that his time in the RSU will be ending at the end of the

year. He understood that one of the districts, South Maliseet, wanted to extend his contract after the current year. The fact that the RSU was splitting in half the South Maliseet part of the district would only be able to pay him half of his current salary. He has already given everyone in the RSU notice that he would be leaving at the end of the year.

The RSU#105 was comprised of two K-12 community schools. These two partners schools in this Regional School Unit, (RSU) were an unlikely match from the beginning when the state had compelled them to be joined. The town of Maliseet by itself, with a total population of 213 residents, did not have enough of a population to support a school, however it had six other small towns that served this regional school district. The town of Shermanville, Maine has a population of 396 residents, is served by three other neighboring small towns that send students to Mountain View Community School. The two previous school districts Maliseet Community School and Mountain View Community School, were twenty-five miles apart, but were compelled to join together to form one RSU district by July 1st 2011 under the Maine Reorganization Law (2010). They were an unlikely partnership from the beginning. The law was the result of a taskforce commissioned by the then Governor John E. Baldacci that released it's report of findings on January 20th, 2004 called the Taskforce on Increasing Efficiency and Equity in the use of K-12 Education Process (Doughty, J., Silvernail, D., Cobb, R., Lewis, B. T., McPhetres, J., Rier, J., & Rosser, J. 2004). The results of the report was an effort to find efficiencies in non-classroom functions such as central office, transportation, contracted services, purchasing and maintenance. The report forecasted a lofty savings of money of between 30 an 36 million dollars annually for the state of

Maine and was forecast to reduce the 290 school districts in Maine to 164 by the deadline for compliance on July 1, 2011(Doughty et al., 2004).

As a part of the school reorganization law for law passed in 2010 the RSU # 105 was created serving twelve host communities in the western part of northern Maine. The service area for RSU#150 covers 440 square miles and parts of two counties in Aroostook and Penobscot, Maine. This geographic area makes it one of the largest service areas in the State of Maine. Enrollments in this part of the state have continued to decline each year since 1999 at a rate of 20-25 students per year.

The school was fairly isolated in what looked to be a pasture between some seldom traveled roads about seven or so miles from interstate 95 that connects this very rural, very sparsely populated, part of northern Maine. There appeared to be miles and miles of trees and a good section of the last part of the seven-hour drive from anywhere was national forest. Many of the vehicles on the highway were large eighteen wheel trucks loaded and traveling at excessive speed. There was a sign that was easily remembered on the interstate that said, “use caution many deer and eagles in the road, high hit area.” I inquired about that sign later after passing it and I was told that because the interstate cuts through the national forest, there were many deer strikes and the eagles go to feed on the deer in the road and they were also often hit. It is amazing that such a rural and beautiful part of northwestern Maine, seldom seen and seldom traveled, could be so beautiful.

At the school on a clear day from the parking lot in front of the school, it was easy to see several miles of rolling farmland from all directions and of a small town nearby. There was a well-kept baseball and softball field in front of the school and a sign

proclaiming that the field had been dedicated on behalf of successful coach of many years. The building at Maliseet School was a pre K through 12 building, which housed a small vocational section with a forestry program. The building was built in the 1976 after many years of work within the community to convince the community the need for the new building. The school was built and opened in April of that year at a cost of three million dollars. It was intended to educate 750 students and employed 36 teachers as well as administration and support staff. Now, 42 years later, it houses 350 students and has approximately 24 staff. The building was a low, one-story, open concept design with very few walls. There are many open spaces without walls that have been since walled up in many places in the building for classroom privacy, but after that was done classrooms in center of the building had few windows in them. There had been few renovations to the building since it was opened in 1976. Mr. Brown, the superintendent, proudly reported in his interview that there had been many costly boiler repairs over the last two years and the community had passed a two million renovation of the heating system, replacement of windows and an upgrade to the electrical system in the building. This project was due to begin in the spring of 2018 when the considerable amount of snow is gone from the grounds and temperatures are no longer subzero in this part of northern Maine.

The sister school in the district system is comprised of two buildings across the street from one another. Mountain View Middle High School grades 7-12 with approximately 155 students and 13 full time teachers in Shermanville, Maine. Mountain View Elementary School houses approximately 193 students in grades prek-6 with a full time teaching faculty of 19 teachers. The two buildings that house the Mountain View Elementary program and the Mountain View Middle High School program are across the

road from one another. Mountain View Elementary School is a low one-story building designed and built in 1964. It was originally designed to serve as the area high school. In 1976, a middle high school was designed and built and has served grades 7-12 ever since. This is also a very rural part of northwestern Maine that has the natural beauty of national forest lands and farming.

Case Two: Superintendent Susan White, Mohican, Vermont

Superintendent White is a veteran superintendent having served for many years in the same town. She was a teacher and later a curriculum coordinator in the same district before becoming superintendent. The staff all seem to respect and enjoy her leadership very much and credit her with turning around the reputation of the Mohican district through her hard work and her ability to spot and hire strong supporting staff. She has established a reputation among the staff and the taxpayers that is trusted and supported. She has created a system of leadership that supports student improvement through instructional leadership; the ability to try new things and apply researched best practices wherever possible.

The town of Mohican is located in the rolling hills and lovely green mountains of central Vermont not far from the capital of the state Montpelier. The town sits in a valley surrounded by farmland, forestland, open fields, and small businesses are present throughout the town. The town's location allows for easy commuting to towns in the central Vermont region of the state including the towns of Barre, and Montpelier. The town is a residential community with many of the residents working out of town and commuting to more plentiful, higher paying jobs that cannot be found in the local community. There seems to be a trend of expanding the town's commercial and

industrial core. There is a definite concern expressed that the commercial growth of the town does not negatively impacted the nature beauty of scenic agricultural and forestlands in and around the town.

In the 1800's and early 1900's the town population increased partly because of the growth of the railroad in the region and the town's proximity to jobs in the granite related industry around Barre. The current population in Mohican is 2,839 citizens and it seems to be experiencing slow and steady growth. There have been some ideas expressed by the local town officials that there will come a need soon, if the current trends continues, to grow the school system and that the town fathers must begin to think about future school expansion. Many of the families that have located in Mohican have done so to find lower housing costs than in neighboring Barre or Montpelier to the north. The location of the town in this part of region allows an easy commute on interstate 89 to destinations north and south.

The school district is divided into four school buildings. Mohican's middle high school houses grades 6-12 with an enrollment of 288 students. Mohican's elementary school has grades PK-5 and a school enrollment of 250 students. There are two other feeder towns with schools that are both grades PK-8 and both have an enrollment each of 100 students each.

The school district of Mohican has been mostly known for the success of its sports teams at Mohican High School. The people of this town can be characterized as hard working middle class people. When interviewing Susan White, the superintendent she characterized the parents and taxpayers in town as being spirited. The community had a lot of pride in their school system and especially in, the success of the middle and high

school level sports teams. She said that sportsmanship at games has been a problem in recent years. To counteract this, and they have tried to characterize the spirit displayed by the fans as a positive display of school and in the town pride instead of a negative force. Superintendent White has had her hand in making changes over time at the building level. She has been challenged with changing leadership at all of the schools focusing improvement on student academic performance, and confronting sportsmanship and fan behavior.

Case Three: Superintendent, Mr. Todd Green, North Penobscot, Maine

Superintendent Todd Green a very personable individual who has on worked within North Penobscot community only a short time, this being his first year. He is very approachable and ease to talk to. He has quickly developed a reputation with the people working in the RSU as being a hard worker who is visible within the school district and within the towns making up the North Penobscot district. He has routinely showed up at the schools and formed relationships with staff and students. The staff members interviewed expressed that they have never had a leader that was a visible as Mr. Green has been. Clearly, he has made a good early impression on all of the students and staff. He has worked very hard by visiting at town select board meetings and these acts have helped to build relationships and begin trust with taxpayers and local leaders. These actions have helped to pass the first budget with very little contention from the town's taxpayers. The North Penobscot School District is located in a western central part of Maine. A large and prominent river, the Kennebec River, runs through many of the towns in this part of Maine. The towns in the school district are legendary in local history supporting the once booming logging and forest products industry. Large paper mills and

pulp mills created a large number of the jobs and made up the life and work of the past generation who flocked to the area to find work in the mills. The log drives, coupled with the paper mills, resulted in untreated municipal sewage being dumped all along the river through out the twentieth century. This outcome made the river almost impossible to be used for other industries and purposes. The health of the river has been the major point of focus in Maine since the federal Clean Water Act was passed in 1977. Through the donation of private funds and grant funding for clean up and the emergence of wastewater treatment facilities throughout the region the Kennebec now is used for fishing and recreational boating. The last log drive on the Kennebec River took place in 1972 and since 1986 the river has been said to be finally clean (Kennebec River Trail, 2016).

The school district serves five towns. There is no center of the school district and no designated downtown or main street in any of these rural districts. There are three elementary school buildings in the school district grades 1-5, a middle school housing grades 6th, 7th, and 8th grade, and one high school serving grades 9-12. Northern Penobscot Community School houses both grades 1-5 and also houses the middle school. There is a current population at the school of 277 students, which represents a student to teacher ratio of 16 students to one teacher. One principal serves two of the elementary schools that are not connected to the North Penobscot Community School. These schools are James Elementary School with a PreK enrollment of 81 students and Kennebec River Elementary School with a population of 105 students grades PreK-5. The principal splits her weekly instructional leadership time between each of these schools. The condition of both elementary buildings is good for being fairly older buildings. Each of them has had

sections renovated in recent years. They appear to be well maintained and evoke a lot of pride from the community. Northern Penobscot Community School and River Valley High School both have a principal and no other administrative help other than support staff in the office to assist them. This school district has one of the largest land areas in the state of Maine and ranks third among the poorest school district in the state. There is a sign that greets travelers who approach River Valley High School on the main road, which reads, "You Are Entering Panther County." The sign evokes a sense of community identity, unity, and pride in its schools.

Case Four: Superintendent Dr. Jonathon Gold, Smithtown, New Hampshire

Dr. Jonathon Gold has been a very visible presence in the school system for many years. He had been the elementary principal before becoming Superintendent eight years ago. Teachers and administrators reported seeing Dr. Gold often in the halls and if the classroom door was open he would walk into the classroom and engage the students or the teacher in conversation. It was obvious that everyone knew who he was and liked and respected his presence in both the middle high school and in the elementary schools. He was always welcome in everyone's classes. The town of Smithtown is very small. It is in a region of the state that has experienced a growth in the population. However, its downtown town business section looks much like other towns in small New England towns. It is dotted with a few business storefronts, some still operating and some vacant. In spending just a few minutes in town on Main Street it is obvious that people go elsewhere for major purchases or shop from home online and the merchants in the town have suffered as a result. Several years ago one town that was sending tuition students to the middle high school was asked by an adjacent community to be part of a building

project to build a regional school. For several years they have not been a part of the Abenaki Highlands school district. This leaves the small town of Smithtown as the only sending district to the elementary and middle high schools. Since that time, the taxpayers have struggled in finding the resources to pay their taxes. This has also made the district very small and unable to sustain or support many co-curricular or athletic programs for its students.

Smithtown has always been small but it continues to get smaller and smaller with the loss of sending schools and tuition students and less and less families residing and purchasing property in town. This outcome has resulted in the high cost of taxes to support this small, isolated school system. Through all of the staff interviews that were conducted, it was obvious that Abenaki Highlands School Districts compensates its teachers and support staff far less than any other School District in the state. Many of the staff anticipated gaining experience to begin their career in the schools, but then leaving to go to a neighboring district after several years of service. They reported a huge boost in pay of as much as 15% to 20% by doing so. The district has become a training ground for new, inexperienced teachers just out of school. That in turn became a training program and hiring resource for recruitment of these teachers by other neighboring towns that could afford to pay more to attract them once they had obtained experience.

Common Unifying Issues in Small Rural School Districts

By using across case analysis in this study, it was very obvious that there were threads of common circumstances at the state, the region, and at the local community level, that were beyond the control of the administrators and staff who worked there. Nevertheless, these common factors were significantly affecting them in everything that

they considered doing to try to make improvements in their school district. Each of these current realities had to do with current economic trends such as declining town population, limited budgets, and erosion of the local tax base. Additionally, common circumstances and conditions were also related to working in small, isolated, rural areas like the loss of enrollments of school age children, difficulty in attracting and retaining talented teachers, especially those with experience. These common circumstances dictated each school district leaders' ability to be able to: (a) offer professional development opportunities to staff, (b) find quality employees, (c) have enough variety of course offerings to attract students who had other school options, and (d) to pass budgets without having to further burden the taxpayers to come up with more money each year. Each of the school district leaders spoke at length and without prompting about these obstacles, as it seemed to be on each of their minds daily. As an example, Superintendent Todd Green reflected about the circumstances of leading his North Penobscot District in Maine, "We are one of the largest, poorest districts in the State of Maine. There are poorer districts and there are larger districts, but when you put poor and large together, we are high up on the list for Maine." Mr. Green never used this statement as an excuse, but instead a way of speaking about the reality of what it is like to work in a rural district in the state of Maine. In another interview, Robert Brown Superintendent of RSU #105 said, "Holding staff is difficult here. There is not a lot around here." He went on to say, "people have to want to be up here to live." You have to get folks who are into living in a rural [area] or who are into mountain climbing or hiking. We get a lot of students right out of college who come up here and get a couple of years experience until they are able to move into districts farther south. Those who decide to come and stay are here for a

lifetime.” He commented that, “ Money is always a challenge here. Building a budget and making sure we have enough money to give the kids what they need is what is a challenge each year.” In the words of Dr. Jonathon Gold, Superintendent of the Abenaki Highlands School District in New Hampshire, “ The other thing in a poor town like this is that we feel like we are on the bottom of the food chain and we are stretched for funding and we find ourselves in a difficult situation in a poor community and that results in a whole lot of stress.”

Factors Related to Impactful District Leadership

The purpose of this study was to further define the qualities of effective leadership (i.e. superintendents for rural districts in Maine, NH and VT) who have rising and sustained student achievement despite challenging district demographics that have just been described. To specifically address this purpose, the alignment of each of the district’s leaders described in the previous section to Marzano & Waters’ five areas of effective leadership will be discussed. Each of these five areas have been validated through prior research to have the most positive influence on improving student achievement. Additionally, the researcher sought to obtain the perceptions of principals and teachers of important leadership qualities and school culture in these improved schools. This chapter will now detail the presence of each of the factors identified by Marzano and Waters (2009) in the district leadership for these small, poor, rural districts. The data collected from the interviews includes the perspective of the superintendents themselves and the perceptions of their principals, teachers, school board members and other professional personnel working along side them each day. Additionally, factors that

appear to be unique to small rural schools that may be contributors to the districts' success will also be presented.

Research Question #1: What are the qualities of effective leadership (i.e., superintendents) for rural districts in Maine, NH, and VT who have rising and sustained student achievement despite challenging district demographics?

The findings in this study confirm that the elements that Marzano and Waters spoke about in their research on effective district leaders are also at work in the leadership practices in the four rural schools in this study. Those district leadership practices were:

- (a) Ensure collaborative goal setting including all relevant stakeholders, central office staff, building level administrators, and board members in establishing nonnegotiable goals for their districts.
- (b) Establish nonnegotiable goals for achievement and instruction.
- (c) Goals should be made so that staff works together on both student achievement and classroom instruction.
- (d) Create board alignment with the support for district goals. In this way the Board ensures that the goals are the most important work that they attend to assure student achievement and alignment and support of board goals. The goals need to be publically adopted and both publically and privately supported. In this way resources needed to implement goals are planned so they can be discussed, planned for and supported.
- (e) Successful superintendents make sure that there is a constant examination of the district's progress towards them remains the primary driving force. They are

regularly focused on and highlighted on as the primary indicator of student success.

(f) It is necessary that there be resources allocated and maintained. This is to make sure that there is the time resources and personnel available to carry out the district's adopted mission.”(Marzano and Waters,2009, pp. 6-8)

Collaborative Goal Setting and Nonnegotiable Goals

The most important areas to set goals in effective districts, according to Marzano and Waters' research, are the areas of student achievement and classroom instruction. Districts that follow the practice of setting goals are more successful if they establish targets and aim for annual growth to achieve their targets in classroom instruction and student achievement (Marzano & Waters, 2009). For this study collaborative goal setting and nonnegotiable goals were merged together into a set of questions asked of participants (see Table 4.3 below). In each of the schools studied there was an effort made to align and support the mission and vision of the district schools. However, one district Maliseet School District in Maine the superintendent did not set goals for the district. In this case, the principals at the high school level set goals for their Pre-K through 12 systems with their staff. In each of the three other school districts reviewed, each district leader was heavily involved in a very collaborative the goal setting exercise district wide and there was wide participation by the school community stakeholders in an annual event. Many participants in the in three out of four of the districts studied felt consulted and included in the goal setting process. School Board chairs in three of the school districts were participants in the goal setting process and said that their fellow members were well aware of goals and felt included in holding the district accountable

for the goals that were set. It was reported that many of the goals were broad and were less likely to be specific for classroom instruction. There was evidence that many of the goals set were nonnegotiable in nature and in some cases, were the driving force for improvement work that was being conducted within the district.

Monitoring Achievement and Instructional Goals

Monitoring achievement and instructional goals is important to achieve effectiveness as a district leader (Marzano & Waters, 2009). The results displayed in Table 4.3 below indicate that goal setting and efforts to monitor goals were a priority for the participants in this study for three out of four of the school districts. In the North Penobscot School District the superintendent organized a school district workshop with the building principals where the principals took time with each board member to go over the most recent scores from recent testing from each school in order to better understand where the school district was currently at each grade level. The principals, the superintendent, and board members in the North Penobscot District reported a high degree of inclusion and therefore satisfaction in being able to ask questions about the data and to truly, and for the first time, understand the testing data. This was an effort to have all of the stakeholders including the school board be part of the monitoring process and to continue to focus on classroom instruction and student achievement. They asked to repeat this activity on an annual basis. The majority of comments (65%) made by the participants in this area were concerned with alignment and support of goals of the mission and vision of the district, setting goals collaboratively and involving all stakeholders and in the setting of the goals and commitment to attain the goals. One member of the North Penobscot District school board commented on the exercise by

saying that he had had many years on the school board and in all of those years, “I had never been so engaged in the data of our own students.” Specifically, as can be seen in Table 4.3 below, 28% of the comments, or the most frequently comment made, referenced goal setting and alignment and support of the mission and vision of the school. Another very strong category was the collaborative support of goal setting having been mentioned, 19%. The third most frequently most mentioned comment (17%) was that district stakeholders were involved in district level goal setting and that they approved of goals that were agreed upon for the district. This study found fewer comments regarding monitoring data to make progress on goals and monitoring goals in order to keep them as the driving force of the district (8%). Comments that were reported with much less frequency (< 4%) were that classroom nonnegotiable goals were set for classroom instruction. This data continues to be an outcome of the pressure from the state and federal government to demonstrate to the public growth in student achievement progress using the common core assessment outcome data.

Table 4.3

Establishing and Monitoring Collaborative Goal Setting and Nonnegotiable Student Achievement Goals

Evidence Statement	Number of statements collected	%
Effort made toward alignment and support of mission and vision	191	28.60
Evidence of collaborative goal setting	131	19.61
All stakeholders are involved in district level goal setting and agree to attain the goals agreed upon	115	17.22
Effort was made toward monitoring goals	71	10.63
Goals are monitored and remain the driving force for the district	55	8.23
Nonnegotiable goals related to student achievement	39	5.84
Evidence that nonnegotiable goals exist	38	5.69
Nonnegotiable goals are set for classroom instruction	28	4.19
Total	668	100.00

Board Alignment and Support

According to Marzano and Waters (2009) district school boards are most effective when they are aligned and are in support of nonnegotiable goals for achievement and instruction. Although there may be other work that is taking place within the district, goals that have gone through a deliberate and collaborative process are focused on and are gradually getting accomplished. In three out of four of the school districts included in this study, board members reported with a total of 96 comments that the school district

was aligned and supported goals set as the top priorities of the district (see Table 4.4 below). In the Abenaki District Dr. Gold, the Superintendent commented, when asking about setting district goals, “We are very careful, especially in front of the public’ not to violate of the goals that we have set for the district. We have to be committed at all times or the goals are not worth what they are printed on.” The exception to this was in the case of Maliseet School District. In their case there was no goal setting done at the district level. Goal setting in the Maliseet District was done with the principals at the building level. As a result of this there was no unified overarching goal structure in place for the Maliseet School District Board to support. All of the district leadership efforts in the 2017-18 school year were spent trying, and eventually succeeding to convince voters to pass a bond to repair and renovate building infrastructure. The heating system needed an overhaul and much needed upgrades to building mechanical systems and electrical systems were needed to improve building efficiency. The two million dollar bond was passed and this was the major accomplishment of the administration for the school. The members on the district boards that had district goals reported that they were very invested in seeing the goals met and they were a part of the structure to make the goals that were in place be successfully accomplished. Three of the school boards that were interviewed agreed to align with and support the structure that was in place and to support the goals established both publically and privately.

Board members interviewed for this study felt less informed in the efforts of the district to keep them up to date with the progress on goals. This may inhibit the board’s progress toward alignment and support of district goals. Overall, throughout the study there was very little opposition expressed by any of the participants interviewed at all

four sites about the progress and the direction of the goals established by the leadership (see Table 4.4 below).

Table 4.4

Board Alignment and Support

Evidence Statements		
Statement Category	Number of statements collected	%
The Board agrees that the goals are the top priorities for the district	65	67.71
There is a structure in place to support district goals	13	13.54
Both publically and privately all Board actions are related to student achievement and instruction	10	10.42
There are efforts made to keep the Board informed so that they can do their work	8	8.33
Total	96	100.00

Allocating Resources to Support the Goals for Achievement and Instruction

According to Marzano and Waters (2009) high performing districts allocate resources and utilize them in the form of time, money, personnel and materials to accomplish district goals. It was clear in each of the district studied that there was overwhelming evidence that each school district was investing heavily in professional development for their teachers and to a lesser amount for the support staff. With the exception of one of the district in this study, Maliseet District, each of the other three

districts were committing a significant amount of funds to support improved goals and classroom instruction and student achievement. None of the school districts in the study had much money for professional development but they used what they had wisely. The superintendent commented in an interview saying that he had found that, “the people in these [towns] don’t have much money especially to pay higher taxes but it they know there is a need for their children. They will do what they have to do to raise the money necessary.” In the case of Maliseet most of the effort in the 2017-18 was used to follow through on the school districts desire to break apart the forced merger done by the state of Maine several years earlier in 2011 and to pass a bond to improve the building at the Maliseet Community School. All of all of the schools in the study used funds to support professional development that were part of their collective bargaining agreement for course reimbursement and were also made possible by federal and state grants. In some of the cases other financial support came from money in the budget set aside to fund projects and were a direct result of goals adopted as the mission and vision of the district. This support was for both short-term projects as well as long-term goals that were tied to supporting the improvement of achievement and instruction. This improvement can be seen in the themes that emerged from the data around resources in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5

*Resources Allocated, to Achieve the Districts
Mission*

Evidence Statements		
Statement Categories	Number of statements collected	%
Resources directed toward supporting the mission and vision	168	44.56
District resources are allocated to support goals	104	27.59
Resources are allocated to support goals for achievement and instruction	54	14.32
Resources are allocated to support high expectations	51	13.53
Total	377	100.00

Despite Being Rural and Poor School District

There are, and will continue to be, several factors that have influenced the landscape in which these rural school district find themselves having do deal with now in the post NCLB era. There is a long slow declining enrollment pattern in the student population that does not look like it will change any time soon. This has led to a decrease in state aid to rural schools. All of the four school studied have lost at least twenty percent of the of student population over the last ten years. This decrease in students has in turn led to a decrease in offerings at the schools. Poverty as measured by free and reduced meals in in all of the schools was over fifty percent. These factors have made school district improvement a more difficult challenge to overcome. Rural poor school

districts that have the outcomes to show that they have improved are not ordinary in the ways they have shown that improvement. The district leadership characteristics that Marzano and Waters spoke of in their research are alive and active in the four school districts studied here, in fact may be partly responsible for the improvements found in each of these successful schools.

Additional Factors Identified in the Research

This research also found that there were two unexpected and surprising factors that had not been previously identified by Marzano and Waters. Each of these small rural school districts had a very visible culture of high expectations that existed within the district. In some of the districts it was more visible at the building level in the schools themselves as illustrated by the Maliseet School District where the principals in both schools were encouraging student to take dual enrollment classes and other experiential classes. Both of these talented leaders were pushing their students to look beyond the rural and isolated nature of the place they lived in and each of these principals found a way to establish online learning, advanced college classes or to partner with natural resources organizations (i.e. the forest service) to encourage learning outside the four walls of the school building.

The other surprising finding in this study was the existence of a positive and caring climate and culture and the part it played in the inner workings of all of the districts studied. It seemed to be a factor that helped to make up for the reality that these rural schools were, isolated and had limited resources to call upon for the support of the students that were served in each of these districts. In all of the districts, climate and culture appeared to be strong and was seen as having a strong influence in the patterns of

behavior of each staff member. In some cases, where there was weaker district leadership or there had been a series of superintendents that had short tenures in past years, as in the North Penobscot School District, Maine where the superintendent was only in his second year of service, climate and culture prevailed. The teachers and the support staff seemed hearty and resilient in a sort of, “ We take care of each other” and we want the best for these kids” climate that was evident within the schools in the study. This was very exceedingly apparent in each interview conducted in each of these four districts. The presence of this element could be a strong and contributing factor as to why these rural and isolated and economically impoverished school districts were overcoming their hardships and were doing better than other districts with the same limiting conditions of poverty in these isolated parts of the state. The factors in these school districts that were hardships did not seem to limit the possibilities for learning for their students.

High Expectations For Students

One theme identified in the data, was the factor high expectations. One of the important and fascinating elements that was revealed in this work was that each of these systems studied had high expectations for students embedded in their work. This factor related to the relationship between district leadership and student achievement was not part of the meta-analysis on effective district leadership done in 2009 to uncover the relationship between district leadership and student achievement (Marzano & Waters, 2009). The existence of this finding was completely unexpected and remarkably prevalent in the four poor districts that were a part of this study. All of the districts involved reported high student expectations as a part of the mission and vision embedded in their day-to-day work. There is the expectation in the culture of the community

(teachers, family, and school staff) that if they work harder, students will achieve at a higher level. Furthermore, of all of the staff and the board were involved in creating goals that aimed to boost student achievement and improve instruction so that outcomes attained would also be achieved at a much higher level (see Table 4.6 below). The philosophy expressed by everyone in the system was, that if everyone in the system expects more of students, students will get more and instruction will improve. One teacher commented while being interviewed, “We know what we are doing and if new teachers are not willing to get on board with the plan and the direction we have worked so hard to achieve as a professional team, then they should not stay here. We know what we are doing and it works.” When constructing a mission and vision for the school district there is an expressed need for it to be centered around, and focused on, improvement of achievement and instruction. There is evidence presented in Table 4.6 that obtaining wide spread support and collaboration in building the mission and vision around student improvement is vital as these are the top two most frequent types of comments made during the interviews that were conducted.

Table 4.6

High Expectations for Students

Evidence Statements

Statement Category	Number of statements collected	%
Support expressed for the mission and vision	155	30.27
Evidence of collaboration in the creation of the vision	135	26.37
There is a clear and focused mission and vision	85	16.6
Awareness exists of the mission an vision	42	8.20
Structural framework is in place	35	6.84
Evidence of being in touch with existing structure	28	5.47
Attention to high quality Instruction	14	2.73
Statements about the development of students	11	2.15
Attention to social emotional support	7	1.37
Total	512	100.00

Climate and Culture

The other unexpected outcome of this study was the influence of climate and culture in these four poor, rural school districts as it relates to the interactions between administrators, staff, school board members, parents, students, and community members.

All of the respondents spoke of their relationship with the community; to the students they serve and their parents, their co-workers, and to the administrators they work with everyday. They commented often saying that these relationships were powerful and a compelling force that affected them and their overall relationship to the school district (see Table 4.7 below).

Powerful Relationships Within the School and the Community

The individuals interviewed spoke in an extremely caring way about the positive communication and interaction that they had with the people that they worked with. These were expression of positive, and in some cases almost loving, family like relationships that seemed to emerge in every interview. The conversations credited these deep relationships and friendships as being part of the reason that they appreciated working in this school environment. In other cases of some of the staff interviewed said that the interaction with their co-workers was the reason that the interviewee has stayed working at the school they were in and continued their work year after year. For some of these people their relationships had continued for a many years. Some within this school community said that even if they had other opportunities to go elsewhere to other jobs, they would not leave because of the strong and caring relationship they had developed with the people around them. In a few cases staff said that they had moved away to other jobs and ended up moving back to this community and rejoining this staff. They explained this was difficult because there was little turnover of staff in these small, rural community schools each school year. The superintendent at the Maliseet Community schools speaking about the rural nature of the school district said, “Living here is a different way of life.” In some of the cases, staff relationship and interactions went well

beyond working in the school. Many of the interviewees talked about knowing each other's staff members families and participating with their co-workers in family and community activities outside of school as a normal practice all year round. Many spoke of the community they worked in as being home. They seemed to value each other's company so much that they participated in social activities with co-workers as if they were part of the family after school hours or on weekends. One teacher commented about the staff she worked with, "We work together in this building during the week and we socialize together on weekends. We go shopping together. We know each other's families and we like each other. Last summer some of us went on a bicycle trip together for a week. We are truly a family here." In the case of some of the staff at the Maliseet Community School they were very proud of the fact that the school was the food pantry for the community and the students along with the staff helped to operate it together. They spoke of giving students rides to school or home if they were made aware that their family was in a difficult circumstance that necessitated it. Some also spoke highly of the administration and their positive feelings and appreciation for the work that they were doing and their agreement and appreciation for the way the district was administrated.

Expressions of a sense of belonging and self-esteem. The staff in all four districts that took part in this study spoke quite openly of their feeling of self-esteem, fulfillment and a deep sense of pride and belonging in being a part of the school district. They exuded pride and gratitude for the work that they performed each day along with their colleagues. Some expressed that they were not only teaching, but also that they were making a profound positive impact in the lives of the students and the families they worked with each day. One of the areas that they talked about which they did not express

as an excuse was how poor the school district was or about how hard it was in such a rural area to find math or science teachers and other specialty, critical shortage areas of teachers. These statements were expressed as matter of fact statements and were spoken examples of assumptions taken for granted (see Table 4.7). They were often stated as a context to explaining why things are difficult because of the size or rural nature of the community, or the financial hardships and the geographic rural region that the school district was in.

Physical environment conducive to learning. The staff continued to state that they felt that they were part of a team with their colleagues working around them. One teacher spoke of the lack of work in the area for someone who has a college degree and wants to stay in the community. He said, “I am lucky to have this job and to have tenure now. For many years I worried if I was going to be able to stay here because I didn’t know if I would be employed from one year to the next.” They did not speak about feeling that they were part of the goal setting process that was done in the district. It is possible that the staff might be involved in some regard, however their answers did not mention that they played a role in goal setting when that part of their role came up in conversation. It was also evident, but to a lesser degree, that the staff felt that they worked in a physical environment that was conducive to learning. It did not seem to be a big factor or a distraction from the work they were doing with the students they served.

Table 4.7

Climate and Culture

Evidence Statements categories collected	Number of statements collected	%
Communication and interaction	436	27.87
Administrators, staff, school board, parents, and student interactions	433	27.68
Statements related to goal setting and to climate and culture	139	8.89
Positive statements made about quality of the district leadership	100	6.39
Promotes learning and self-fulfillment	98	6.27
Promotes sense of belonging and self-esteem	93	6.14
Expressions of a supportive community	67	4.28
Statements related strong instructional leadership and climate and culture	66	4.22
Assumptions taken for granted	55	3.52
Statement related to collaborative goal setting and climate	43	2.75
Physical environment conducive to learning	22	1.41
Statements about a philosophy of risk taking in the culture of the district	8	0.51
Artifacts and symbols	3	0.19

Statements related to board alignment and support having to do with climate	1	0.06
Total	1,564	100.00

Information In Each Area Collected

In looking at the sample comments made by the 43 staff members interviewed in the four school districts the number of comments made related to climate and culture represents was an overwhelming majority of the comments made in comparison to the other topics listed (see Table 4.8). Climate and culture accounted for almost half or (48%) of the comments collected. This was not an area that Marzano and Waters (2009) commented on or was described in their research about the responsibilities and initiatives of a school district. The next most frequent comment category was in the area of collaborative and nonnegotiable goal setting (i.e., 668 comments) expressed. This was an area that Marzano and Waters did identify in their research. It was something that was also very evident in three out of four of the district observed. Another very large category not described in the Marzano and Waters research was high expectations for students. Marzano and Waters overlooked this factor in their research, however it was very apparent that it was present in this study with 16% of the comments related to the category (i.e. 512 comments). The vast majority (85%) of the statements made, were made in these three areas. The category of resource allocation or making sure that the people doing the work with students every day were provided the tools they needed to do the work was the next strongest category. In this area 12% of the staff members felt that resources were being made available through the budget and other sources and was vital to their success in improving student academic growth and instructional improvement

each day. The concept of allocating resources to support the goals of achievement and instruction was also pointed out in the research done by Marzano and Waters (2009) as being necessary to becoming a high-performing school district.

The concept of alignment and support of district goals was also mentioned, but to a lesser degree in this study. Out of the comments expressed 2.98% (i.e. 96 comments) were made in reference to alignment and support of district goals. Respondents felt that this area of the Board of Education being aligned and supportive of nonnegotiable goals was important but to a far lesser degree than other areas described. This was also an area that Marzano and Waters found expressed in their research as being important to having an effective school district that supported achievement and instruction.

Table 4.8

Summary of Evidence Statements

Information in each area collected	Number of Statements Collected	%
Climate and Culture	1,564	48.62
Collaborative and nonnegotiable goal setting	668	20.76
High expectations for students expressed	512	15.92
Resources are allocated, maintained and made available to achieve the Districts' adopted mission	377	11.72
Board alignment and support	96	2.98
Total	3,217	100.00

Research Question #2: Are there any common characteristics between these education leaders?

Characteristics of Effectiveness Across Cases

When looking across the four cases in this study (see Table 4.9) it is easy to see the strengths and weaknesses of the leadership in each district when comparing the data against the five factors identified by Marzano and Waters' research for effective district leadership along with the two additional variables identified in this study.

Collaborative goal setting. This study found that district leaders in three out of four districts in the study worked hard on setting goals in a collaborative way so that there is a collective vision of the stakeholders in the district and once set goals are established. Each one of the district leaders in the study were very collaborative in the way they conducted themselves and took every opportunity to gain consensus of the people in considering all ideas to maintain and improve the school district.

Creating a positive climate and culture. Each one of the superintendents were good communicators all of them possessed great interpersonal skills. In speaking with teachers, administrators and board members they expressed that they maintained a very good working relationship with each of the superintendents in of the districts in this study. Many people who were interviewed in this study expressed that they felt welcome to meet face to face with the district leader and were pleased that they were always welcomed always with a friendly and somewhat informal open door policy.

Visible and hands on. In three of the four of the cases studied the district leaders were very visible and were likely to be seen often around the school buildings in classrooms observing teaching or attending community meetings after school hours

around the town. In the case of one of the superintendents in this study there was little evidence that he was not as visible as the others. In this case there was evidence that the building administrator was visible and was looked to for being hands on and active in all matters of school and community. In all of the cases these rural district leaders chose to be very hands on. They oversee small districts with limited district resources and few district employees. These common leadership characteristics set a positive tone for the supportive elements of climate and culture found in each district.

Indicators of Effectiveness Across Cases

In case one, the Maliseet School District, it was quite obvious that there was very little goal setting that was being done by the superintendent or by the school board. Most of the goal setting or the establishment of nonnegotiable goals in the Maliseet school district happened between the principal and the teachers. It was all building specific and not district specific. There was evidence that there was goal setting taking place, but it did not include anyone beyond of the school building level. There was very little board alignment happening in the Maliseet district as well. There were committees created to handle curriculum, facilities, and policy but these committees did not form district goals but instead handled day-to-day decisions and policy that needed to be considered at the time. Resources were made available in the Maliseet District to affect the goals that were set at the building level, but each of the buildings were working on building level endeavors that were very different from one school building to another.

Contributing to the district's strong academic performance of its students was a strong presence for the two factors identified in this research: climate and culture and high student expectations. There was ample evidence in each school of a strong climate

and culture in each building within the study. This relationship was obvious and was expressed by everyone in the organization. There was a strong relationship present between the building administration and the teachers and support staff and a strong bond between the teachers and their students. There was supporting evidence of high expectations set by the principals and teachers within the Maliseet School District.

In the second case of the Mohican School District many of the goals were set by the superintendent and by the principals together as a planning unit. The teachers and the school board had very little to do with setting nonnegotiable goals for achievement and instruction each year. District goal setting was done each year by an administrative committee. The membership of the committee is composed of the superintendent, principals, and other administrators from each building. The curriculum coordinator and the business manager are included in this work. These goals are based on data collected and a decision is made on what area of professional development to provide based on that data for the year. The work sometimes encompassed several years concentrating on areas selected, for example math one year and or reading another year. The attainment of goals was presented to the school board when they were met. There was a continuous improvement plan that was written and revised each year for the district. This plan was also the plan that was approved by the school board each year.

In the Mohican School District financial resources are limited and many teachers have to make do with what they have. There is little money for expensive equipment or other materials. There is a feeling in the building, expressed by all of the staff interviewed, that each of the staff members get the supplies and materials that they need

to do their work. The administration usually finds a way to make sure necessary materials are made available to the teachers.

In case three, the North Penobscot School District, decisions about collaborative and nonnegotiable goal setting involved everyone who had a professional role in the school system. There was an effort by the superintendent to make sure that the school board was involved in knowing all of the data about student performance and they were able to have realistic conversations related to a realistic picture of the current academic condition of the students as it related to their current assessment scores. Although teachers were involved in the discussion around student academic performance they were not part of the goal setting with the administration and with the board. However, the teaching and other professional staff was familiar with the goals that were being set each year. They did not express discomfort with the way the conversations took place between the school board at North Penobscot and the administration around goals setting. It was obvious as a result they had a lesser voice in decisions around that part of the process. Teachers had very little involvement in board alignment. Their role was more as an observer of the improvement work with limited input. This process of board alignment was done between the superintendent and the board with input from other building and district administrators

In North Penobscot district the school board was involved in discussions around monitoring student progress largely because the superintendent wanted their involvement in order for them to understand the task at hand in improving student performance in the district. In conversations with the superintendent, he expressed the need for the school board to be involved with how to allocate precious resources in this very economically

challenged school district in rural central Maine. The Board Chair in North Penobscot expressed the need for the Board and the superintendent to be on the same page at all times and he was very clear that it was not the Board's role to micro manage the superintendent in any way. He expressed that he currently had many conversations with the superintendent and that they were in agreement on many things. He said that they talked often and that his relationship with the superintendent was excellent given that the fact that superintendent was only finishing his first year with the district. The Board Chair had a military service background and was comfortable in a very top down relationship of goal setting within the district. The teachers that were interviewed and other staff members at North Penobscot did not feel slighted at all not being part of a collaborative system of the goal setting process.

In North Penobscot school district, case three there was a need for higher student expectations expressed by all of the stakeholders interviewed. Building principals, the superintendent and the school board members spoke often in their conversations with the researcher about the need to increase rigor in the classes and all of them had the expectation that students were capable of more than their current performance in their classes. Each person expressed a higher expectation for the students above the goal of graduating from high school. Everyone interviewed wanted to see students move on after high school. They were pessimistic that there would be jobs in the local area to support them if they did not improve their skills further and have options outside of the community.

As in other schools considered for this study a positive climate and culture was on display in every conversation that took place. There was an atmosphere that everyone in

the school system was in this together and that there was a spirit of, “pitching in” by everyone to help students to thrive in their education. There was a visible sense of caring for one another and a an atmosphere of self-reliance on the part of the support staff, teachers, and administrative staff who seemed willing to go to great lengths to care for the educational needs of their students even in this large, property poor, rural district.

In case four, the Abenaki Highlands School District, the results indicate study that all of the district leadership indicators were evident from all of the interviews conducted. The school district had constructed a strategic plan they called a logic model that was made up five areas of concentration that guided the overall vision for the district and aligned and connected all of the school districts strategies, activities and objectives. This vision involved five areas that were the following: (1) ensuring student ownership in the learning, (2) raising student achievement, (3) developing of work-study practices, civic responsibilities and social emotional learning, (4) systems and infrastructure support for student-centered learning and (5) engaging with the community. This school district had undergone a huge self-study over a five-year period supported by generous funding primarily by the Nellie Mae foundation through grants over that time. Other than that, there was little evidence that the district school board was involved in monitoring achievement data of the students in the district. However, the board, along with the community, the staff, and the administrative team were all equally aligned in goal setting for student achievement and instruction in a true partnership.

The district teachers had little district involvement in the allocation of resources to support their teaching, however, they seemed to have been involved in every other aspect of the planning and the construction of the vision, goals and strategies for the plan for

their district's improvement since 2014. The school district had the lowest pay for its teachers within the entire state of New Hampshire and as a result, had high teacher turnover each year for the of the districts' young newly seasoned teachers. However, there was evidence of high expectations displayed by the stakeholders in every interview conducted and every conversation that happened. Despite low pay for its teachers, and annual high teacher turnover, the quality of the climate and culture was evident in the district in every interaction and contribution of evidence for this study.

Table 4.9				
<i>Indicators of Effective Leadership Across Cases</i>				
Rural school districts considered for this study	Case 1 Maliseet School District	Case 2 Mohican School District	Case 3 North Penobscot District	Case 4 Abenaki Highlands District
Personnel in the district	S P T B O	S P T B O	S P T B	S P T B O
Indicators Identified by Marzano and Waters (2009)				
Ensuring collaborative goal setting	* Y Y * *	Y Y Y Y Y	Y Y * Y	Y Y Y Y Y
Establishing nonnegotiable goals for achievement and instruction	* Y Y * *	Y Y * * Y	Y Y * Y	Y Y Y Y Y
Creating board alignment with support of district goals	* Y * Y *	Y Y * Y Y	Y Y * Y	Y Y Y Y Y
Monitoring achievement and instruction goals	* Y Y * *	Y Y Y Y Y	Y Y Y Y	Y Y Y * Y
Allocating resources to support the goals for achievement and instruction	* Y Y Y *	Y Y * Y *	Y Y Y Y	Y Y * Y Y
Additional Indicators Identified in the Current Study				
Indicators from data on high expectations for instruction and achievement	Y Y Y Y Y	Y Y Y Y Y	Y Y Y Y	Y Y Y Y Y
Indicators from data of climate and culture	Y Y Y Y Y	Y Y Y Y Y	Y Y Y Y	Y Y Y Y Y
Total for the district	170	159	143	148

Note. S= superintendent; P=principals; T= teachers; B=board members; O=other; Y=indicator was present; *=indicator not present;

Research Question #3: What are the perceptions of principals and teachers of important leadership qualities and school culture in these improved schools?

For each case in the study, when all of the data was coded and collated, it was finally displayed in Table 4.9 by what each person said. As the table indicates, each of the four districts surveyed were remarkably similar. In each an every case, at least two people verified that the factors that Marzano and Waters had identified in their work was present in the district. Different personnel in each district verified each other's perceptions thus triangulating the data. The consistency was evident. In three of the four cases, the superintendent's statements related to effective leadership practices were verified by either the principal, school board member and/or each teacher. In fact, in the case of the Maliseet School District where the superintendent was not seen as exhibiting goal setting, goal setting did in fact exist but at the building level through the vision of the principals and the teachers instead of at the district level. It was found that each of the district leaders in these high performing, rural, poverty areas acted in a very similar way.

In three of the four cases in this study there was evidence of collaborative goal setting taking place in each district. In two of the district both Mohican School District and North Penobscot School District this collaboration work took place between the superintendent, the principals, and members of the school board and did not include teachers in this process. In another case in the Abenaki School District, the collaborative goal setting included all of the stakeholders asking for goal input and approval from the public at public forums, from students, from staff, the administrators and from the Board. The district administration in the Abenaki District aggressively sought input and consensus in all matters related to district change and improvement of student learning.

This district was an excellent example of inclusivity and an ongoing commitment for making changes and even taking risks to try new things when looking for the possibility of school district improvement. In one case, in the Maliseet School District goal setting did not take place at the district level, but it was very strong at the building level between the building principal and the teachers they worked with. The autonomy that each of the principals enjoyed in setting goals at the building level on their own kept both schools moving in different directions. As a result of the lack of a district approach to goal setting both district schools remained independent of one another. This caused a further divide and little if any hope of improving district unity and alignment in the Maliseet School District.

In three out of four of the districts examined for this study there were goals set by the district that were nonnegotiable with a series of consensus building activities taking place in each district with common goals and planning taking place to accomplish the work agreed upon. The exception to this was again, in the Maliseet District where none of this work took place at the district level and all of it took place at the building level. In three out of the four districts studied the process that took place to in order to set goals was done in a very public way and each of the three superintendents made efforts to align the boards around the goals that were being set. In each case the goals were announced publically with a detailed explanation as to why each goal was necessary. In subsequent meetings there was follow up for the work on each goal that was done. Board members in these districts had a chance to show their support in front of the public. The exception to this standard was again within the Maliseet School District where goals were not set on the district level but within the schools.

In each of the four districts that were studied there was work being done to track student data for the purpose of making informed decisions about student academic growth and improvement. Each of the districts used survey data and test data to try to understand the direction of the work, new agenda items, and goals that each district should adopt to improve student academic performance. It was not unusual in these districts to form committees and do the work of goal setting in an organized and collaborative way. There was a constant effort to revisit and emphasize each of the goals set and thus kept them as the driving force while using data to inform the progress on each of them over time.

Each of these school districts were a poverty district having between 50 and 60% percent of free and reduced throughout the district. What little resources had were always used in a very thoughtful and conservative way. There were no frills in any of these districts and what few resources were available were conserved and thoughtfully allocated. All of these districts qualified for maximum grant support because of their high poverty numbers. Whatever support was given from the state or federal government was used to improve student achievement and teacher professional development. In the North Penobscot School District the district received the only School Improvement state grants offered in the 2016 school year because one school out of the four schools in the district had slipped in their standardized test scores, qualifying for school improvement program money that year. They used the money to encourage improvement in climate and culture in the school and by encouraging to each student to build student-to-student personal relationships, respect, and responsibility with each other in classes. The school is used the grant over a three-year period to encourage positive behavior that hopefully will directly

lead to building student achievement and the improvement of student learning. This is another program that linked improved climate and culture to improved student achievement.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to address the leadership practices of rural superintendents in poor and isolated communities in the three states of Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont. This research contributes to the greater body of knowledge of the leadership practices of rural district leaders and how those leadership practices may contribute to gains in student achievement. Up until now, there have been only a few other studies in the area of district leadership. Research in the investigation of rural districts that are economically disadvantaged and are in isolated areas are almost nonexistent in the literature up until now. The aim of the current study was to look at the leadership practices of rural superintendents and pinpoint the methods and techniques that they employ to be effective in accomplishing their work in leading school districts. The hope of this work was that if leadership techniques could be identified they could also be replicated. Rural district leaders can benefit from best practice ideas from the field of knowledge that already exists. It is also hoped that the findings of this study can be used to contribute to the body of work yet to be written in the area of district leadership especially as it applies to rural and impoverished districts.

Up until now, Marzano and Waters' (2009) study of school district leadership has been at the forefront describing the elements of school district leadership as it relates to factors that must be present, if student achievement is to be improved. There is strong evidence in the literature that supports the fact that school district leadership is vital for schools to improve, especially in the delivery of successful instruction for students.

Strong leaders are important because they ensure that the organization has direction and focus and that the district continues to actively sustain a path toward redesign. It is equally evident that a contributing factor in school decline is a weakness in leadership (Leithwood et al., 2010).

Unique Qualities of Rural Districts

Rural school district leaders have been identified in previous research studies as having a somewhat different approach to their work as opposed to the methods suburban and urban fellow superintendents employ. One study found that rural school district leaders used more direct, hands on, and people centered approach to their everyday work in order to be successful. These were actions that were expectations expressed in the study as being part of the everyday life in a small rural community. The superintendents were expected to interact with people in the local town in a very public face-to-face manor (Forner et al., 2012).

In another rural study in high poverty districts that had growing immigrant non English speaking population in California, district leadership relied on the relationships with outside agencies to provide student support and formal and informal linkages with community organizations in order to generate more community and parent support and engagement with the school system. This study found that district leaders needed to employ multiple systems to support the diverse learning needs of students in order to improve student achievement. They applied an emphasis on school wide standards and instructional expectations for students. They also capitalized on the diverse strength of teachers in order to accomplish the best instruction for students with diverse learning styles and individual needs (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009).

The rural research study focused on three high performing, high poverty California high schools. “Cross-case findings revealed that the local educational leadership had effectively employed multiple instructional, distributed, and transformation practices to improve student outcomes, and had established multiple formal and informal linkages with instructional entities outside of the school to accomplish their mission” (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009, p. 1). The contributing factors in reaching success in these three selected high schools were: “a focus on instruction, school-wide standards and expectations; strengths of teachers, and development of multiple systems of support for students with varying needs” (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009, p. 1). These schools made significant gains in student achievement by accessing community resources and taping into greater levels of parent engagement. They were able to get parents more involved in the school (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009)

The current research identified some of the some themes within it that connect the findings to the previous limited rural research that has been done in the area of rural district leadership. The research conducted in California by Masumoto and Brown-Welty in 2009 relates to the current study because there were school wide standards and expectations that were related to the success of the districts along with non-negotiable goals being set. In the California study the success of the improvement work was also related to relationships that unified the community that can be related to the building of climate and culture in the findings of this current study. Likewise in the previous research in Michigan (Forner et al., 2012) rural district leadership success meant building hands-on face-to-face and direct relationships in their everyday work. This factor relates back to

the importance of building a positive climate and culture in the school that appeared to be linked improved student achievement and instruction in the current study. It seems that there is a link between these findings. In summary, the importance of climate and culture appears to be a common thread in both the current and previous rural research investigating the successful leadership of turnaround districts. Additional common factors of district leaders that were identified in both the current and previous rural research were setting school wide standard and expectations, setting nonnegotiable goals, and maintaining high levels of personal interactions. These factors appear to be present in successful school system turnaround where there are increased levels of student achievement and effective classroom interaction.

Discussion of the Current Findings

The current study also found that all of the elements identified in the leadership research done by Marzano and Waters in 2009 as the most effective strategies for improving district leadership, while and at the same time positively impacting student achievement and classroom instruction, unequivocally apply to small rural schools. This research found that in successful schools, even ones that struggle with rural isolation, are adversely effected by poverty, that are affected by turnover in leadership, can still successfully improve classroom instruction and raise student achievement and classroom instruction by paying attention to the research on effective district leadership.

This study found that the majority (85%) of the statements made by the participants were in the areas of collaborative and nonnegotiable goals setting high expectations for students and building a positive climate and culture in each district.

These themes along with the other effective leadership practices will now be discussed in more detail.

Goal Setting

The findings reveal that successful district leadership means setting district goals for classroom instruction and student achievement. It is a practice that offers a high value of return and is highly beneficial for students. The study showed that goal-setting work is vital in rural schools and that it is more effective if it takes place in a collaborative way including all teachers, administrators, board members, and the public if possible.

The results of this study point out that district wide goals work best if they are nonnegotiable and compel all staff members to work together to attain all of the goals set and ask them to comply with them as they attend to their daily work. It is also important to have all staff members in the district be aware of the goals that are generated and then implement a plan for achieving them (Marzano & Waters, 2009). Goals act like a rudder to make sure the staff stays on course in working with students. In this study, three out of four of the districts set goals at the district level and some of the successful outcomes shown should be credited for the leadership driving a process that sets nonnegotiable goals in each of the districts. The one district that did not set district goals had goals set at the building level and not at the district level. This study supported the importance of setting nonnegotiable goals with 668 responses affirming the importance of this leadership activity connected to successful district leadership.

Board Alignment

This study found that effective district leaders take the time to work with the board and have the board members aligned themselves with the district goals. The board

should be part of the process so that they can easily be aligned with district goals and show their support for them both publically and privately. In three of the four districts studied there was obvious board alignment done by district leadership and board members supported achievement and instructional goals. In this body of work 96 responses were related to the importance of alignment and support for district goals. This was higher than expected because only three out of four district set districts goals. One district, the Maliseet District did not participate at goals setting at the district level so there were no responses for the Maliseet district for this important category of district leadership and its connection with classroom instruction and student achievement.

Monitoring Achievement

This study underscored the importance of monitoring achievement and goals for the purpose of improved instruction. In all of the districts there was a significant effort to monitor data around student achievement with 126 responses made in that area. It was obvious that the use of data to track school improvement was being done in all of the school districts in this study. It was seen as a very important exercise to improve student outcomes. In the case of one of the districts, the North Penobscot School District, the superintendent went so far as to hold a data night with the SU board members so that he could engage them in the data for the schools they represent and as a result have them support achievement and instructional goals. He had each of the principals explain what the data meant to each board member so they could be more engaged in the direction of the district and the SU. This was a compelling exercise and not something that is typical to do with school boards. The teachers, administrators and board members interviewed felt that doing this was very successful in helping the board members engage in looking

at the data and sharing the needs expressed by it. Board members understood the work of the administration and the teaching staff who had to deal with the outcomes of the data. It also meant that if there was training or materials that needed to be purchased as a result, the board would understand the need to allocate more funds for that area.

Evidence through comments about allocating resources to support goals was another area that was strong in this study. There were 377 total comments made about the importance of this exercise. The evidence speaks to the importance of supporting the goals of achievement and instructional improvement. The study reinforced the importance of taking action and making resources available where they are needed. This is another area spoken about in the previous Marzano and Waters research related to district improvement. In addition to each of these leadership practices there needs to be dedicated professional development so that teachers and principals are supported to continue their work. There needs to be a continuing focus on the knowledge and the development within the mission of the school district. The ongoing work to improve skills, to accomplish the goals of improved instruction therefore builds stronger student achievement.

Similar to the two studies in rural areas previously mentioned in this chapter where relationships and high expectations were important, there were two unexpected findings that appeared to be central characteristics of district leadership in this study. In addition to the factors that Marzano and Waters (2009) pinpointed in their meta-analysis there were two other very important factors seen in this study that were notable that Marzano and Waters did not write about in their research outcomes. Each of the four school districts in this study, as noted throughout each of the interviews conducted, showed an

unusual degree of high expectations for student performance in their make up. They seemed to talk about the mission and vision of the school and they were committed to the social, emotional, and instruction needs of the students that they worked with as part of the direction of each of the districts' work. Likewise, the huge presence of a positive climate and culture within the make up of these districts and the role that it played in the research that was conducted for this study was notable. Both of the factors, visible high expectations and having a positive climate and culture, appeared to be in every school district. Each one of these areas are important contributing factors in the turn around of the school district and at the same time may help to overcome the lack of district leadership in some specific areas. For example, if a lack of district goal setting existed then climate and culture and high expectations were strong and they made up for the lack of defined district goals. These elements were both pervasive throughout the work in these successful school districts. Identifying these two factors make an important contribution that appear to set these four districts apart. Many small rural school districts struggle with poverty and rural isolation, but if the identified factors of high expectations and climate and culture are not present and pervasive then the district may not have the same positive graduation rate or assessment outcomes to show for it.

High Expectations

In every discussion in these interviews that were conducted there were thoughts expressed about opportunities for students to do more and to gain more educational opportunities at every level. High expectations were a unifying theme from building to building. The maintaining of a culture of expectations and doing it in a way where the

staff is a part of establishing, supporting, and maintaining that vision is something that may set these school apart from others that are otherwise similar to them.

The faculty and the administration showed unity in all of the interviews that were done in each of these four districts visited around the topic of having high expectations for these students that they worked with. There was a discernible emphasis on encouraging dual enrollment classes for high school students and both community and college partnerships for students wishing to take college level classes while in high school.

Each of these small rural school districts had a very visible culture of high expectations that existed within the district. In some of the districts, however, it was more visible at the building level, in the schools themselves as found in the Maliseet School District where the principals in both schools were encouraging students to do dual enrollment classes and experiential classes. Both of these talented leaders were pushing their students to look beyond the rural and isolated nature of the place they live and each of these principals found a way to establish online learning, advanced college classes, or to partner with natural resources organizations, in this case the forest service, to encourage learning outside the four walls of each school.

In the Maliseet School District especially, where there was little goal setting being done at the district level by the superintendent, the high school principals were working with the guidance and teaching staff at each high school to encourage students to work harder to set goals for themselves and continued their education beyond high school. This school district very deliberately celebrated student successes and displayed colorful college banners throughout the school for students who had attended college

beyond Maliseet school districts' two high schools. One of the Maliseet district principals spoke about making it an emphasis, pushing for higher expectations for students in that school and doing deliberate work to try to engage every student to take steps to consider all possibilities and maximize their capabilities and aspirations. There was a close tracking of test scores in each of the district schools in this study and that contributed to the of improvement for all students. There was an overall emphasis on the need and the desire to take care of each and every student in each of the four districts in the study. There was a personalized approach that created deliberate nurturing of each and every student within the district. Comments about this came through in every interview that was done in all four districts examined in this study. The universal presence of increased expectations for students could be a reason why the outcomes for these low-income rural schools were positively affected.

Climate and Culture

Probably the most surprising element that was evident in each of the four districts studied, was the strong presence of climate and culture. Of all the comments made, in all of the 43 interviews that were conducted in this study and all of the responses recorded, almost half (48.62%) were comments made suggesting that there was a strong climate and culture at work within each of these school districts. Responses to questions about climate and culture were referred to over and over to the point to where this factor had to be considered as something missed in the rural school research up until now. Statements were made about the warmth and caring of the interaction between administrators, staff, school board members, parents, and student. There were statements expressing positive communication and interaction, statements related to the quality of the leadership at each

of the school in each district. There were statements that spoke about goal setting and how that process related to climate and culture of the school district. There were other statements that were related to sense of belonging and self-esteem among staff with their colleagues and statements about school board and community support for their work. The prevalent number of these comments was unexpected and somewhat overwhelming as related to the overall study. The existence of a positive climate and culture was mentioned as being closely tied to the overall well being of these four districts. Its presence may be one of the contributing factors for why these schools do so much better than other schools with the same demographics as they have. Clearly this factor of positive climate and culture and its effect on the district leadership and student body is something that is important to be considered for future study as it may be linked to school success.

Limitations of the Reported Results

The reported results of this study have been limited by its focus on a small number of schools in a three state region of the country. There is no indication that the issues raised in this study are accurate if applied to small, isolated schools in districts in poverty areas in other parts of the county. A second of the limitation was selecting the Smarter Balanced Assessment to compare the performance of the test scores of these selected school districts. This test was only given in all four districts in the three states for two years 2014-15 and 2015-16. While the states of New Hampshire and Vermont still give the Smarter Balanced Assessment today the state of Maine abandoned the test after the 2015-16 school year in favor of their own version of a statewide assessment. The only way that these school districts could be compared side-by-side using the same assessment

data was to select a very narrow window when all three states were given the same test. A wider window of assessment data may have made the outcomes of this study more generalizable. It is predicted that it will be harder to find common national assessments data especially state to state in the future because different states give different assessments.

In this study a purposeful sampling method was used to include interviews of, teachers, school board members and superintendents which could have an effect on the reported results. However, given the number of statements providing evidence for the existence of all factors identified and the multiple sources of data that validated their presence, it appears that the factors identified in the research represent a true and accurate picture of effective district leadership in this study.

Directions for Future Research

It is hoped that if some of the factors identified in this study were to be applied in other school districts with similar demographics in rural regions nationwide, the findings might also uncover the reasons why some rural school districts are successful and others are not. Maintaining high expectations is something that should be further probed to discover if it contributes to the overall success of rural districts and therefore, sets them apart from others with similar demographics. It is also obvious that since this was something uncovered in this research that was unexpected, that there is an opportunity for so much more work to be done to find out what might be taking place in these small rural, schools that are getting better results than those similar to them. Future research should be done to discover if having higher expectations as a staff and administration in fact does help to foster high achievement. An interesting idea generated by this study,

that could be explored further in future research is that systems that appear on the outside to be disadvantaged, given they are in a rural location and in a poor disadvantaged community, may in fact have an advantage as they are expecting and encouraging their students to do more than students in more privileged communities.

Another area to be explored by future research in rural areas is the positive climate and unity found within the school and also in the community supporting the student body. Participants expressed overwhelming care and support for the students that they worked with and they offered expressions of warmth and caring for their colleagues almost like they were part of the family. There was a high degree of care expressed in every building by everyone working in the district that was a part of the district. Perhaps this behavior exists because of the rural nature of the districts in the study. Perhaps this is taking place because these are school districts with few resources. Perhaps it is all of these things together and are necessary for the staff members and the administrators to become as close as they appear to be. There should be a follow up study to discover if the climate and culture that is so powerful in these schools has to do with the overall success of the district as opposed to districts with the same size and makeup (i.e. rural and impoverished conditions) that do not display the same successful outcomes. This current study seems to indicate that school districts with strong climate and culture and an expressed unity among the staff can overcome many things that might be otherwise lacking within the system. This hypothesis might be worthy of further exploration.

The Maliseet School District provides an example for why the power and effect of climate and culture might be an important factor to be curious about. Research questions explored in additional research investigating the relationship between climate and culture

and school improvement might be: What is the effect of climate and culture on overcoming isolation and poverty when the necessary and important leadership qualities characterized the Marzano and Waters (2009) meta-analysis are not present? What is taking place when other powerful district leadership factors are missing, like they were in the Maliseet District? What part, if any, does strong climate and culture have to do with overcoming the lack of opportunity to engage some stakeholder groups, like the school board and the public, to create and align goals? Can a strong climate and culture, which was obvious in the Maliseet District, make up for an absence of mission, vision, and goal setting as it relates to positive school improvement outcomes in districts with same district profile? Would Maliseet have had the positive outcomes that have been documented in this study without having such a positive climate and culture among the students, staff, and administration? All of these questions are important areas of interest that are left unanswered and should be further investigated in future studies.

The emergence of the theme of high expectations as an outcome in this research was an unexpected finding in this study. It was a constant element mentioned in many of the conversations that took place in each of the four schools that were visited. It has never been talked about in any of the literature having to do with support for the students as it relates to the mission and vision in rural school districts. There were statements made throughout the study about the development of students and the need for high quality instruction for all students in the system. Respondents to the questions were well aware of their own expressed reasons for being a part of the school district and they were very committed to the work they do every day in making students future better and brighter. There were a total of 512 responses in the category of high expectations for students. This

is an area that should be probed further as perhaps a research study in the future would be fruitful in this area. The question that comes to mind has to be, why these responses were made in such a strong and obvious voice in these four rural, small, school districts all in impoverished areas in three different states? What is it about rural schools like the four in the study who have improved student outcomes in school districts that seemed surprisingly successful and otherwise should not have been, given their demographic profile?

The amount of evidence that was collected in this area was overwhelming and it caused there to be a question of what was going on here that had to do with more than just these four rural school districts. Could the overwhelming positive climate and culture make a difference and overcome deficits in other areas? Could rural poor districts like Maliseet District where there was no goal setting at the district level make up for a lack of this important exercise by having a culture that was expressed as warmth and caring at Maliseet? Is this a rural phenomenon that presents itself in only a rural school culture where everyone works closely together and there is little turn over? This element that was overwhelming and should be the topic of future rural studies related to student achievement and improvement in classroom instruction. Case four was a model of community engagement, stakeholder participation and student voice that was a unique investment in an improved system model for the improvement of student achievement and instruction.

The review of the literature conducted in preparation for the work in this study brought forth the realization that district school leadership has not been well researched or studied. This lack of research on district leadership may relate to two facts: (1)

nationally there is a shortage of district leaders and (2) the leaders in district positions turnover every three to six years depending on the study looked at. There has been a lack of interest in research around best practices in district leadership nationally. It seems that there is a need to do more research on effective leadership practices. Perhaps if superintendents were to learn from this research and apply the concepts of important leadership characteristics, there would be far less stress leading to turnover in district leadership nationwide.

In addition, the examination of the literature has brought to light the fact that there is currently a serious underrepresentation of research about school districts in rural areas. Of the approximately 100,000 schools in the United States rural schools account for one third (National Association of State Boards of Education, 2016). Clearly, there needs to be more rural research done to improve leadership, classroom instruction, and student achievement in rural schools. Without devoted research and awareness of what is best practice in all dimensions of school district leadership with the intent of improving rural district leadership there will be little hope of improvement. The findings in this study put emphasis on the needs and interests of rural districts and especially those districts that lack resources and are located in very isolated areas. The study reflects on the needs of district leaders in small schools systems and how their circumstances and their leadership needs are far different than their colleagues in larger more prosperous districts or those in urban settings. Clearly, much more research is necessary at this time focused on both district leadership and also specifically rural district leadership. There must also be a focus on how small, impoverished, rural school districts differ from urban and suburban districts or there will be little chance to replicate best practice in rural districts.

In addition to the factors that Marzano and Waters (2009) pinpointed in their meta-analysis such as goal setting, creating school board alignment, monitoring achievement and instructional goals, and allocating resources to meet the goals of achievement and instruction, there were other very important factors that were notable that Marzano and Waters did not write about in the research outcomes which were seen in this study. Each of the four school districts in this study, as noted throughout each of the interviews conducted, showed an unusual degree of high expectations for student performance in their make up. They seemed to talk about the mission and vision of the school and they were committed to the social emotion and instruction needs of the students that they work with as part of the direction of each of the districts work. Likewise, the huge presence of the existence of a positive climate and culture within the make up of these districts studied and the role that they played in the research that was conducted for this study was notable. These factors were not mentioned in the Marzano and Waters research yet it was noticed in this study that there appeared to be was a connection between leadership practice in these two areas that school district contributed to a relationship between district leadership and student achievement (Marzano & Waters, 2009).

Analysis and Conclusions

This research found that certain elements in leadership practice are associated with do result in the improvement of student achievement rather than other practices that have less positive return. District leaders should learn from the limited research and apply only activities that have a higher return for the school district to achieve positive successful outcomes so they can improve instruction and achievement in small rural school districts (Marzano & Waters, 2009).

These districts were selected because they all had high levels of student achievement despite their rural location and limited financial resources. Each of these four district cases were in different points in their development under the current leadership. In two cases, Maliseet School District and in the North Penobscot District, the district leadership was established for only one or two years having changed district leaders during that time. In the other two districts Mohican School District and in Abenaki Highlands District, the district leadership had been in place for a much longer time and as a result had had a chance over many years to implement a plan of leadership, and action planning, and follow through with it. It is also important to note that the leadership in the two districts that had consistent leadership for a long time, expressed confidence in where they were headed and seemed confident in the plan of action. Many of the participants had been included in the planning process and had contributed to the direction and plan of action. This was an important element related to student achievement that Marzano and Waters wrote about in their research.

What was also interesting was that even though the important goal setting work was not taking place at the district level in the Maliseet School District by the superintendent, it was taking place, through the principals at the building level with the staff. There was still goal setting happening in the district, but at the building level of leadership. Perhaps one of the reasons that these rural school districts, who faced similar financial challenges and the geographic isolation of their rural area, had nevertheless achieved relatively high performance, was the existence of the indicators that Marzano and Waters had identified as being important in district leadership.

Additionally Marzano and Waters did not discuss in their research, two unique factors that were obviously uncovered in this study that was conducted in rural districts. The two overlooked factors by Marzano and Waters are the importance of positive climate and culture in the school and maintaining high expectations of the students in the district. These factors appear to be important contributing factors to the effectiveness of district leadership in rural areas. These two elements were uncovered in the study and seem to play an additional role in the effectiveness of district leadership in high performing, impoverished rural districts they appear to and that contribute to district improvement and the growth of student academic improvement.

Recommendation for Future Rural District Leaders

As a conclusion to this study it is important to make some recommendations given the results of conducting this extended investigation of district leadership practices in rural, impoverished, school districts. It is hoped that by heeding the recommendations other district leaders will gain knowledge from this work by understanding what is necessary to turn their districts around. It is the hope that other district leaders in the future:

- Understand and take the time to develop an inclusive and collaborative mission and vision statement for direction of the future of their school district and allow administrators, staff members and students to participate in the development of the vision and mission in order to build a collaborative and inclusive culture and climate in the school district.
- Maintain an attitude that continues to articulate the goals, vision and mission of the school district and promote it within the community at every opportunity.

- Develop habits and routines to maintain visibility within the community at both school and community events. Pay attention to the fact the culture in rural communities is to accept leaders who are accessible and who seem to show interest in the activities and the vitality and well-being of the community as well as the school district. Interactions are very valuable with residents of the community and especially with community leaders. These interactions should be face to face whenever possible.
- Develop data profiles for each student that monitors student progress. The more data points as practicable are necessary to have a comprehensive understanding of student strengths and weaknesses. Trust and analyze the data as information used to inform district strategic decision-making. Students should be aware of their own academic strengths and weaknesses at all time so that they can target their own improvement opportunities and build their skills.
- Make a deliberate effort to build a sense of community where all students can thrive academically within the school district. Be visible and attend and promote traditional celebrations including those that encourage academic accomplishments of the entire student body of the district.
- Promote an atmosphere in the school district so that students have a meaningful oversight in their own student voice and choice for their education.
- Invest time energy and resources to establish a high level of student safety. This includes installing equipment and upgrades to existing facilities, routines and updating leadership training. Promote a school atmosphere in each of the schools

in the district of appropriate interactions and between and among students, staff, and administrators so that all students are valued and respected.

Lasting Impressions from this Research Study

There are lingering final thoughts at the conclusion of this work that are still considerations as the result of the screening of all of the school districts which were considered in the three northern New England states where this research was done. It is not only to consider what is common about these four that were the subject for the study after the rigorous screening process was done and these districts stood out for their unique and successful outcomes. Now, when it is time to step back from this work, it is impossible to conclude that these successful outcomes for the students in these four school districts were a direct result of the district leadership characteristics present in each of them that Marzano and Waters professed to be a necessary and a contributing factor to building strong student achievement and instruction. What was striking in this study was when that when a leadership factor that did not exist at the district level, it surfaced at the building level between the faculty and the principal. In these four schools, perhaps the existence of the Marzano and Waters' necessary principles for being an effective school district merely needed to exist in some part of the district structure. Perhaps if these principles were not evident in the districts' leadership these turnaround schools were still successful by using the criteria in spite of the leadership. These principles were in existence at the building level if they did not exist at the district level. They had to be in the system somewhere for the district to be successful. Forced accountability was never going to be successful in rural, poor school districts with the role demanded by the federal government during the NCLB era. The federal government

attempted to change the leadership roles of both building and district leaders demanding results in the form of better test outcomes. A school district with limited resources has to deal with the federal government in a new position of authority. The accountability movement was not going to be successful in obtaining meaningful and sustained student achievement and improved instruction in rural schools with limited resources. The results of this study show the driving force of change is about harmony and setting collaborative goals and maintaining a positive climate where teachers have high expectations for all students. These schools are places where all students are valued and each one of them are expected to work to their potential.

What was so striking in the results of this research was the power of positive climate and culture in all four of these school districts. The unity of the community with the board, teaching staff, and the students was overwhelming in all of these school districts which underscores the necessity of a positive climate and culture. It was noted in some way in every conversation by every person who participated in the study. Finding this furthers the belief that in order to be a successful school district that wishes to improve student performance and classroom instruction in a rural, very poor, region it must also have a positive climate and culture in order to turn the district around. These turnaround school districts must spend time and energy deliberately working to create a positive atmosphere where there is safety and respect and that everyone is working hard to promote the initiatives that they have all created collaboratively. This important element is not to be taken for granted. It needs to be deliberately maintained and improved if the school district it is to be healthy for the students and the staff. Positive performance in building school district improvement appears to be heavily tied to the

health of the climate and culture and the successful rural school districts that were in low socio economic areas in this study are great examples.

Finally, as an outgrowth of positive climate and culture, that everyone in the organization was working together in a unified way to improve student achievement and classroom instruction is the key to these findings. In all of these schools in this research each staff member struggled each day to confront the fact that these students have barriers to overcome such as lack of opportunity and the stress of living in a poor rural area. They worked as a team with team goals and objectives to improve achievement and instruction. Everyone seemed to just work harder and to put forth effort to help the students be encouraged to do more. There was an underlying effort and a feeling that a student has to work harder in these communities to be successful. There were signs of student expectations everywhere in the results. Every parent and taxpayer, faculty and administrator contributed to an overall message to these students that they needed to work more and work harder because they were working at a disadvantage and they had fewer resources and fewer advantages to call upon to be successful. There was a strong and noticeable work ethic in each of the school districts in this study that contributed to the student success found in these districts. Without the care and attention to the important elements of the Marzano and Waters (2009) principles, care and attention to making sure that everyone in the system is engaged in the existence of a positive and productive climate and culture and everyone in the system promoted and encouraged students to do more and to work harder to be successful, the system cannot be successful. Improving student achievement and classroom instruction is everyone in the system's job

and the united vision must be attained in order for the students in a rural poor school district to be successful.

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Appendix A
Superintendent Recruitment Letter

Dear Superintendent,

Please allow me to introduce myself to you. My name is Bruce Labs and I am a practicing Superintendent of Schools at the White River Valley Supervisory Union school district in Royalton, Vermont. I have been a superintendent for fourteen years in NH and Vermont school districts. I am also a doctoral student at Plymouth State University in NH. I am writing to you in the hope that you will participate in qualitative research study I am doing on effective leadership practices for small rural district leaders. The fact that you are receiving this letter is because I have narrowed my search including your district because I have been impressed by what I have seen from your district performance in the last several years. Up until now there is very little research that exists that has focused on effective distract leadership practices in small rural districts.

I am writing to ask you to participate in this study. If you do decide to participate I would ask you to allow me to have two 45-60 minute interview sessions with you. I will be asking to know more about your leadership practices and about your vision for the districts and how that translates in to your everyday work. I would ask you to give your permission to interview others in your organization such as board members, principals, teachers, and community members or others who might be familiar with your leadership practices. I would request that you furnish a list identifying these people so that I can contact them. I would reach out to them and ask for their consent to participate in the interviews. My plan would be that I spend some tie on-site to be able to collect this

information by making appointments with staff and board members to interview each of them for 45 to 60 minutes. I would also request that I be permitted access to use copies of additional data such as minutes of meetings, documents that you have communicated messages to the staff, policy statements, newsletters, and other information to show evidence of your encouragement for academic improvements for your students to the staff and to the community.

Interview questions would be submitted to you and others for all interviews well in advance. I would use a digital voice recorder and also take notes so that I can transcribe the sessions when the interviews are finished. Transcripts will be made available to all participants when they are transcribed so that any corrections can be captured and changes can be made. All information including transcriptions of the interviews will be kept securely in my office or my home.

Cooperation and involvement in this study is strictly voluntary and subjects interviewed can withdraw at any time without penalty. All interviewee's identities will be protected and kept strictly confidential at all times. Identifying information of the school district will not be revealed in the study. Your name and identification as district leader will be kept confidential and your descriptions and stories will be given a pseudo reference names to protect your identity.

I intend to follow this letter up with a phone call in the next week or two. I would make the call when you have time to talk and I will call back if the time is not convenient to you. I can be contacted by email at blabs@wrvsu.com or my personal email at labsbruce@gmail.com. My phone at the office is 802-763-4480 and my personal cell

phone numbers is 603-252-0188. I look forward to talking with you about this work very soon.

Sincerely,

Bruce C. Labs

Appendix B

Participant Recruitment Letter

Dear,

Please allow me to introduce myself to you. My name is Bruce Labs and I am a practicing Superintendent of Schools at the White River Valley Supervisory Union school district in Royalton, Vermont. I have been a Superintendent for fourteen years in NH and Vermont school districts. I am also a doctoral student at Plymouth State University in NH. I am writing to you in the hope that you will participate in qualitative research study I am doing on effective leadership practices for small rural district leaders. The fact that you are receiving this letter is because I have narrowed my search including your district because I have been impressed by what I have seen from your district performance in the last several years. Up until now there is very little research that exists that has focused on effective distract leadership practices in small rural districts.

I am writing to ask you to participate in this study. If you do decide to participate I would ask you to allow me to have two 45-60 minute interview sessions with you. I will be asking to know more about your leadership practices and about your vision for the districts and how that translates in to your everyday work. I received a list of possible participants from the administration. You were included on that list as a person I might ask to participate. My plan would be that I spend some tie on-site to be able to collect this information by making appointments with staff and board members to interview each of them for 45 to 60 minutes. I would also request that I be permitted access to use copies of additional data such as minutes of meetings, documents that you have communicated messages to the staff, policy statements, newsletters, and other information to show

evidence of your encouragement for academic improvements for your students to the staff and to the community.

Interview questions would be submitted to you and others for all interviews well in advance. I would use a digital voice recorder and also take notes so that I can transcribe the sessions when the interviews are finished. Transcripts will be made available to all participants when they are transcribed so that any corrections can be captured and changes can be made. All information including transcriptions of the interviews will be kept securely in my office or my home.

Cooperation and involvement in this study is strictly voluntary and subjects interviewed can withdraw at any time without penalty. All interviewee's identities will be protected and kept strictly confidential at all times. Identifying information of the school district will not be revealed in the study. Your name and identification as district leader will be kept confidential and your descriptions and stories will be given a pseudo reference name to protect your identity.

I intend to follow this letter up with a phone call in the next week or two to answer any questions you might have and discuss the work with you. I hope that you will agree to work with me and be interviewed for this study. I can be contacted by email at blabs@wrvsu.com or my personal email at labsbruce@gmail.com. My phone at the office is 802-763-4480 and my personal cell phone number is 603-252-0188. I look forward to talking with you about this work very soon.

Sincerely,

Bruce C. Labs

Appendix C

Interview Questions

Superintendent interviews first round questions

1. What is it like being a superintendent in this school district? What are some of your challenges you have and what are some of benefits of working here?
2. What is your instructional leadership style you have used since coming to this district? (Instructional leadership)
3. How do you make student achievement activities important in the schools you lead? (High expectations)
4. Tell me how you have constructed this organization since becoming superintendent? (Clear and focused mission)
5. Can you give a brief description of this SU? How does the SU function as a merged group of districts? (Climate and Culture)
6. Were there any improvements that you advocated for that you feel contributed toward positive academic improvement for students? (High expectations)
7. Are there best practices that you employ through your leadership? (Instructional leadership)
8. Can you give me some major challenges that face this community? (Demographics, climate and culture)
9. Are there advantages that you feel this community has that set it apart from other communities that are similar (very rural, high poverty etc.)? (Demographics, Climate and culture of the school)

Superintendent interviews second round

Question #1) How do you insure that making improving student achievement is the most important goal in the organization? (Goal setting)

- a) How is it that people in the district know that this is the most important goal of this organization? (Monitoring goals)
- b) Are there specific things that you do or say or have written to express the district goals for the organization from day to day in this district? (Nonnegotiable goals for achievement and instruction)
- c) Can you talk about things you have done with the principals to encourage student achievement and raising student achievement in the district? (Monitoring goals)
- d) What specific actions have you taken with teachers and support staff to reinforce that improved student achievement is most important? (High expectations for students)

- e) What specific actions have you taken with parent, students, and or community members to reinforce that improved student achievement is most important? (Board alignment and goal setting)
- f) Are there specific activities that or actions you have taken with the school board members to encourage student achievement? (Nonnegotiable goals for achievement and instruction)
- g) Why has your district improved and maintained student academic performance where other districts around you have not been as successful at doing that? (Clear and focused vision)

Question #2) When you are hiring new teachers and principals, how do you go about selecting people for positions do you ensure that the people you are selecting have the same values for improving student achievement?

- a) How have you communicated to administrators that when hiring people to fill positions we should hire people with the goal of finding those people who will improve student achievement. (Clear and focused mission)
- b) What role does the School Board play, if any, in staff replacement? (Alignment and support)
- c) Do you feel like you have a free hand in staff hiring and management when it is necessary? (Board alignment and support)
- d) What do role do the current staff members play in helping to hire new staff? (Climate and culture)

Question #3) Do you have a process where goals are set for the district each year?

- a) If so, who is involved in the goal setting process for the district? (Climate and culture)
- b) How have you gained and maintained board alignment and support for district goals? (Board alignment)
- c) How does the goal setting process work? (Collaborative goal setting)
- d) How is the staff involved in setting the goals? (Collaborative goal setting)
- e) How are principals involved in setting goals? (Collaborative goal setting)
- f) How are board members involved in setting goals? (Collaborative goal setting)

Question #4) What do you do to help attract and maintain talented leaders to this district?

- a) What have you done to train leaders once you have hired them for a position? (Clear and focused vision)
- b) Are there measures that you have taken to support and train leadership within the district? (Use of resources to support goals)

Question# 5) How does the district raise, appropriate, and spend money from the budget that expresses the values of continuing to build student achievement in the district?

- a) Who is involved in budget development each year? (Climate and Culture)
- b) Who has the final word if there is conflict around a decision recommended as a part of the budget? (Collaboration)
- c) How is conflict related to the budget resolved? How are choices made? Please describe the resolution process? (Collaboration)
- d) How difficult has it been to pass budgets in the district? If it has been difficult, how have you and the board been able to pass a budget in the end? (Use of resources to support goals)

Question #6) Is there a process for monitoring achievement and instructional goals within the district? (Monitoring achievement)

- a) How are those goals established and how do you assure that they are the driving force for improvement in the SU? (Clear and focused goals)
- b) How do you ensure that progress monitoring is done in all of the schools? (Monitoring achievement)
- c) Who is involved in establishing the tools and benchmarks for monitoring and student achievement? (Monitoring Achievement)
- d) Is there an agreed upon instructional model within the district and if there is what is it? (Non-negotiable goals)
- e) If there is a need for a correction in an observed instructional practice by a teacher, how do you go about changing that instructional practice? (Non-negotiable goals)

Question #7) What are the most important actions or activities that you as the superintendent have done to improve student achievement?

- a) Why has your district improved and maintained student academic performance where other districts around you have not been as successful at doing that? (Clear and focused vision)

Can I contact you later if I require follow up once I look through the question?

School Board Member Interview

Opening question for a board member: Can you talk about your working relationship, as it currently exists with the Superintendent of Schools? How long have you been on the Board?

Question #1) What does the Superintendent do to make student achievement one of the most important goals in the school district? (Strong instructional leadership)

- a) Can you articulate what specific activities that the Superintendent has done to promote the importance of improvement of student achievement and instruction? (Instructional leadership)
- b) Can you tell me about any community's perceptions about the importance of improvement of student achievement in the district? (Community perceptions)
- c) What activities and actions has the Superintendent taken to signal the importance of improving student achievement and instruction? (Clear and focused vision)
- d) Why has your district improved and maintained student academic performance where other districts around you have not been as successful at doing that? (Clear and focused vision)

Question #2) What specific actions or activities have you noticed that the Superintendent does or has done to try to hire staff that have the talent to improve student achievement in the district? (Collaboration)

- a) Does the board set aside time at monthly meetings to talk about improved student achievement, instruction, or assessment? (Clear and focused vision)

Question #3) How much involvement in the goal setting process do you as an individual board member feel you have?

- a) Is the school districts goal setting process collaborative? If you think so why and if you don't think it is what more needs to be done to make it so? (Collaboration)

- b) Can you cite some examples where you have had an impact on the goal setting process each year? (Collaboration)
- c) Do you feel that the goal setting process is a collaborative process or do you feel there are groups in the community ie. teachers, parents, administrators or board members who need more of a role in the goal setting process? (Collaboration)

Question #4) What role does the board have maintaining leadership to support the district?

- a) Do you believe that the district has been able to attract talented leaders to the school district in the past? (Climate and culture)
- b) Has the board supported specific actions and activities to support leadership growth and development? If so what are they? (Use of resources)
- c) Are there policies that have been passed by the board to support leadership improvement in the past? (Board alignment)

Question #5) Does the budget development process involve considerations of goals the district has set?

- a) As a member of the Board do you feel that there is a plan for how the budget that has been raised and appropriated will be spent to accomplish district goals? (Use of resources)
- b) Does each board have discussions about building student achievement in the district? How often do those discussion take place and who is the person or group that raises the topic? (Board alignment)

Can I contact you later if I require follow up once I look through the question?

Principal interview questions

Opening questions for the Principal: How long have you known the Superintendent and how would you best describe you relationship to him/ her?

- a) Why did you decide to work in this district and why have you decided to stay here? (Climate and culture)

Question #1) How does the superintendent reinforce the message of the importance of improvement of student achievement within the school district? What does the superintendent do to make sure student achievement is very important within the district? (Clear and focused mission)

- a) Can you describe specific measures or activities that the Superintendent has taken to ensure improved student achievement is promoted with the administrators? (High expectations for achievement)
- b) Can you describe specific measures or activities that the Superintendent has taken to ensure improved students achievement with teachers in the district? (High expectations for achievement)
- c) Can you describe specific measures or activities that the Superintendent has done to ensure improved student achievement with parents and the community? (High expectations for achievement)

Question #2) How is the Superintendent involved in making decisions about how money is set aside for activities to improve student achievement in the district? (Collaboration)

- a) Who is involved in setting the budget for the district? (Collaboration)
- b) How is the Superintendent involved in the development of the budget? (Use of resources for student achievement)
- c) If people can't agree on what the priorities for the budget how do people decide how to settle this conflict? (Collaboration) Follow up question. How is the Superintendent involved in resolving the dispute involving the budget?

Question #3) What specific activity does the Superintendent do to support leadership development within the school district? (Use of resources)

- a) How have you as an administrator been supported by the Superintendent to improve your own leadership development? (Use of resources for achievement)
- b) How are goals set for each administrator from one year to the next? (Collaboration)
- c) What part, if any, do principals have in recommending people being considered for leadership positions within the SU or district? (Collaboration)
- d) Can you describe specific actions that the Superintendent has done to encourage student achievement with the community and with parents? (Instructional leadership)
- e) Why has your district improved and maintained student academic performance where other schools or districts around you have not been as successful at doing that? (Clear and focused vision)
- f) Can I contact you later if I require follow up once I look through the question?

Question #4) Are there two or three specific things the Superintendent has done to contribute to improvement of student achievement in the district? (Instructional leadership)

Teacher Interview questions

Opening questions for teachers: Can you describe how you interact with the Superintendent, in other words, what is your working relationship with him/her? (Climate and culture)

Why did you decide to work in this district and why have you decided to continue to work here? (Climate and culture)

Question #1) what are the specific steps that the Superintendent taken to improve student learning and student achievement in the district? (Instructional leadership)

- a) Can you describe actions in cooperation with the principal aimed at building student achievement in the district? (Instructional leadership)
- b) Can you describe actions the Superintendent has taken with teachers to improve student achievement in the district? (Instructional leadership)
- c) Are there specific actions that the Superintendent has taken with parents and the community to encourage improvement of student achievement? (Climate and culture)
- d) Why has your district improved and maintained student academic performance where other schools and districts around you have not been as successful at doing that? (Clear and focused vision)

Can I contact you later if I require follow up once I look through the question?

Bruce C. Labs
92 Rivervale Road
Piermont, NH 03779-3106
(603) 272-9013 Cell (603) 252-0188

EDUCATION

Plymouth State University Graduate School of Education Doctor of Education (Ed D) in Learning, Leadership and the Community (Expected graduation June 2019)	Plymouth, NH
University of New Hampshire Graduate School of Education Certificate of Advanced Graduate Study in Educational Administration (June 1996)	Durham, NH
Plymouth State College Graduate School of Education Master of Education, School Administration and Supervision (June 1981)	Plymouth, NH
New England College Bachelor of Arts in Secondary Education Social Studies (June 1973)	Henniker, NH

EXPERIENCE

2014-Present Superintendent of Schools for White River Valley SU (Formerly the Orange Windsor SU until June 30 2016)	Royalton, VT
2003-2014 Superintendent of Schools for SAU # 23	North Haverhill, NH
1988-2003 Principal, Woodsville H.S	Woodsville, NH
1999-2003 Elected to Board of Directors, Consortium for Educational Excellence Through Partnerships	Middlebury, VT
1996-98 President of the New Hampshire Interscholastic Athletic Association (NHIAA) Representing NH Association of School Principals. Past Vice President 1994-96, Past Chair of the Sportsmanship Committee, Finance Committee , Past member Appeals Board, Strategic Planning Committee, and Council	Concord, NH

RELATED WORK EXPERIENCE

2008-2009 Elected President of the North Country Educational Service	Gorham, NH
2008-2014 Creator of the NHIAA "Hoops for Hunger" Campaign	Concord, NH
2007-2014 NHIAA Basketball Committee Chair	Concord, NH
2002 Appointed by the Governor as the representative on the State of New Hampshire Workforce Opportunity Youth Council as the only delegate from Grafton Co.	Concord, NH
2000- 2004 Woodsville High School named National Service Learning Leader School by the Corp. For National Service (One of two schools named in NH and one of sixty-six schools named in the United States. The presentation of awards was in Washington, DC June 14-17, 2000)	Washington, DC

1999 (September) Woodsville High School selected by the Foundation for Excellent Schools, Cornwall, VT
Best Schools Program (beginning November 1999)

1993-98 Woodsville High School named as one of four high schools in Bedford, MA
New England to the Rural Partnership for Student Success Program of the
New England Association of Schools and Colleges

1997 (April) Appointed Delegate to the President's Summit on Community Service
Philadelphia, PA

1997-Present Created Mentor/Cross Age Tutoring Program at Woodsville Woodsville, NH
Elementary School, Woodsville High School and Bath Village School, (nationally recognized twice)

AWARDS, RECOGNITION RECEIVED

2011 Recipient of the Superintendent of the Year Award for the State of Denver, CO
New Hampshire National Award presented at the AASA National Conference February, 2011

1997 Recipient of the 1997 Consortium for Educational Excellence Through Williamstown, MA
Partnerships Distinguished Service Award

1996 Recipient of the 1996 National Educational Leadership Award Washington, DC
Presented by Jobs for America's Graduates, Inc.,
(Only Five Awards Given Nationally)

1994 Outstanding Secondary Principal of the Year for New Hampshire, Award Washington, DC
Presented in Washington, DC. (October 1994)

1993 Nominated for the Outstanding Secondary Principal of the Year for NH, Concord, NH
National Association of Secondary Principals

EDUCATIONAL CERTIFICATIONS:

New Hampshire Certifications; Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, Principal, General Special Education, Mental Retardation, Social Studies; New Jersey Certifications: Teacher of the Handicapped grades K-12, Teacher of Social Studies 7-12.

PUBLICATION:

Labs, Bruce, "Using Performance Interviews For A Comprehensive Approach To Finding Excellent Teachers", The School Administrator, Spring 1994.

REFERENCES:

Available Upon Request

