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**Closing the Achievement Gap: A Case Study Examining the Role of the
Superintendent Executive Team in Improving African American
and Hispanic Student Performance in a Texas School District**

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**Closing the Achievement Gap: A Case Study Examining the Role of the
Superintendent Executive Team in Improving African American
and Hispanic Student Performance in a Texas School District**

by

Ricardo López, B.A.; M.A.

Treatise

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Dedication

I dedicate this to my entire family. They have been my inspiration and my motivation to this scholarship experience. Thank you for the unconditional love and encouragement - none of this would have been possible without you.

Linda, you are not only my wife, but you are my best friend. You inspired me to take a risk and apply for a doctoral program 600 miles away. You believed in me and held the household together while I was away and completing endless assignments. You were with me every step of the way and I share this accomplishment with you. I could not have taken this leap of faith without your support and belief in me. Please know you mean the world to me. I love you.

Mom, it was you that instilled in me to dream big and that anything was possible. You have been the spiritual force of who I am today. You instilled so many qualities in me molding me to be the person I am today. You modeled integrity and the importance of working with youth. You are my hero and I hope to be the great person you are. I love you, Mom.

Dad, you always supported me to find my way and gave rock solid advice in critical situations in my life. Growing up, I used to hear how invaluable you were to the armed service branch you served and seeing you in the paper receiving medals reinforced this belief. I knew that you believed in me and felt I could excel at anything I put my mind to. You showed me the power of having a strong will and modeled how to remain calm when critical situations arise. You taught me to speak through actions, not

words, and this lesson has had a significant impact. Dad, I love you and thank you for showing me what being a good father entails.

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reinforce that I was on the right path. Your spirituality is second to none and your prayers have been felt by me; I could not have made it through without them. I dedicate this treatise to my Uncle Hector, who was in the process of completing his study, before God called upon him. Both of you have been significant motivators in my life and I am forever grateful.

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For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord. They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.

Jeremiah 29:11

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**Closing the Achievement Gap: A Case Study Examining the Role of the
Superintendent Executive Team in Improving African American
and Hispanic Student Performance in a Texas School District**

by

Ricardo López, Ed.D.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

Supervisors: Edwin Sharpe; Ruben Olivárez

The challenge of district-wide reform to accelerate the reduction of achievement gaps is a point of emphasis in the American public school system. Today's superintendents are expected to focus on enhancing district-wide instruction at both national and state levels, in order to close achievement gaps, particularly for African American and Hispanic students. Superintendent success in creating and sustaining effective instructional frameworks has been the subject of few studies since high stakes testing was introduced in the 1990s. Similarly, research has also focused on district efforts to close achievement gaps (O'Doherty, 2007) and others have examined the role of the superintendent in reducing achievement gaps (Harris, 2014) illustrate the challenges of district-wide reform and introduction of systems, strategies, and tactics these teams use to further narrow achievement disparities with African American and Hispanic students. However, those studies primarily focused on the role and responsibilities of the superintendent's instructional team and the superintendent's successful efforts in reducing achievement gaps with diverse youth. Therefore, the

purpose of this study was to examine the specific role of the superintendent and this leader's instructional leadership systems, strategies, and tactics, which might have contributed to the reducing of achievement gaps with African American and Hispanic students.

Findings of the study suggest that the superintendent plays a critical role as instructional leader, along with the district leadership team. Findings indicate that the superintendent creates a program evaluation and a student centered belief system, in addition to strategically build relationships and plan and set goals. Finally, the study suggests that the superintendent employs specific tactics such as being visible and accessible, building trust, sharing accountability, and sustaining a culture of high expectations with the intent of ensuring academic success for all students.

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Chapter One: Introduction

African American and Hispanic youth represent the majority of the population growth in the United States, calling attention to the need for public educators to address the scholastic achievement concerns for this growing groups of students (Castillo & Osborn, 2011; Census, 2010; Texas Education Agency, 2014b). As a result, public school educators are focusing on reducing the achievement gap between African American and Hispanic students to their Anglo counterparts (Herron-McCoy, 2009; Price, 2007), and “to close achievement gaps, we must increase the scale of successful reform- from schools that serve a few hundred students to school districts that serve tens of thousands of students” (O’Doherty & Ovando, 2009, p. 28). Existing research on reducing the minority achievement gap primarily addresses two areas: (a) the teaching pedagogy and its relationship to improved student performance (Marzano, 2007; Schlechty, 2002; Stigler & Hiebert, 2007); and (b) the principal’s role as an instructional leader (Blase & Blase, 2003; Maxfield & Flumerfelt, 2009; Sergiovanni, 2000). Ensuring the acquisition and use of meaningful instructional approaches is seen as a primary way for educators to improve student performance (Akert & Martin, 2012; Marzano, 2007). The corollary to these approaches is the notion of the campus leader as a vital factor in ensuring academic success for the entire campus student population (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2001; Rodriguez-Campos, Rincones-Gomez, & Jianping Shen, 2005). However, most recently several researchers have examined the superintendent role in district-wide progress in reducing academic achievement gaps (Harris, 2014; Price, 2007; Waters & Marzano, 2006; Wright & Harris, 2010).

While efforts to improve the capacity of both teachers and campus based instructional leaders provide modest results at the local level (Blase & Blase, 2003; Marzano, 2007), a school district's system-wide instructional transformation can have a profound impact on student academic progress (O'Doherty & Ovando, 2009; Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2008; Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2000). In order to bring district-level reforms to scale, the superintendent of schools must be the catalyst for systematic change (Harris, 2014; Price, 2007). There are empirical studies on the district central office executive team as transformational instructional actors (O'Doherty & Ovando, 2009; Rorrer et al., 2008; Snipes & Casserly, 2004; Togneri & Anderson, 2003) and emerging research on the role of the superintendent on closing achievement gaps (Harris, 2014; Mora, 2010; Price, 2007; Waters & Marzano, 2006; Wright & Harris, 2010). Which have focused on the influence that districts and few superintendents have on reducing student achievement differences. However, additional research is needed to examine the sole role of the district superintendent as the chief instructional leader and the degree of influence this leader has on closing the achievement gaps for diverse learners (C. A. Edwards, 2006; Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2001; Mora, 2010).

Background of the Study

In 2010, the national census listed Hispanics as the second largest population in Texas, with nearly 10.5 million residents and the African American population with just over 3 million citizens (TDSHS, 2012). A rapidly growing population, Hispanics in Texas are only 900,000 short of the largest ethnic group, Anglo Americans (TDSHS, 2012). In Texas public schools, Hispanic students constitute the majority of the student

population with 2.6 million students, compared to 1.5 million Anglo and 600,000 Black students (Texas Education Agency, 2014b). The impact of this growing Hispanic student population has direct implications for public schools across the state and the country at large, particularly concerning closing achievement gaps related to the academic achievement of specific populations as outlined by No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001). Compounding this challenge, failure to achieve specific benchmark scores for identified subpopulations, including Hispanics, English Language Learners (ELLs), and African Americans, may result in a district's failure to meet the mandated Annual Yearly Progress (AYP), an accountability measure of NCLB (2001). In 2009, in an effort to nationally align standards for students to gain knowledge and skills needed to succeed in college and the workforce, The U.S. Department of Education was authorized under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), to create the Race to the Top Assessment Program. This program provides funding to a consortia of states to develop assessments aligned to this national expectation (USDE, 2014). The goals of the Race to the Top program are to:

- Adopt standards and assessments that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace and to compete in the global economy;
- Build data systems that measure student growth and success, and inform teachers and principals about how they can improve instruction;
- Recruit, develop, reward, and retain effective teachers and principals;
- Turn around low-achieving schools; and,

- Meet President Obama's goal of being the world leader of college graduates by the year 2020 (USDE, 2014).

States and school districts are encouraged to participate in this voluntary program and participants will receive a waiver from NCLB stipulations and sanctions (USDE, 2014). However, many states, including Texas, are not participants in Race To The Top (USDE, 2014). As Texas elected not to participate in the Race to the Top program, its public school districts are aligned to and evaluated by the Texas Education Agency state assessment standards and federal standards set by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001; Texas Education Agency, 2013a). At the same times, the rapid Hispanic growth in Texas is changing how the public education system addresses the needs of schools impacted by the shifting demographics. The numbers of students who are counted as subpopulations including Hispanics, English Language Learners, African Americans, and Economically Disadvantaged students continues to grow, with 10.4 million Hispanic citizens already documented in Texas, along with numerous undocumented Hispanics attending Texas public schools (Fry & Gonzales, 2008), and an increase of 40,000 African American students in a decade (Texas Education Agency, 2014b). Thus, school districts have the opportunity to potentially make a profound positive impact on diverse students' academic performance in reducing achievement gaps (Price, 2007; Rorrer et al., 2008; Skrla et al., 2000).

Statement of the Problem

NCLB (2001) set a uniform goal of 100% of the students in each state meeting minimum proficiency in math and reading by 2014. Under the localized public education

leadership framework, the superintendent has the capacity to be a critical driver of high academic attainment for diverse learners (Ragland, Asera, & Johnson, 1999; Waters & Marzano, 2006). However, the intricacies and complexities of being a superintendent involve facilitating the learning process while yielding positive achievement results, a task that involves three of the ten functions of public school leadership (Olivárez, 2013). Olivárez (2013) presented a model of superintendent leadership outlining the ten functions of the public school district. However, those related to instruction, illustrated in Figure 1, are: (a) curriculum and instruction; (b) elementary and secondary campus operations; and (c) instructional support services.

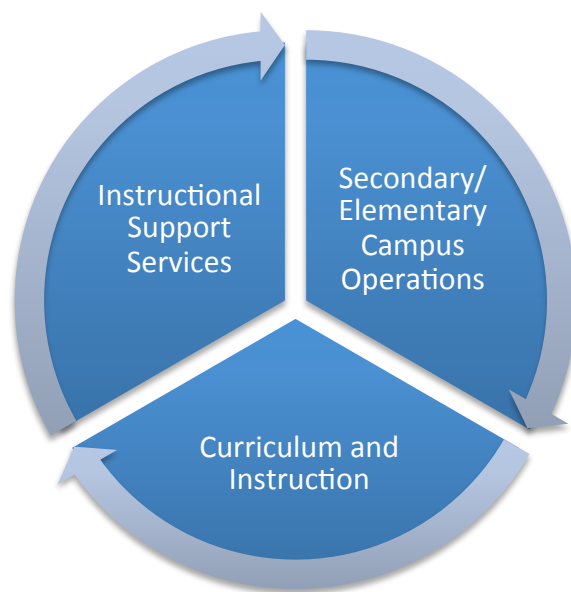


Figure 1. The Superintendent's Role as an Instructional Leader (Olivárez, 2013)

Although these three instructional functions are essential, the remaining seven functions (governance operations; human resources; accountability, information,

management and technology services; administrative, finance, and business operations; facilities planning and plant services; external and internal communications; and operational support systems) often take much needed time and attention away from instruction (Lashway, 2002; Waters & Marzano, 2007). As a result, the district leader may lose sight of instructional management, relying on principals and teachers to get the job done while the superintendent is left to navigate through the political arena (M. Edwards, 2006; Fuller et al., 2003; Kowalski, 2005). Furthermore, each school system implements varied educational models with mixed results, resulting in a lack of continuity and consistency in student performance across a district (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). Yet, there are few studies revealing the positive impact a superintendent and central office executives can have on student achievement through a centrally focused instructional design (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2001; Fullan, Bertani, & Quinn, 2004; O'Doherty & Ovando, 2009; Snipes & Casserly, 2004). There are also emerging studies on the role of the superintendent in closing achievement gaps with diverse learners (Harris, 2014; Mora, 2010; Price, 2007; Waters & Marzano, 2006; Wright & Harris, 2010). Lessons learned from these studies on how district-wide reform can facilitate reducing achievement gaps include: building instructional leadership and teaching capacity through professional learning communities (Fullan et al., 2004; O'Doherty & Ovando, 2009), the creation of a shared vision that is the anchor for instructional decisions (Skrla et al., 2000; Waters & Marzano, 2006), a collaborative culture focused on results (Fullan et al., 2004; Harris, 2014; Snipes & Casserly, 2004;

Wright & Harris, 2010) and supplying the resources needed to facilitate the teaching and learning exchange (Fullan et al., 2004; Snipes & Casserly, 2004).

The rapid increase in the Hispanic and African American student populations has created the demand and urgency for districts to systematically achieve high levels of student performance for all students by providing instructional consistency throughout the school district. Previous research suggests that the superintendent may significantly contribute to reducing the existing achievement gaps. However it is noted that additional research should be conducted in other districts. For instance, O'Doherty & Ovando (2009) suggested, "more studies are needed on districts that have reduced achievement gaps in post-NCLB context" (p. 28), particularly those that serve diverse populations, including Hispanics and African Americans.

In addition, previous researchers have focused specifically on the role of closing achievement gaps in culturally diverse districts (Price, 2007; Waters & Marzano, 2006). Others noted the role of the superintendent in closing achievement gaps in small Texas school districts (Harris & Wright, 2010). Yet, others have identified the role of the superintendent in narrowing the learning gaps between African American and Caucasian students (Harris D., 2014). However, these studies did not focus on closing achievement gaps with African American and Hispanic students nor did these examine the superintendent's role in working with the central office executive team in the school district and community they serve. Further, the systems, strategies, and tactics used by the superintendents must also be examined and shared so current and aspiring

superintendents can learn and emulate actions that have facilitated closing of the achievement gap at the district-wide level.

Purpose of the Study

In an era of public school accountability, superintendents must have the instructional precision and skill to effectively sustain student achievement systematically across the entire district (Harris D., 2014; Price, 2007; Waters & Marzano, 2006; Wright & Harris S., 2010), but specific information related to this domain is limited. The purpose of this phenomenological case study was to determine the specific superintendent role and actions taken to provide a district-wide learning system to reduces achievement gaps. In addition, this study explored strategies and tactics a superintendent used to increase student academic achievement for diverse learners.

This study built on prior research recommendations derived from studies of district-wide actions and promising superintendent instructional and organizational tactics shown to enhance student performance and to reduce achievement gaps among minority and economically disadvantaged students (C. A. Edwards, 2006; Mora, 2010; O'Doherty, 2007; Price, 2007). Ultimately, this study attempted to discover the superintendent's role in effectively facilitating district-wide instructional continuity and consistency in order to close existing achievement gaps with African American and Hispanic student populations.

Research Questions

District-wide examination of closing achievement gaps have been available for review for decades (Cuban & Usdan, 2003; Marzano & Waters, 2006; Ragland et al.,

1999; Skrla et al., 2000). However, several questions related to effective strategies remain. For instance, why are there some superintendents successfully leading districts to reduce the achievement gap and others not? The case study examined a Texas school district superintendent whose district was making progress in reducing achievement gaps, and whose student enrollment demographics resemble Texas' average. The research was guided by the following questions:

1. What is the role of the superintendent in reducing the achievement gap for African American and Hispanic students?
2. What systems did the superintendent create to reduce the achievement gap for African American and Hispanic students?
3. What strategies does the superintendent use to create a system-wide culture that is responsive to reducing the achievement gap for African American and Hispanic students?
4. What tactics are used by the superintendent to facilitate reducing the achievement gap for African American and Hispanic students?

Methodology

The study utilized a qualitative methodology and a single case study design using a phenomenological approach. A qualitative methodology permitted the researcher to gain a deep understanding of the personal experiences of the participants and their perspectives on how a superintendent facilitates systematic instructional design (Hays & Singh, 2011). A single case promoted a deep exploration into the superintendent's role in promoting African American and Hispanic student achievement within a district that

is closing the achievement gap. A phenomenological approach unearthed the personal experiences and highlighted perspectives gained through the lived experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). This case study design aligned to qualitative data collecting processes which included: (a) emerging methods; (b) open-ended questions; (c) interview data, document data, audio/visual data; (d) text and image analysis; and (e) themes, patterns, and interpretation (Creswell, 2013; Hays & Singh, 2011; Merriam, 2009). The data sources for this study were: (a) interviews, (b) a review of documents, and, (c) a reflective researcher journal.

The bounded system for the case study was a single school district located in Texas. The case site was a Texas public school district with student demographics that closely resemble the state average within +/- 15% of Hispanic and Economically Disadvantaged enrollment and +10% in African American enrollment, and a district performance distinction on Index 4 - post secondary readiness - in the state accountability index, and with a superintendent tenure of at least three years. Participant selection began with purposive sampling (Hays & Singh, 2011) and proceeded with referral sampling (Merriam, 2009). The purposefully selected participants were the superintendent and central office members. The remaining participants were selected through referral sampling, as the researcher asked the district superintendent to supply names of principals, a board member, teachers, and parents involved in the district instructional design. The participants' list consisted of the superintendent, two central office administrators, three principals (a representative from elementary, middle, and

high school), three teachers (a representative from elementary, middle, and high school), a board member, and two parents or community volunteer representatives.

Definitions of Terms

Academically high-performing district or successful school district: A district that has attained national or state distinction in student performance metrics. For the purpose of this study, a Texas Public School district with a distinction on Index 4 of STAAR assessments that measures post-secondary readiness was evaluated. A school district must have 70% of its campuses in the district receive this distinction for district recognition. In this study, these terms are used interchangeably.

Achievement gap: The disparity of academic performance between White students and their minority counterparts.

Closing achievement gaps: For the purpose of this research this term is used to describe the narrowing of achievement gaps for African American and Hispanic student populations.

District-level practices: A framework that supports public school initiatives that is reflective in campuses throughout the district.

Minority student academic achievement: Ethnic minority background students' performance on state and national assessments. This study focused primarily on Hispanic and Black minority student performance.

Superintendent: The chief executive officer of a public school district. This study examined a superintendent, with a minimum of three years experience in the current district, in an academically successful public Texas school district.

Superintendent instructional leadership: The superintendent's function focusing on the instructional program planning, integration, execution, and evaluation that translates to positive student performance.

Superintendent role: The district leader as a driver in the entire learning system with the focus of reducing achievement gaps with African American and Hispanic students.

Superintendent strategies: The superintendent's careful plans used to meet goals crafted to reduce academic achievement gaps with African American and Hispanic students.

Superintendent systems: The superintendent's use of organized integrated whole networks made up of diverse but integrated and interdependent parts used to facilitate the closing of achievement gaps with African American and Hispanic students.

Superintendent tactics: The superintendent's specific planned actions to accomplishing the closing of achievement gaps with African American and Hispanic students.

Significance of the Study

The complex nature of the superintendency in the present era of high-stakes accountability merits further exploration through multiple vantage points within the organization, particularly as it relates to facilitating and promoting effective instructional practices and improving learning for low-performing student groups. This study expanded on the understanding of the role, systems, strategies, and tactics a

superintendent uses to facilitate a district-wide instructional focus that has made progress in reducing achievement gaps with diverse learners.

The results of this study provided insight into the superintendent's actions that facilitated the reducing of achievement gaps. The study uncovered several successful superintendent instructional practices for closing student achievement gaps with African American and Hispanic students. Information resulting from this study included that a superintendent is an instructional leader, working with executive teams, in closing achievement gaps. Systems used by the superintendent to amplify student success are a program evaluation system and a student centered belief system. Strategies utilized by the superintendent to close achievement gaps are building relationships and planning and goal setting. And finally, superintendent tactics used to reduce achievement gaps with African American and Hispanic students are being visible and accessible, building trust, sharing accountability, and sustain a culture of high expectations. This information may serve current and aspiring superintendents as they continue to search for avenues that might ensure academic success for all students.

Delimitations

This study was designed to examine only one Texas school district, with African American, Anglo, and student demographics that reflected the state average +/-15 Hispanic and Economically Disadvantaged and +10% African American enrollment, and had a superintendent in the current role for a minimum of three years.

This study focused on a single superintendent's tactics in promoting district-wide instructional services that are closing achievement gaps. Participants selected in the

study were only those with perspectives of the superintendent role in providing district-wide instructional consistency. Other participants included a superintendent, central office executives, campus administration, teachers, parents, and a board member. Students were not included in this study. Data was collected through interviews and document analysis and no observations or focus groups were employed.

Limitations of the Study

Limitations of this study were those common to qualitative methodologies. Thus, findings may only apply to the district being studied and were not necessarily generalizable to other school districts. Further, research bias in collecting and researching data; no comparison data from other districts; a small number of selected participants; participant feedback of 12 people does not represent the voices of an entire district. For the purpose of this study, a district that obtained a state distinction in Index 4, post-secondary readiness, had students' scoring at high levels on their state assessments was selected. Thus it was assumed that districts with high minority populations, including African American and Hispanic, that received this distinction are reducing achievement gaps. All participants were purposefully selected. Such selection might also reduce wide generalizations. However, the researcher used thick, rich descriptions to provide a highly defined context to increase the generalizability of the findings (Creswell, 2013; Hays & Singh, 2011). The study design attempted to offset the above noted limitations through the integrity of the interview process.

Assumptions

This study was based on two assumptions. First, was the reliance that the Texas Accountability Rating System from the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) Index 4 district distinction, properly identified districts that have 70% of its campuses scores in the top quartile of post-secondary readiness to show academic readiness of diverse learners, thus reflecting the reducing of achievement gaps. The second assumption was that interview participants truthfully and faithfully answered questions based on their first-hand professional experiences and understandings. To this end, the researcher developed a trusting relationship with all participants, ensured the participant anonymity and confidentiality of responses, and validated the data through trusted methods. It was also assumed that the study would generate knowledge and information about practices a superintendent employs to improve African American and Hispanic student performance.

Summary

Chapter one provided an overview of the study, establishing the problem to be addressed, as well as the significance of the study. The chapter framed the current context in which superintendents must work to enhance African American and Hispanic student performance across the district to close achievement gaps. Finally, the chapter also presented the research purpose questions for the study and outlined the methodology and design, as well as limitations and delimitations. Chapter two will review literature related to the study and chapter three describes the research methodology used for the study. Chapter four offer the contextual background of the

public school district being studied, United Public School District. Chapter five includes a description of the findings according to each research question. Chapter six provides a summary of the findings with connections to the extant literature as well as implications for practices and further research.

Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

Efforts to improve teacher and campus leadership capacity have proven fruitful (Blase & Blase, 2003; Maxfield & Flumerfelt, 2009), but the evolution of district-wide transformation has been a slow process (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Tyack & Cuban, 1997). In order to bring district-level reforms to scale, the superintendent of schools can be the catalyst for systemic school district change. Multiple studies addressing district-wide reform to close achievement gaps have been published (Harris, 2014; O'Doherty & Ovando, 2009; Price, 2007; Rorrer et al., 2008; Skrla et al., 2000; Snipes & Casserly, 2004; Togneri & Anderson, 2003; Waters & Marzano, 2006), but additional research is needed to further examine the role of the superintendent as the architect of improving district-wide practices that enhance diverse student achievement (C. A. Edwards, 2006; Mora, 2010).

This literature review identifies avenues superintendents use to drive district-wide instructional continuity and consistency, thereby enhancing district instructional delivery and concurrently increasing diverse students' ability to realize their potential, while closing academic achievement gaps. The literature review is comprised of five sections. The initial section historically frames American schooling practices and beliefs since the late 1960s. It details the manifestation of accountability systems and designs to close diverse student achievement gaps in Texas. The next section chronicles superintendent development outlining the role and functions of the district leader, and delineating the four key leadership tasks associated with enhancing student performance, as illustrated in Figure 1: (a) curriculum and instruction; (b) elementary and secondary

campus operations; (c) instructional support services, (d) and systemic program planning (see Figure 2) (Olivárez, 2013; Region 10 Education Service Center, 2000; Yarbrough, Caruthers, Shulha, & Hopson, 2011). The third section focuses on successful comprehensive practices employed to close achievement gaps. Section four relates the four frames of organizations to district leadership, as the foundation to develop a theoretical framework for the study (Bolman & Deal, 2012). The final section concludes the literature review and gives transition to the methodology used to examine the study of a Texas school district superintendent and the tactics this leader applied to start closing the achievement gap throughout the school system.

American Schooling Practices and Beliefs on Diverse Learners and Subsequent Instructional Practices Since the Late 1960s

The evolution of schooling in the United States reflects a constant search of avenues that may contribute to ensuring the academic success of all students. Similarly, it illustrates how children are educated. For instance, it suggested that, “schools are a powerful indicator of a community’s current health and its future well being” (Orfield, 2002, p. 9). The belief systems that exist within schools play a powerful role in student outcomes. Further, Oakes, Wells, Jones, and Datnow (1997) identified ways in which school systems often view intelligence through an Anglicized lens, with fixed perceptions of how a student should act, speak, and come prepared from home. Other researchers (Hatt, 2012; Ogbu, 1978, 1988; Orr, 2003) examined concepts of smartness, cultural backgrounds of diverse students, and the impact of measuring these students against their more affluent Anglo counterparts. A synthesis of their findings indicated

that, in many instances, a school district chose to embrace the dominant culture, using it to either enhance the learning environment or to create a subtractive model where the student must master the traditional “Anglicized” assessments to be considered intelligent. Moreover, it is argued, “a dominant culture is one that is able, through economic or political power, to impose its values, language, and ways of behaving on a subordinate culture or cultures” (Gordon, 1998, para. 1).

Subtractive instructional practices that rely on the Anglicization of students are still remnant, if not prevalent, in public schools (Bartlett, 2011; García & Kleifgen, 2010). Despite symbolic acts (Bolman & Deal, 2012), such as adjusting boundaries and naming buildings after prominent citizens of a given minority’s heritage, school districts continue to face issues of discrimination (Orfield, 2002; Rippberger & Staudt, 2002). In instances where school districts make decisions based on the historically dominant Anglo beliefs and values, the result is often the subtraction of minority cultures (Bartlett, 2011). These instructional practices influence which holidays are celebrated, what character values are emphasized, and which lessons in civics are taught (Rippberger & Staudt, 2002). Although there have been superficial attempts to recognize multicultural perspectives and heritage, the needs of minority students run much deeper and are more entrenched than can be remediated through a cultural celebration, or a bulletin board dedicated to a hero, or other token approaches to celebrating cultural diversity (Rippberger & Staudt, 2002; Rudnesky, 2007; Valdes, 1996).

Since the late 1960s, researchers, such as Ogbu (1978, 1982, 1983), conducted extensive studies to gain better insight into the dynamics impacting minority student

performance in the American learning system. In Ogbu's book, *Minority Education and Caste* (1978), he studied minority student achievement through multiple lenses to identify the factors in African American underperformance. This report built upon a multi-ethnic study that compared the analogous academic performance problem in six countries, focusing on *caste like* (stratified class) groups and their respective scholastic achievement in relation to the instructional practices these children received (Herron-McCoy, 2009; Ogbu, 1978; Ogbu & Simons, 1998). The findings revealed that minority groups who were labeled as *unwilling* immigrants, were treated unfairly, experienced a lack of educational resources, and were not given equal job opportunities. Groups defined as *willing* immigrants, in each of the six countries, did not face the same hardships and adapted and thrived at an accelerated rate (Herron-McCoy, 2009; Ogbu, 1978). The structural barriers of cultural perceptions appeared to limit the academic achievement and attainment of the unwilling immigrants, as IQ was not a factor (Ogbu, 1978). The United States' African American and Hispanic populations fall into the unwilling immigrant category that is still remnant today (Herron-McCoy, 2009; Johnston & Viadero, 2000). Their experiences in America's public schools illustrate the educational ramifications of the various instructional practices that have evolved in the United States and how these influenced the schooling of diverse students.

The Hispanic schooling experience. The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (1968) conducted an educational study of Hispanics. The findings produced a series of reports that established the educational opportunities afforded to Hispanic students,. Although conducted in the late 60s and early 70s, much of the information found in the

report, regarding the lack of educational opportunity and performance, is still relevant to educational institutions today (Collier, 2009), especially in predominantly Hispanic cities. The findings in these reports provided a historical context for the current situation for Hispanics with respect to reading levels, accountability, school holding power, ethnic isolation, retention, student interaction, and the quality of education (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights & Rowan, 1968) to include discrepancies in facilities and school district funding (Acosta, 2010). Hispanic students were not rapidly integrated into public school systems, in contrast to declining levels of Black/Anglo segregation during the 1970s. In a study during this period of time, Santiago and Wilder (1991) stated that “the level of segregation between Hispanics and Anglos rose slightly in 58 metropolitan areas under study” (p. 494). Most recently, Darling-Hammond (2013) posited that in the past two decades, segregation has not improved, but worsened. Contemporary segregation continues to affect the educational experiences of Hispanic students across the nation (Orfield, 2002).

The first two reports in this Commission’s series (1968, 1971) examined the ethnic isolation of Hispanics in the public schools of the Southwest. These studies attempted to determine the extent to which Hispanic students were kept apart from Anglo students. In addition, it documented the underrepresentation of Hispanic teachers, principals, other administrative personnel, and school board members in public schools. This report addressed concerns regarding instructional practices, school conditions, and how the relationship between the two influenced educational outcomes for Hispanics. An extensive literature review was utilized to explain the views and justifications held

concerning Anglo/Hispanic segregation. Findings indicated that, during this time, the Anglo community viewed itself as racially and economically superior to the Hispanic community. The study (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights & Rowan, 1968) derived three conclusions:

- Hispanic students were severely isolated by school district and by schools in the border region.
- Hispanics were underrepresented in school staffs and on school boards.
- Schools that do include Hispanic staff and school boards were predominantly found in Hispanic-majority schools or districts.

It was not until the fifth report in this series (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1973) did the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights focus on Hispanics again. This report focused on differences in teacher interaction between Hispanic and Anglo students. This report identified the teacher as the primary factor in a student's quality of education, regardless of curriculum, location, district and/or state mandates, student population, or other variables. The report targeted teacher-pupil behavior in the classroom and cited extensive research identifying the impact of classroom interaction on the quality of education and student achievement. The findings suggested that schools consistently failed to involve Hispanic children as active participants in the classroom to the same extent as they engaged Anglo children. In most of the measures of verbal interaction between teacher and student, the report cited gross disparities in favor of Anglo students.

English language learners' schooling experience. Providing instruction designed to meet the instructional and language needs of English Language Learners

(ELLs) was another area in which educational delivery failed minority students. Federal litigation (*Lau v. Nichols*, *United States v. Texas*, 1974) mandated the provision of appropriate language instruction. Texas Senate Bill 121 enacted the Bilingual Education and Training Act, S.B. 121 (Rodriguez, 2010). “The Texas Bilingual Education Act (S.B. 121) required that school districts use native-language instruction to promote learning and facilitate the transfer of the language-minority child to the English-only mainstream program” (Rodriguez, 2010, para. 8). Rodriguez (2010) stated:

The *Lau v. Nichols* decision of the United States Supreme Court (1974) assured the survival of the bilingual program. The court declared that children who could not understand the language of instruction were denied access to a quality education. On August 11, 1975, Education Commissioner Terrel Bell announced guidelines for identifying and evaluating children with limited English skills and for planning appropriate bilingual education and ESL education. *United States v. Texas*, filed by the G.I. Forum and LULAC, reinforced legal support for bilingual education. It criticized state efforts to address the needs of children. Judge Justice ordered the Texas Education Agency to initiate additional bilingual instruction, if needed, to satisfy “their affirmative obligation” and guarantee linguistically deprived children an equal educational opportunity. The decisions in *United States v. Texas* and *Lau v. Nichols* were prime catalysts for the expansion of bilingual and ESL programs in the state. (para. 9)

To address existing inequalities in educational access for bilingual students, governing entities provided additional fiscal resources for advancement of minorities. While the

mandate to provide effective educational practices and training for teachers was secured by this legislation, conflicting ideologies regarding English Language Learner program design further reinforced the disconnect perceived in some communities. None of the stated governmental actions, however, addressed minority students' culture. Researchers (Darling-Hammond, 2013; García & Kleifgen, 2010) suggest that many minority students feel that true caring for them involves efforts to understand their culture, to embrace it, and to have it as part of the educational process.

In addition to complete second-language immersion programs, García and Kleifgen (2010) identified seven supplementary educational programs serving bilingual learners. These programs were: (a) Immersion plus ESL; (b) ESL pull in; (c) Sheltered English; (d) Early Exit Bilingual Education; (e) Late Exit Bilingual Education; (f) Two-Way Dual Language; and (g) Dynamic Bi/Pharlingual Education (p. 28). García and Kleifgen (2010) further illustrated the differences within each program with respect to language used in instruction, program components and goals, and duration of instructional treatment. This wide variation in bilingual program designs increased concerns for minority achievement, leaving some administrators unconvinced of the value of bilingual education (Thomas & Collier, 2012; Wahala, 2011).

At the district level, enhancing the academic performance of second language learning students requires supportive leadership that will ensure fidelity to systems designed to improve Hispanic student achievement (M. Edwards, 2006; Mora, 2010). Although extensive educational research provides direction to effectively enhance ELL academic performance (Bartlett, 2011; Collier, 2009; García & Kleifgen, 2010; Wright,

2010), these practices are not being effectively utilized as reported by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (2009). In this briefing report, *Minorities in Special Education* (2009), explains that ELL students are more likely to be placed in special education classes since eligibility decisions were based on language proficiency and testing did not take language and culture into account; compounding the dilemma of effectively educating our bilingual students and begs the question if researched bilingual instructional practices are being implemented correctly.

African Americans' schooling experience. Much like the Hispanic student experience, African American students' were segregated from their Anglo counterparts. In the 1954 case, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, the United States Supreme Court justices unanimously ruled that the *de jure* (mandated by law) public school segregation practices were unconstitutional. This landmark decision was predicted to level the academic playing field of public schools, and to be the first step towards providing the same academic rigor to African Americans that White students had traditionally received (Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2002; Reardon, Grewal, Kalogrides, & Greenberg, 2012). Implementation of this law took ten to 15 years for full realization, as each state took its own unique approach to implementation (Hanushek et al., 2002). Not until the late 1960s and early 1970s did legal pressure compel American public schools to fully adhere to desegregation laws that allowed the vast majority of African American students to attend public schools with their White counterparts (Hanushek et al., 2002). This integration exposed the disproportionate academic levels

between African Americans and their White counterparts; the juxtaposition was highlighted (Hanushek et al., 2002; Ogbu, 1983, 1987).

The significant problem of high numbers of African American dropouts, consistent underperformance in state standardized testing; on college entrance exams; and participation in rigorous courses, in comparison to White student groups, has remained a dilemma in our public school system (Farkas, 2003; Orr, 2003). Compounding the issue, a separate study by the U.S. Commission of Civil Rights (2009), revealed that African Americans are disproportionately labeled with mental retardation. This briefing report also detailed that African American students in a special education program have some of the highest dropout rates of all subpopulations. The historic lack of a quality academic experience for African American students led to the monitoring of their success on state assessments at the federal and state levels. Under No Child Left Behind (2001), African American student performance is monitored and underperformance triggers sanctions. Similarly, the state of Texas adopted academic performance expectations for African Americans; not meeting them may result in additional state sanctions (Texas Education Agency, 2013a). While African Americans are not a majority of the Texas population, as a demographic subgroup, their student performance carries as much weight as other previously mentioned groups and their performance directly impacts accountability ratings.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) accountability and its effects. In 2001, the United States Department of Education was charged with enforcement of an education law that promoted the reducing of achievement gaps through a standards based

curriculum. This law was coined No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The NCLB (2001) was created and implemented to guarantee equity in academic achievement for all learners. Initially it illuminated the existing disparity in academic performance of minority students through objective academic achievement data. As a result, school districts and schools were rated and those not meeting standard expectations were sanctioned accordingly. As Darling-Hammond (2013) recently noted,

NCLB (2001) was initially praised for its emphasis on improving scores for students of color, those living in poverty, new English learners, and students with disabilities, and, indeed, the law contains some major breakthroughs...by flagging differences in student performance by race and class, it shines a spotlight on long-standing inequalities and has triggered attention to the needs of students neglected in many schools. (p. 67)

However, the unintended consequences of NCLB (2001) created a school culture focused on standardized testing (Ravitch, 2011) designed to limit students to having only one right answer on a checklist (Kearns, 2011; Palmer & Rangel, 2011; Pandya, 2011) and shifted focus away from the law's intent of implementing a standards based curriculum, such as focusing on higher order thinking skills (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Ravitch, 2011). These rote-learning practices acculturate students to seek teacher approval for the exact right answer, rather than to look to themselves and to "own" the material being covered. This form of instruction removes problem-solving skills from the learning process. Increasingly, such approaches to educating minority students are

the new standard found across our nation, and are paralyzing the cognitive growth of these youth (Darling-Hammond, 2013; McNeil, 2000).

In response to poor student performance on state assessments, school districts were challenged to implement a researched based and instructional model based on a viable curriculum, delivering instruction designed to decrease diverse student achievement gaps (Johnston & Viadero, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2006). School districts were compelled to implement and sustain models that will enhance student performance on state assessments (Mora, 2010; Ravitch, 2011), escalate performance on college entrance exams (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Honig & Copland, 2008), and increase the percentage of students graduating from high school (C. A. Edwards, 2006; Moore, Dexter, Berube, & Beck, 2005). Implementation of the stated initiatives required reform at district-wide levels. Further, district-wide effectiveness in reducing achievement gaps with diverse learners falls on the district leaders, such as the superintendent, central office executives, central directors, and campus principals (Fullan et al., 2004; O'Doherty & Ovando, 2009). The instructional responsibilities associated with the modern school are complex and requires instructional leadership, especially when addressing the needs of diverse learners and reducing achievement gaps in a high stakes testing era (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Tajalli & Opheim, 2005).

The impact of growing diverse populations in a NLCB era. Researchers have detailed the impact of accountability in various states (Cuban & Usdan, 2003; Pandya, 2011) on instructional practices, of narrowing the curriculum to only cover what is tested, and of utilizing instructional time to teach rote-learning skills (Kearns, 2011;

Palmer & Rangel, 2011). Largely viewed as the birthplace of high stakes testing and accountability models, Texas serves as a prime example of this phenomenon in action (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Ravitch, 2011). The rate of minority student growth far surpasses the national mean, and it reflects on a larger scale, the demographic trends across the United States (Census, 2010; TDSHS, 2012; Texas Education Agency, 2014b).

As a result of NCLB and the public emphasis on measuring student achievement, many superintendents “...believe that assessment and accountability are among their most pressing instructional leadership concerns” (Moore et al., 2005, p. 68), a concern that is compounded by the intense focus on the performance of the minority students whose assessment data determines achievement gaps. However, Bjork and Kowalski (2005) stated:

Although these standards were published nearly a decade ago, many within and outside the profession continue to believe the work of superintendents is so fragmented and consumed with politics and conflict that their ability to be instructional leaders is at best, an elusive goal. (p. 109)

Exacerbating the challenge of accountability is the rapid growth of the Hispanic and African American subpopulations. District leaders must determine how best to meet the needs of a fast-growing and traditionally underperforming minority student population while balancing the immense pressure imposed by the federal AYP sanctions set by NCLB. Pandya (2011) stated:

We need to find alternative ways to help our students develop the intelligence they bring to school. We need to help them become ethical, thoughtful members of our society. At the moment, we are trapped in the first step of this process: assessment. The intense pressure brought on by our national passion for accountability needs to be acknowledged, but also appropriately contextualized. (p. 106)

The unintended consequences of holding schools accountable through yearly assessments are vast and profound, especially for diverse students. This practice has moved assessment to the forefront and moved instruction to the back (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Ravitch, 2011), and undermines prior research that identified successful instructional practices for diverse students (Marzano, 2007; Palmer & Rangel, 2011). Research has consistently shown that a different approach to schooling must take effect to increase minority students' academic achievement (Davis, Ajzen, Saunders, & Williams, 2002; Palmer & Martínez, 2013; Townsend, 2002). In order to nullify the stratifying effects of being a diverse learner, a synthesis of recommended changes to move from assessment prep schools to an inclusive educational environment are: (a) not tolerating discrimination at school; (b) heterogeneously grouping students; (c) strictly monitoring retention; (d) monitoring special education referrals; (e) monitoring course placement in middle and high school; (f) providing a wide range of student and teacher resources (per pupil expenditure); (g) effectively training teachers; (h) assuring cultural sensitivity and understanding; (i) adequately utilizing compensatory funding; (j) providing a system of success with high expectations; (k) meaningful and impactful

teacher preparation models; and (l) a viable curriculum (Hatt, 2012; Marzano, 2003; Palmer & Martínez, 2013; Tajalli & Opheim, 2005). Implementing the aforementioned approaches in schools across the country is complex and may result in varying levels of fidelity, as the emphasis is less on systemic responses and more on symptomatic remediation in order to pass high stakes assessments.

In 2009, in an effort to nationally align standards for students to gain knowledge and skills needed to succeed in college and the workforce, The U.S. Department of Education was authorized under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), to create the Race to the Top Assessment Program. States and school districts are encouraged to participate in this voluntary program and participants will receive a waiver from NCLB stipulations and sanctions (USDE, 2014). However, many states, including Texas, are not participants in Race To The Top (USDE, 2014).

The Texas story: Diverse student enrollment. The national census, as reported in February 2011 by the Texas Department of State Health Services, TDSHS (2012), listed Hispanics as the second largest documented population in Texas, with nearly 10.5 million residents. The Hispanic population is only 900,000 people short of replacing Anglos as the largest population and projected to be the majority by 2017 (TDSHS, 2012). This index also reports that the Hispanic population comprises 40% of Texas' documented residents, a significant increase from the 1992 study in which Hispanic residents only embodied 26% of the Texas population (TDSHS, 2012).

In 2012-2013, over 1,200 Texas public school districts and open-enrollment charters encompassing 8,500 schools, reported over five million students enrolled in the

public education system (Texas Education Agency, 2014b). In comparison to a 2003 Texas study, this enrollment reflects an increase of 19.3%, and a 21.6% gain from 2000-2010. These rates of growth are significantly higher than the national average growth rate of 4.8% during the same time frame (Texas Education Agency, 2014b). The rise of student enrollment has created a concurrent increase in minority and subcategory populations to include: Hispanics, Black/African Americans, Economically Disadvantaged students, and English Language Learners (Texas Education Agency, 2014b). The Texas Education Agency (2014b) reported the following statistics:

- 2,606,126 Texas students are Hispanic (51.3% of total students population)
- 1,521,551 Texas students are White (30% of total student population)
- 646,182 Texas students are Black/African American (12.7% total of student population)
- 3,058,894 Texas students are Economically Disadvantaged (60.3% total of student population); a 9.5% increase from a decade earlier
- 864,682 Texas students are English Language Learners (17% total of student population)
- 840,724 Texas students are enrolled in a bilingual or English as a Second Language (ESL) program (16.6% of the total student population)

These statistics illustrate a shift to the ethnic majority with Hispanics, followed by Whites and African Americans. The study also revealed that the African American student population has risen by 40,000 students in ten years, second only to Hispanics, and that the White student population has decreased (Texas Education Agency, 2014b).

What is also of significance is the growing number of Economically Disadvantaged students (60.3%) and the increased student population in Bilingual/ESL programs which has enrolled more students than the total amount of African Americans in the Texas learning system (Texas Education Agency, 2014b). Each of these factors contributes to widening rather than narrowing achievement gaps in the public schooling systems, which serve African American, Hispanic, Economically Disadvantaged, and students enrolled in bilingual programs.

In Texas, where Hispanics comprise over 50% of the population and African Americans an additional 12.7% (Texas Education Agency, 2014b), minority student underachievement not only presents an educational dilemma, but also an economic predicament (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Santiago & Wilder, 1991). It is significant that this discrepancy in achievement between Hispanics and African Americans to Whites “is evident in data regardless of socioeconomic status” (Mora, 2010; Ogbu, 1987; Ogbu & Davis, 2003; Orr, 2003). Mora (2010) further illustrated that this phenomena exist beyond state assessment scores, as evidenced by dropout rates, student enrollment in advanced classes, passing scores on Advanced Placement exams, and admission to graduate programs.

Texas’ student achievement concerns are underlined for over 800,000 second language learners, as students must show growth on two separate tests. Student achievement in Texas is measured by the state mandated test, the STAAR exam, and the Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System (TELPAS) exam, a language proficiency exam for second language learners (Texas Education Agency, 2013b,

2014b). As a result, exposure to a rigorous curriculum may be further narrowed as teachers “teach to the tests” in order to show student progress on these exams. Interestingly, these exams do not overlap; each score is evaluated independently of the other. One (STAAR) is a measurement of content knowledge, and the second of English language acquisition and proficiency. This emphasis on student results has caused many second language learners to fall farther behind their Anglo counterparts. These students are exposed to a test-focused environment, and are losing ground due to the lack of exposure to the mandated curriculum (Thomas & Collier, 2012; Wright, 2010). Efforts to increase minority academic achievement in state assessments have resulted in the narrowing of curriculum and an extreme focus on test taking skills, thus limiting the minority students academic experience.

Historically, the availability of quality school resources is largely dependent on location. Researchers comparing minority based neighborhoods to Anglo communities clearly outlined the differences in key structural resources including physical facilities, (Lareau, 2011; Orfield, 2002), educational supplies (Ogbu, 1987; Orr, 2003), teacher salaries (Lareau, 2011; Morello & Melnik, 2013), supplemental financing (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Lareau, 2011), and volunteer efforts contributed by parents (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Lareau, 2011). As Lareau (2011) stated, “If social class did not matter, these differences would be randomly distributed. They are not. Across the country, communities where the average social class position of parents is higher have vastly more favorable public school systems” (p. 24) Remnants of this phenomena are exhibited in Texas through student assessment scores (Texas Education Agency, 2013a).

The stark contrast between suburban and urban schools challenges the notion that public education offers students equal life chances and that social class is not a factor in those chances. When students have no connection to or identity in their school, and there are low expectations, they are likely to underperform and meet the low expectations already set (Darling-Hammond, 2013), often closing the door to the next step in their education: attending a college or university. Texas' shifting demographic and how it reflects national trends in public school performance makes Texas a solid example of diverse instructional outcomes for diverse learners and these learners are not as confined to select districts (Census, 2010; TDSHS, 2012; Texas Education Agency, 2013a, 2014b).

Fuhrman (2004) found the failure rates for Hispanic students on high stakes tests in Texas were more than double that of Whites, suggesting that issues related to ethnicity in the classroom continue nearly four decades after the initial report by the U.S. Education Commission (1968). Compounding the issue, the state-wide combined average of assessment scores of African Americans' in math and, reading and ranked lowest out of all categorized ethnic groups (Texas Education Agency, 2013a). A number of school districts are not reducing achievement gaps, which, provides a predicament for the diverse learner attending the vast majority of public schools. This challenge becomes apparent in the geography of where these students are schooled; the majority of schools not meeting federal expectations are those that do not adequately serve a majority of Hispanics, ELLs, African Americans, and Economically Disadvantaged students (Heilig et al., 2011; Palmer & Rangel, 2011; Texas Education Agency, 2013a). In Texas, the school district's ability to properly instruct diverse students plays a major role in the

overall success or failure of that districts (Kearns, 2011; Texas Education Agency, 2013a).

Texas as a microcosm of the national educational challenges. The challenge of meeting the needs of minority students is not solely a Texas-based phenomenon. Researchers (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Pandya, 2011; Ravitch, 2011) explained that many districts have moved toward a *cookie-cutter* approach to educating minority youth. Pandya's (2011) California-based study illustrated how teachers were required to follow a scripted instructional sequence, using only provided materials, in order to ensure that students mastered set benchmarks. Any deviation from this model or negative student performance resulted in sanctions against the teacher, up to and including termination. This instructional focus on standardized assessment often overrides the ability of teachers to provide time for remediation, internalization, or extension and enrichment.

This hyper focus on student test prep underscores the importance of identifying system-wide instructional practices that counteract factors contributing to these disparities and the Anglo-minority student achievement gap. Success in the high-stakes accountability assessments in the state of Texas calls for district leadership to be instructionally assertive, and trained in the pedagogy required to spearhead a successful learning system. In order to meet the demands of the 21st-century student, district leaders must provide their principals with the proper resources, support, and training to effectively lead their educational communities in a democratic, collaborative partnership (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2013; Fairman, 2003).

In addition, school district superintendents need to engage in a focused search of mechanisms to ensure that effective instructional practices are in place. District leaders must also be cognizant of the expectations associated with the essential role they must enact to serve all learners.

Superintendent Development

Public education's expanding student enrollment created a system requiring a person who would manage and operate the institution. This person was coined *superintendent*. Two major actions facilitated a universal movement toward the employment of superintendents to lead a school system. The first was the 1874 Kalamazoo, Michigan court case (Candoli, 1995) that enabled local school boards to collect taxes to support not only elementary schools, but also high schools. The second development was the creation of multiple learning environments with a diverse student population, and thus the need for a single leader to consolidate all the schools under a single system (Candoli, 1995). As public education in America has evolved, the role of school leaders has advanced in tandem to address unique dilemmas facing public education in each era and addressing these needs guided the Superintendent's priorities. The superintendent functions have developed as follows:

- From 1850-1900, superintendents managed the day-to-day operations without board oversight and were seen as *teacher-scholars* (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005; Candoli, 1995; Kowalski, McCord, Petersen, Young, & Ellerson, 2011).
- From 1900-1930, in the midst of the industrial revolution, the United States' once rural communities migrated toward urban settings. This prompted the

district leaders to focus on fiscal responsibility. District leaders' assigned duties took a management focus to ensure fiscal responsibility and proper employee management (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005; Kowalski, 2013; Kowalski et al., 2011).

- From 1930-1950, superintendents lobbied for support as *educational statesmen*. School leaders, or educational statesmen, became the political activists for public education (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005; Kowalski, 2013).
- From 1950-1967, the superintendent functioned as a *social scientist* and social justice was the focal point as schools faced pending desegregation mandates (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005; Kowalski, 2013).
- In the 1970s, the shift toward central control became the theme for district leadership with a political focal point on student achievement, integration of arts, and the superintendent as a communicator within the school community (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005; Cuban, 1976; Kowalski, 2013).
- In 1983, the publication *A Nation at Risk* exposed deficiencies in the American public education system and strongly suggested that Americans were not able to compete in a global market. The gaps highlighted by *A Nation at Risk* (1983) prompted the education reform movements of the 1980s and 1990s and drove local agencies to demand reform (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005).
- At the turn of the 21st century, superintendents faced an increasingly complex nexus of responsibilities, including the challenge of resolving the minority achievement gap identified by performance comparisons on state assessments (Fuller et al., 2003; Kearns, 2011; Lipman, 2004).

The history of public education has understandably impacted the duties and responsibilities of a district superintendent, resulting in what is now a multifaceted leadership position (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005; M. Edwards, 2006; Fuller et al., 2003; Kowalski, 2013). Among all of the aforementioned roles, the modern superintendency evolved from a managerial focus to a position with a growing emphasis on deploying instructional leadership (Kowalski et al., 2011; Price, 2007).

Superintendent leadership. Effective district leaders establish a set of beliefs organized to support and reinforce quality decision-making (Fairman, 2003). Leadership is defined as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2010, p. 3). Likewise, creating a clear vision, mission, values, and goals establishes the foundation upon which all initiatives are built (Bambrick-Santoyo & Lemov, 2012; Blankstein, 2013; Fullan et al., 2004). The modern superintendent must balance the dynamic complexities associated with his or her role as a communicator (Kowalski, 2005), scholar (Kowalski et al., 2011), community connector (Owen & Ovando, 2000), and instructional expert (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005; C. A. Edwards, 2006; M. Edwards, 2006). To be effective as the leader of a diverse school district, a superintendent must possess the requisite core of an instructional leader: the precision, knowledge, and skills to understand the best teaching practices for students, and the ability to oversee a plan that ensures strategies are systemically implemented throughout the entire district, for instructional continuity and consistency (C. A. Edwards, 2006; Marzano & Waters, 2009).

Prior research has highlighted the impact that district-wide leadership, or lack thereof, has on student performance (O'Doherty & Ovando, 2009; Rorrer et al., 2008), on a district's collaborative culture (Fullan et al., 2004), and on the ability of an organization to effectively respond to challenges and opportunities (Snipes & Casserly, 2004). Most definitions of leadership edict *providing direction* and *exercising influence* are inherit with its meaning (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). However, there is a shortage of superintendents with the leadership precision to effectively meet the stated expectations, navigate the political arena with school board members and school community members, and address social dilemmas found in the school system (Fuller et al., 2003; Romo, 2013). Researchers also concurred that there is a link between successful school systems and strong leadership (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008; Marzano & Waters, 2006, 2009). As Houston (2001) stated "superintendents of the 21st century must become courageous champions for children, using their skills to muster the broad support for children and families that will enable children to be successful at learning" (p. 431). This assertion illustrates the powerful impact superintendents can have beyond a localized mindset of merely serving the students in their own districts.

Further, Houston (2001) argued the need to focus on the "Crucial Cs" of leadership, if superintendents are going make the needed changes to support the students' learning experience. These include constructive connections, communication, collaboration, community building, child advocacy, and providing a culturally responsive curriculum. "Leadership in the future will be about the creation and

maintenance of relationships: the relationships of children to learning” (Houston, 2001, p. 431). In essence, district leaders must engage in reflective practices in order to initiate the change needed within the systems they lead (Fullan, 2005; Houston, 2001). Bjork and Kowalski (2005) stated:

It is clear that focusing on the peripheral organizational concerns, with minimal time devoted to the technical core of curriculum and instruction, establishes a set of organizational values and commitment that our public schools and their leaders can no longer afford to ignore... In this era of accountability, superintendents who do not have a primary focus the academic success of students will not last long in their role of district leader. (p. 130)

Yukl (2012) examined general leadership effectiveness based on the degree to which individual or teams attained their goals. Yukl (2012) identified *level of conceptualization* theories to classify leadership influence concepts, and identified four processes: (a) an intra-individual process; (b) a dyadic process; (c) a group process; and (d) an organizational process (p. 14). The salient point of these theories lies in how these different approaches of leadership influence change. The four models illustrate how the evolution of the superintendency from a centralized person dictating compliance, toward a collaborative and democratic approach that addresses the complex tasks intrinsic to a modern system. With these theories, the direct or indirect influence of the leader is evidenced in creating working conditions that sustain two-way communication between the leader and employee (Yukl, 2012). Leadership for the 21st-century superintendent is

no longer autocratic; it requires skill and precision to gain collective buy-in and to facilitate a collaborative culture focused on successfully attaining organizational goals.

What Works in Schools: Translating Research into Action by Marzano (2003) synthesizes 35 years of research to provide answers to the factors affecting student achievement. Marzano (2003) identified four factors needing proper implementation to effectively embed proven research based practices into the education system. The four factors delineated are at the (a) school-level, (b) teacher-level, (c) student-level, and (d) implementation-level (Marzano, 2003). The author demonstrated the needed undertakings for each level to be effective and did not outline the leadership influence until the end of the book. Marzano (2003) stated leadership “influences virtually every aspect of the model... leadership is a necessary condition for effective reform relative to the school-level, the teacher-level, and the student-level factors” (p. 172). To successfully change the school dynamics, the district leader must amplify optimism (Marzano et al., 2001; Wiseman & McKeown, 2010). Leaders affecting learning community performance must increase teacher confidence and intensify motivation (Marzano, 2003; Marzano et al., 2001) and it is the superintendent’s responsibility to directly and indirectly create the conditions for effective research practices to be embedded in the entire learning system (Leithwood et al., 2004; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Waters & Marzano, 2007).

In 2004, researchers from the University of Minnesota and Toronto investigated campus based leadership effects on student performance (Leithwood et al., 2004). Their empirical evidence revealed “leadership can play a highly significant- and frequently

underestimated- role in improving student learning” (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 5). The study revealed two major conclusions of leadership influence on student performance. These two findings were: (a) leadership is second only to classroom instruction contributing to student learning; and (b) leadership effects are usually largest when needed the most (Leithwood et al., 2004, 2008). Yet, this study revealed three sets of superintendent practices that promoted reform. These were: (a) capturing the attention of school personnel; (b) capacity building; (c) and pushing the implications of state policies into schools and classrooms (Leithwood et al., 2004). In order to obtain district-wide success, the superintendent must have multiple leaders within the organization to execute these practices. The successful superintendent distributed the leadership role among many within the organization, amplifying influence over the members of the organization, while increasing the initiative’s success rate (Leithwood et al., 2004; Northouse, 2010; Wiseman & McKeown, 2010; Yukl, 2012). Leithwood et al. (2004) used the research results to illustrate that the district leader is the *critical bridge* between education reform initiatives on student school performance, and that leadership has the greatest impact at the most critical moments, such as in times of needing to reduce achievement gaps. Therefore, the ability of an underperforming district to move forward rests on the shoulders of the superintendent (Lashway, 2002; Marzano, Frontier, & Livingston, 2011; Marzano & Waters, 2009) and leadership is a determining factor in the success or failure of a district’s instructional initiatives (Leithwood et al., 2004; Marzano et al., 2001; Waters & Marzano, 2007).

However, some researchers examined the superintendent's role and responsibilities in the narrowing of the achievement gap in minority and economically disadvantaged students (C. A. Edwards, 2006; Mora, 2010; Ragland et al., 1999). Two of the studies were conducted in Texas and another in California. Ragland, Asera, and Johnson (1999) focused on efforts made by ten superintendents serving low socioeconomic students that enhanced student performance in the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) assessments resulting in a district rating of Recognized or Exemplary, the two highest rating a district could receive at the time. A later study by C. A. Edwards (2006) surveyed 951 Texas superintendents with 276 responding. The researcher narrowed the feedback to examine districts that had superintendents with over three years tenure (156) and assessment data from the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS). Mora (2010) conducted a California survey of ten high performing superintendents, based on the California assessment system, of large urban districts in California with a minimum of 28% Hispanic student enrollment and 29% students that qualified for free and reduced lunch. While there were a multitude of discoveries in each of the studies, there are four common findings related to the superintendent's leadership practices in reducing achievement gaps. A synthesis of these three research findings were, in no particular order: (a) the creation of a shared vision and moral purpose with all members of the organization; (b) a clear focus on instructional goals; (c) accountability and high expectations for all members of the organization; and (d) the use of data to make decisions and prioritize goals (C. A. Edwards, 2006; Mora, 2010; Ragland et al., 1999). Primarily, these studies were conducted through the lens of the

superintendent and did not take into account the experiences of others in the organization.

These studies presented how district leadership affect the organization by facilitating positive or negative student performance. Leithwood et al. (2004) provided a pragmatic study indirectly illustrating how Yukl's (2012) four leadership concepts positively influence student performance through the attainment of instructional goals. Researchers (Marzano, 2003; Waters & Marzano, 2007) related the importance of school leadership to promote a healthy culture of learning to "justify a strong belief in the contributions of successful leadership to student learning" (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 22). It is the superintendent's responsibility to ensure this high level of leadership is consistent throughout the district and does not solely rely on the talent of the campus principal (Houston, 2001; Waters & Marzano, 2007). The nexus of these studies illustrate the complexities involved in creating a comprehensive leadership system focused on student performance (Kowalski, 2013; Leithwood et al., 2008). Convoluting the instructional leadership system is the challenge to successfully meet the needs of the steadily increasing diverse student populations (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Ravitch, 2011).

A leader needs to wade through an often complex and not altogether coherent bay of research evidence to determine which policies to implement...a leader can generate high expectations, sustain a faster pace of instruction, encourage sharing of effective learning among peers and adopt a more challenging curriculum. (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 11)

Curricular knowledge is essential for the superintendent to understand the intricacies of instruction to adequately navigate the entire organization toward higher student performance (Schmoker, 2004; Waters & Marzano, 2007). Superintendents who depend on principals and teachers to actually carry out the vision and were most successful when they could elicit commitment from the staff. They do so “by providing resources, buffering staff from outside meddling, being visible, engaging others in conversation about instruction, and empowering collaborative risk taking” (Lashway, 2002, p. 5). According to previously stated research, leadership is the driver to reducing district-wide achievement gaps with diverse learners (Fullan et al., 2004; O’Doherty & Ovando, 2009) and the breadth and scope of the instructional leadership role comes with an expectation of reducing achievement gaps.

Superintendent expectation of reducing achievement gaps. Among the many responsibilities facing the modern superintendent, reducing achievement gaps is at the forefront. Scholars, local and national media, and legislators look to district leaders to systemically restructure the learning environments they oversee (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Rudnesky, 2007).

Education can no longer focus primarily on the transmission of information that, once memorized, comprises a stable storehouse of knowledge and facts. Instead, schools must teach content knowledge in ways that focus on central concepts and help students learn how to think critically and learn for themselves, so that they can use knowledge in new situations and manage the demands of changing

information, technologies, jobs, and social conditions. (Darling-Hammond, 2013, p. 4)

Unfortunately, the expanded role of the public school superintendent has created a necessity to juggle so many roles and responsibilities with inconsistent formal training (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Carella, 2000; Kowalski, 2003; Olivárez, 2013) resulting in inconsistent instructional outcomes as they relate to reducing achievement gaps for diverse learners.

Present-day superintendents must balance the ten functions as outlined by Olivárez (2013), amidst a drastically shifting demographic landscape caused by the growth of the Hispanic, ELL, and African American student populations, to effectively narrow achievement gaps (Fry & Gonzales, 2008; TDSHS, 2012; Texas Education Agency, 2014b). Studies have identified how many public school districts are failing to meet the needs of Hispanic and African American student populations through their academic underachievement and not persisting through high school graduation and facing federal and state sanctions (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006; Fry, 2003; Johnston & Viadero, 2000). These researchers also revealed statistics regarding African American and Hispanic dropout rates; combined with the academic achievement gap between minorities to their Anglo counterparts, the significance of addressing the needs of the nation's fastest growing student populations becomes clear. The superintendent must create a learning system fostering high academic achievement for all students to ensure the narrowing of achievement gaps and avoid public scrutiny for not meeting

state and federal expectations (Houston, 2001). Olivárez (2013) summarized the challenges of today's superintendents, by stating:

The literature is clear in its conclusion that superintendent leadership responsibilities have grown in both scope and complexity. This complexity is borne out of new leadership and management demands brought on by a multitude of change forces facing our public schools. Among these are the increased diversity in student populations and the public expectation for alternative instructional delivery systems that address varied and complex student learning needs guaranteeing high school graduation and college readiness skills for all students. (p. 11)

In the last 30 years, numerous studies identified the conditions negatively affecting Hispanic and African American youth in American public schools (Farkas, 2003; Ogbu & Davis, 2003; Orr, 2003; Rippberger & Staudt, 2002). In addition to socioeconomic conditions, school practices that demonstrate a lack of attention to family culture and youth experiences, as well as generally subtractive educational models, have a negative impact on student learning outcomes (Kearns, 2011; Riele, 2006; Tajalli & Opheim, 2005). If minority students are to be supported in achieving academic success, Ladson-Billings (2000, 2006) suggested the need for massive reform of educational practices. Houston (2001) asserted that federal, state, district, and campus leaders have both an ethical and moral responsibility to improve student performance. That responsibility extends beyond maneuvers to avoid the sanctions associated with high states testing and accountability measures (NCLB, 2001; Texas Education Agency,

2013a). The expectations is for superintendents to emerge as leaders who enhance the educational experience of students by addressing the complex social, emotional, environmental, and educational problems (Fullan, 2005; Johnson & Johnson, 2006; Tyack, 1992) within the systems they lead to reduce achievement gaps.

Superintendent roles and responsibilities. The scale of the modern public school superintendent's role and responsibilities has evolved significantly from that of a schoolhouse warden to a multi-faceted CEO, whose breadth of professional responsibilities and expectations may appear to be unreasonable and, at times, conflicting (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005; Fuller et al., 2003; Kowalski, 2005). The original American school systems were built and administered by local townspeople and did not need the supervision of a formal head of schools. As schools grew and developed, so did the need for a sole leader, but local communities were not eager to relinquish their power until their previous supervision methods were no longer effective and delayed the emergence of the term *superintendent* for nearly 200 years (Owen & Ovando, 2000). On July 31, 1837, the concept of the superintendency gained momentum with the first appointed school superintendent in Kentucky. The turn of the 20th century was faced with increased numbers of superintendent appointments, and brought superintendents more power and authority beyond the traditional secretarial and instructional duties (Candoli, 1995).

The role and responsibilities for public school district superintendents continues to grow in complexity and demand (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005; Hess, 1999). In Olivárez's (2013) "Framework of 10 Operational Functions of School Districts," the

responsibilities of the superintendent position are conceptualized in an organizational framework that encompasses the key functions superintendents must oversee, in no particular order:

1. Curriculum and Instruction;
2. Elementary and Secondary Campus Operations;
3. Instructional Support Services;
4. Human Resources;
5. Administrative, Finance and Business Operations;
6. Facilities Planning and Plant Services;
7. Accountability, Information Management, and Technology Services;
8. External and Internal Communications;
9. Operational Support Systems- Safety & Security, Food Services, and Transportation; and
10. Governance Operations. (p. 10)

The ten functions, along with the multiple subcategories aligned with each, fully capture the depth and breadth of the responsibilities associated with the modern day superintendency (Olivárez, 2013). As the administrative burdens for district leaders have increased, so has the shortfall in the number of qualified applicants who can adequately address these demands (Meyer & Feistritzer, 2003). Matters contributing to this deficit include superintendent compensation, which often does not support the amount of responsibility; a lack of qualified candidates with instructional institutional knowledge of the modern accountability system; and education reform that is in the hands of

legislators, local politicians, and teacher interest groups (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005; Fuller et al., 2003).

The 21st-century superintendent must embrace multiple roles and responsibilities, including the necessity to keep abreast of current best practices needed to effectively support and sustain a consistent and successful curriculum and instruction framework throughout the district (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Kowalski, 2013). In order to effectively navigate through the intricate web of roles and responsibilities facing the superintendent, the district head must effectively share power (Elmore, 2006; Fullan, 2011) while communicating with all educational stakeholders, including the board of trustees, personnel, parents, legislatures, and community members, (Kowalski, 2005; Owen & Ovando, 2000) as these stakeholders are interdependent (Fullan, 2011).

The roles of the superintendent hit the apex of accountability-related expectations at the turn of the century. The 21st century added a new responsibility to the superintendent with the federal education legislation of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB, 2001). NCLB created an assessment system that required monitoring all children enrolled in the American public education system. Further, NCLB assigned a target universal passing rate for state assessments in reading and math. If a district or campus failed to meet these expectations, federal sanctions were administered (Fuhrman & Elmore, 2004; Fuller et al., 2003). While Kowalski (2011) described the 21st-century superintendent as a communicator, effectively connecting with all stakeholders in order to lead school improvement efforts becomes critical. The presence of NCLB sanctions significantly expanded the role of the superintendent into the instructional realm.

“Unfortunately, the bureaucratic school created at the turn of the 20th century was not organized to meet these needs for intellectual development or for individual responsiveness” (Darling-Hammond, 2013, p. 237). Rather, it engineered a quagmire for the district leader attempting to attend to demands of high stakes accountability in an education system built for the industrial age (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005; Glass et al., 2001).

School system reform. The gradual evolution of school system reform to meet the demands of modern society frustrates many stakeholders (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Ravitch, 2011). Houston (2001) added that “the recognition that we must transform the system has led us to the current efforts at school reform. Unfortunately, these reforms are based on a faulty analysis of what ails us” (p. 431). A Continued focus on state assessment scores has shifted the priority from attending to social issues to improving instruction in an effort to bolster scores on state assessments (Lashway, 2002; Ravitch, 2011).

Compounding the lack of willing and able leaders, districts also face increasing federal accountability requirements and sanctions for failing to meet required student achievement benchmarks. Federal sanctions for not meeting the Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) or for low performance on Texas assessment indices with minority subgroups, are perhaps some of the most significant challenges facing school districts (NCLB, 2001; Texas Education Agency, 2013a). Specifically, achievement results demonstrate that districts are struggling to help minority students achieve the same levels of

academic performance on state assessments as their Anglo counterparts (Moore et al., 2005).

In addition to the managerial aspects of the position, the modern role of the superintendent must also address the complexities of social reform (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005; Glass et al., 2001); operate within the political frame to advocate supportive legislation favoring public education (Bolman & Deal, 2012; Kowalski, 2005; Northouse, 2010; Yukl, 2012); promote the reforms within the organization needed to support 21st-century learning expectations (Hanson, 2006; Houston, 2001); and ensure schools or the district within the superintendent's jurisdiction avoid federal and state sanctions (Fuhrman & Elmore, 2004; Moore et al., 2005; Ravitch, 2011). The current context presents the contemporary superintendent with often unrealistic expectations on a leader with fairly limited power (Fuller et al., 2003; Glass et al., 2001). In modern times, disaggregated test data are used to measure the success of public school organizations, emphasizing the need for superintendents to be keenly aware of the instructional factors affecting diverse students' achievement.

As the district's highest paid employee, and the person with the most internal and external influence, the district superintendent is responsible for the entire system—all personnel, departments and campuses, and the accompanying failures and successes associated with each campus (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005; M. Edwards, 2006). Consequently, it is important to provide school superintendents with a framework to help guide the system-wide reform needed to improve the quality of instruction, thus

yielding positive results. The goal is to not only initiate change to improve scores, but also to redefine the culture of the organization and to ensure sustainability.

Superintendent instructional functions. School superintendents direct highly complex organizations and deal with teachers' unions, students, parents, community organizations, the business community, governing boards, and politicians. "Although external agents view the superintendent as an autonomous figure, insiders understand that they are often pressured by many different interests and rarely control their own agendas" (Fuller et al., 2003, p. 11). Today's superintendent is called upon to be the bond that holds all stakeholders together, the change agent who redefines the current education system to reflect the needs of modern society (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005; M. Edwards, 2006), the champion who advocates for improvement and educational equity for diverse learners (Fuller et al., 2003; Houston, 2001), and the multi-faceted leader who must coalesce all of these demands with the goal of preparing all students for life beyond high school (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005; Lashway, 2002).

The head of a school district can no longer rely solely on the expertise of the curriculum and instruction department to organize, support, and evaluate curricular programs, provide organizational effectiveness, and evaluate personnel performance; he or she must be a driver in all instructional functions of a school district (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005; M. Edwards, 2006). The following section examines the importance of the three instructional functions found in the ten functions of a school district as they relate to student achievement (Olivárez, 2013). The section presents the specific functions related to enhancing student performance, illustrated in Figure 1: (a)

curriculum and instruction; (b) elementary and secondary campus operations; and (c) instructional support services (Olivárez, 2013).

Superintendent function: Curriculum and instructional leadership. *A Nation at Risk* (1983) exposed the shortfalls of American public schooling in its quest to match the education levels of foreign counterparts. The commission's findings prompted recommendations such as: the creation of rigorous and measurable academic standards; strengthening graduation requirements; adequate resources to support the learning environment; and increasing time with the content by extending the academic school year to 11 months, facilitating an instructional focus for public schools to endure (United States Department of Education, 1983). Since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (1983), the development of national and state accountability systems has become the driving force of education based decisions and legislation and has prompted states to create curricular standards for public schools in their jurisdiction to follow (Lashway, 2002; Leithwood et al., 2004).

NCLB (2001) used the individual curricular frameworks of each state as guides to facilitate the creation of mandated assessments to measure student performance and impose sanctions on school districts and individual schools who fail to meet expectations set by the federal and state governments. All groups and subgroups of students affect the ratings of districts and individual campuses through their performance on state assessments. Thus, prompting a district-wide instructional focus to reduce achievement gaps with diverse youth thorough coordinating a system-wide curriculum, ensuring instructional services that are successfully provided to all student populations,

effectively training and equipping all instructional staff, and shaping and leading instructional frameworks (Bambrick-Santoyo & Lemov, 2012; Ravitch, 2011).

The district head can no longer delegate instructional duties to an executive cabinet member and monitor progress through reports and feedback (Lashway, 2002; Marzano, 2003; Schmoker, 2004). The superintendent is expected to be versed in the curriculum and instructional programs, create and monitor continuous planning sessions, coordinate staff development activities, and provide the adequate instructional resources to all students populations (Leithwood et al., 2004; Rudnesky, 2007). When the district leader has first-hand knowledge of current research, understands curricular design, and knows instructional delivery, student achievement manifests as a priority resulting in higher student performance (Marzano & Waters, 2009; Meyer & Feistritzer, 2003). Instructional expertise also enables the superintendent to spearhead the right training and resources to enhance instructional program (Olivárez, 2013).

District level instructional leadership is the driving force for curricular and instructional matters (Fullan et al., 2004; Marzano & Waters, 2006). The superintendent is responsible for aligning the instructional practices with state standards and creating a consistent district-wide instructional program found at every campus (DuFour & Fullan, 2013; Marzano & Waters, 2009). In order to ensure alignment and consistency, the creation of central monitoring structures is essential to the success or failure of the instructional plan (Moore et al., 2005; Waters & Marzano, 2007). The district leader is called to consistently evaluate the instructional program's effectiveness, provide adequate funding to secure highly qualified teachers, purchase adequate instructional

resources, contract qualified instructional consultants, and ensure benchmarks are aligned to curricular expectations while avoiding state and federal sanctions (Johnson & Johnson, 2006; Marzano et al., 2011). This nexus of instructional support services for a school district can detract a superintendent from the other nine superintendent functions advanced by Olivárez (2013) and the district leader must understand his or her role for leading the instructional function.

The role of the superintendent in the instructional function is to (a) provide direct leadership to the establishment of district vision, mission, goals, objectives, and strategies for improvement; (b) take specific actions to have quality impact in the system-wide curriculum; and (c) guide the priorities for district-wide training and development (Bambrick-Santoyo & Lemov, 2012; DuFour & Fullan, 2013; Olivárez, 2013). Through these specific functions, the superintendent is in a position to effectively impact curriculum and instruction; yet, he or she must also adhere to other instructional functions, such as elementary and secondary campus operations, to effectively reduce achievement gaps.

Superintendent function: Elementary and secondary campus operations. While the instructional and curricular functions of a superintendent set the vision and mission of the district, these instructional functions cannot reach desired goals and objectives without effectively integrating teaching and learning structures into elementary and secondary campus operations (DuFour & Fullan, 2013; Olivárez, 2013). Elementary and secondary school operations are essential for creating a feedback loop to central office administration ensuring that pragmatic approaches to learning are effectively

implemented (Marzano & DuFour, 2011). It is through this superintendent function that student groups, such as Hispanics, ELLs, African Americans, and special education are monitored to also include the gifted, Career and Technology Education programs, Magnet programs, and dropouts (Olivárez, 2013). The superintendent is called to create a system, through elementary and secondary campus operations, that consents the organization to fully achieve the district mission and vision, implement campus instructional plans, and evaluate the implementation of organizational structures.

Primarily, each campus must have a collaborative culture where united stakeholders focus on the vision, mission, and goals of the district (Bambrick-Santoyo & Lemov, 2012; DuFour & Fullan, 2013). Campus policies must be clear on the roles and responsibilities of the campus principal, on how data are conveyed to ensure compliance with state and federal guidelines, and on how federal and state expenditures are allocated to facilitate academic progress (M. Edwards, 2006). Effective coordination of this portion of campus operations leads the district and campus leader to fully understand how to implement and monitor the structures supporting the district vision and mission and enables the campus instructional plans to take full form.

Utilizing the district instructional vision and mission, each campus creates their unique plan to reach the desired goals (Blankstein, 2013; Fullan, 2001). Superintendents must now ensure that each plan supports the district vision and mission, provides structures effectively supporting minority youth, and that specialized programs services address student needs (Johnson & Johnson, 2006; Leithwood et al., 2004; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2009), through pertinent evaluation tools. In order to meet

school district goals, instructional evaluation systems should be embedded district-wide. Creating formative and summative evaluations create a systemic approach to solidifying success of students in their scholarship experience (Fullan, 2005; Marzano et al., 2011). The creation of these evaluation approaches enables the campus leaders and district leaders to collaboratively enhance the learning systems at each campus while allowing for each campus to retain their unique approaches toward meeting the needs of their students (Fullan, 2001; Maxfield & Flumerfelt, 2009).

Modern superintendents must manage the newly established instructional structures and systems found in the operations of elementary and secondary campuses (Marzano & Waters, 2009; Olivárez, 2013). For the district not to lose sight of the mission and goals, the superintendent is responsible for modeling instructional leadership to stay abreast on the most current instructional practices, keep campus leaders informed on current policies, evaluate leadership quality, and audit instructional resources (Mertens, 2012; Yarbrough et al., 2011). Failure to adequately adhere to instructional systems may result in individual campus student groups not meeting federal and state assessment expectations, sanctions for federal or state program noncompliance, and ineffective campus leadership manifesting in these instructional dilemmas (Fuller et al., 2003; Moore et al., 2005; Waters & Marzano, 2007). The success of elementary and secondary campus operations is dependent, to some extent, on the final superintendent instructional function—the superintendent’s role in providing instructional support services (Olivárez, 2013).

Superintendent function: Instructional support services. Instructional support services are programs and assistances that provide an indirect support to the goal of high student academic achievement (Olivárez, 2013). These instructional support services include, but are not limited to, library services, social work, community partnerships, parental involvement programs, extra curricular programs, and health related networks (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Tyack, 1992). These instructional services are critical for the health and welfare of the entire learning system.

The superintendent's function to service students' academic, social, emotional, health, parental and psychological needs is a cumbersome role that is facilitated through collaborative partnerships found in the superintendent elementary and secondary operational functions (Lashway, 2002; Leithwood et al., 2004; Olivárez, 2013). The elementary and secondary school collaboration extends into human services and partnerships found within the district and in the school community (M. Edwards, 2006; Kowal & Ableidinger, 2011). As a result, the instructional superintendent is charged with implementing the delivery of support services and guiding the coordination of the provided services (Fuller et al., 2003; Houston, 2001).

To ensure instructional support services are properly integrated in the elementary and secondary campus operations function, the district leader is expected to utilize the established evaluation system to effectively monitor whether the services are following state and district policy (Smith & Larimer, 2009; Stone, 2011), adhering to federal and state health requirements (Franklin & Streeter, 1995; Tyack, 1992), and are effectively supporting the entire learning community to include parents and community

stakeholders (Kowalski, 2005; Owen & Ovando, 2000). Continuously evaluating instructional support services not only provides the district with the current feedback needed to evaluate effectiveness, it also gives the district the ability to modify and enhance the services to avoid the program shortfall (Fitzpatrick, Sanders, Worthen, & Worthen, 2011; Mertens, 2012). The superintendent's maintenance of instructional support services expands beyond internal appropriation; the district head is charged with engaging legislatures and civic leaders to advocate for upkeep of instructional support services (Kowalski, 2005; Owen & Ovando, 2000).

In order to sustain instructional support services, the district leader of today needs to look beyond supporting instructional systems through budget support and adequate staffing (Houston, 2001; Kowalski, 2005). The district head must generate community partnerships to create confidence in the learning system and have these community members as stakeholders in supporting campus services (M. Edwards, 2006). Bringing in community members to engage in the decision making process is essential to building a collective understanding of the schools and district undertaking. Equally as essential is the superintendent as a political activist (Kowalski, 2005; Owen & Ovando, 2000). The contemporary district head must build coalitions to advocate support for instructional services, budget allocations, and legislative rulings (Birkland, 2010; Cuban, 1998). The importance of the superintendent engaging with public entities for instructional service support cannot be understated. Districts no longer have the luxury of self-sustaining their sustenance programs and must rely on business partnerships with local institutions of higher education, health care providers, city

officials, and recreational services to maintain instructional program support (Kowal & Ableidinger, 2011; Tyack, 1992). The expectation of the superintendent as an advocate for instructional support services is a weighty role. In order for a superintendent to effectively manage the instructional support function, along with the functions of instructional leadership and elementary and secondary operations, calls for a systemic planning and evaluation formula ensuring each superintendent instructional function is properly administered to further enhance student performance (Mertens, 2012; Yarbrough et al., 2011).

Systemic planning and evaluation. The three aforementioned functions of a superintendent relies greatly on how each instructional initiative is planned and evaluated (Fullan, 2005; Mertens, 2012). Proper planning and evaluation increases the possibility of successful implementation (DuFour, 2004; Yarbrough et al., 2011). Systemic instructional evaluation provides current and appropriate feedback to ensure integration is having a meaningful impact in the learning environment (Bryson & Alston, 2011; Mertens, 2012; Yarbrough et al., 2011). The evaluation instrument should measure equity access and participation rates, effective coordination, and assessment of attaining targets and goals (Blankstein, 2013; DuFour & Fullan, 2013). The evaluation of instructional programs is cycled (Figure 2) for continuous review and includes seven components:

- *Mission statements:* Mission statements are easily understood declarations establishing clarity for organizational common ground and should be the initial

step in any program integration (Blankstein, 2013; DuFour & Fullan, 2013; Region 10 Education Service Center, 2000).

- *Comprehensive needs assessment:* Using current data for decision making teams to review the effectiveness of programs, analyze academic performance gaps, identify areas of concern, and prioritize organizational needs (Bryson & Alston, 2011; DuFour & Fullan, 2013; Region 10 Education Service Center, 2000).
- *Long-range goals:* Using the mission statement as a foundation and the comprehensive needs assessment as a guide. Comprehensive long-term goals set a standard to be met in a two to three year time period (Blankstein, 2013; Bryson & Alston, 2011; DuFour & Fullan, 2013; Region 10 Education Service Center, 2000). These goals should be specific, measureable, attainable, results-based, and timely (DuFour, 2004).
- *Strategies:* Strategies are the methods and team members used to support long-range goals (Kotter & Schlesinger, 2008; Region 10 Education Service Center, 2000). Support includes, but is not limited to, organizational human capital, space, fiscal support, and program allotment (Bryson & Alston, 2011; Kotter & Schlesinger, 2008).
- *Resource allocation:* Highly qualified members of the planning committee estimate costs and benefits to attain the organizational goals and make recommendations for proper allocation (Hull, 2013; Olivárez, 2013; Region 10 Education Service Center, 2000). It is also the responsibility of the highly qualified budget team members to ensure all legal requirements are followed,

make recommendations if adequate resources can not be allocated, ensure proper staffing, include training, and balance costs (M. Edwards, 2006).

- *Implementation:* Implementation phase includes detailed activities for each aforementioned strategy, incremental timelines, clear assignments, scheduled reviews, and target attainment (Bryson & Alston, 2011; Region 10 Education Service Center, 2000).
- *Evaluation:* Plans are divided into two categories, formative and summative evaluations (Blankstein, 2013; DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Formative evaluations measure short-term outcomes enabling for ongoing feedback and program enhancement (Dick, Carey, & Carey, 2005; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Region 10 Education Service Center, 2000). Summative evaluations are used to provide a final measure to evaluate programs and goals and summarize cumulative results (Dick et al., 2005; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

As the components of the planning and evaluation systems described above are placed together, based on various researchers (Dick et al., 2005; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Region 10 Education Service Center, 2000; Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007; Yarbrough et al., 2011), a Planning Cycle Continuum (Figure 2) surfaces. This emerging cycle reflects the Texas Region 10 Education Service Center evaluation protocols and relies on the use of data from summative evaluations to make necessary adjustments for the following reporting period starting with revisiting the organization mission.

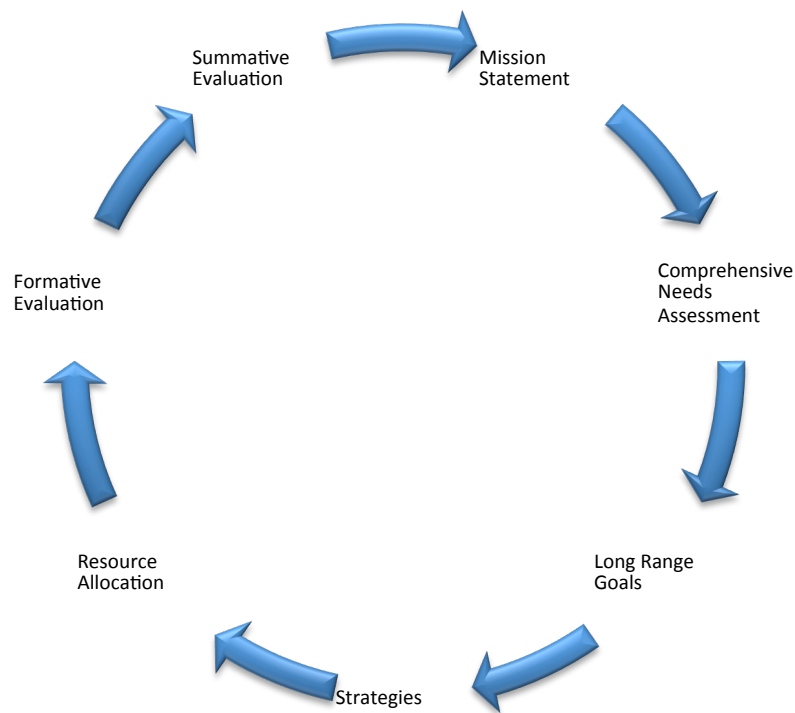


Figure 2. The Planning Cycle Continuum

According to researchers, proper planning is instrumental to reaching the desired goals of an education organization (Bryson & Alston, 2011; Dick et al., 2005; Rudnesky, 2007). Therefore, the superintendent is expected to use the planning and evaluation cycle to ensure systems are in place to support the superintendent functions of instructional leadership (Fullan, 2001; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Schlechty, 2002). Moreover, others suggested the modern district leader is versed in the intricacies of proper planning for the purpose of reducing achievement gaps (Lashway, 2002; Snipes & Casserly, 2004; Togneri & Anderson, 2003).

District and Superintendent Roles in Reducing Achievement Gaps

The following is an analysis of previous research related to both the district and superintendent roles. Some studies related to specific district contributions, and others focused on the role of the superintendent, to reduce achievement gaps with diverse learners.

District Role in Reducing Achievement Gaps

Previous researchers have attempted to describe how a school district contributes to closing achievement gaps. For instance, Skrla et al. (2000) conducted a study on “systemic school success in four Texas school districts serving diverse student populations” (p. 1). The data collection, from four school districts, consisted of interviews with over 200 individuals and groups with superintendents, board members, central office administration, principals, teachers, community members, and business leaders; collection of thousands of internal documents; and observation notes. The entire process took over a year. The findings from this study were reported in five categories: (a) state context of accountability for achievement and equity; (b) local equity catalysts; (c) ethical response of district leadership; (d) district transformation; and (e) everyday equity (Skrla et al., 2000, pp. 6-7). Each of the five mentioned categories was detailed with multiple subcategories and examples to provide the reader with a vivid description on how each applied to the studied districts. In a Pre-NCLB era, this study suggested that, “if this improvement can happen in the four school districts that were the focus of this study, it can happen anywhere” (Skrla et al., 2000, p. 39). While this study reported

systemic school success, it did not clearly isolate specific district contributions to closing achievement gaps.

Snipes and Casserly (2004) examined reform efforts across the United States of three large urban school districts and a portion of a fourth that had been successful in reducing diverse student achievement gaps. The district selection criteria was by these districts' demonstrating an improvement trend of overall student achievement for three years, narrowing the diverse learner achievement gaps, increasing student achievement that was more rapid than their counterparts, and the district geographically representing an urban school district. The goal of the study was to understand achievement patterns in large urban school districts and provide ideas on how more districts could emulate these efforts to reduce achievement gaps. Key findings from this study suggest that successful districts embark "on a number of initiatives intended to increase the effectiveness of central office at supporting high-quality instruction and creating more consistency and coherence across the district" (Snipes & Casserly, 2004, p. 137). These initiatives included the creation of viable and comprehensive curriculum, coherent professional development, data-driven decision making, district-wide consistent instructional guidance, and a focus on improving teacher quality in high-poverty/low-performing schools. The findings from the study revealed how a district-wide instructional focus can reduce achievement gaps for diverse youth in a large urban district but did not determine the role of the superintendent in reducing achievement gaps.

Rorrer et al. (2008) examined the district central administrators as actors in reducing achievement gaps for diverse learners. The researchers' goal was to generate a

district driven instructional framework facilitating the reduction of achievement gaps. The attempt was to create a model for replication and provide areas for future research to “extend our understanding of districts as institutional actors in educational reform” (Rorrer et al., 2008, p. 307). The uniqueness of this study was that the researchers synthesized over 160 research-based publications, limited to specific reform efforts such as standards-based reform or math reform, to determine common attributes of district-wide school reform. The meta-analysis established that the districts engaged in actions on four roles found to reduce diverse learners’ achievement gaps: (a) providing instructional leadership; (b) reorienting the organization; (c) establishing policy coherence; and (d) maintaining an equity focus (Rorrer et al., 2008). In addition, the findings support the literature, which establishes the four district roles in reducing diverse achievement gaps do not operate in isolation.. To effectively reduce achievement gaps at a district-wide level, there had to be a “focus on the interdependence and interrelatedness of these roles” (Rorrer et al., 2008, p. 336). In fact, the actions integrate in a nonlinear and coupling fashion. This study suggested to enact recommended roles interdependently to continuously refine district actions with the purpose of improving achievement and advancing equity would reduce achievement gaps for the diverse learner. Although the researchers determined the district as an organization had facilitated higher student achievement, it did not unveil the role of the superintendent in this process.

A fourth district-wide study by O’Doherty and Ovando (2009) examined a Texas school district’s processes for reducing achievement gaps in a post-NCLB era. The study

examined a Recognized Texas school district with demographics that shifted from affluence to “economically and ethnically diverse” (O’Doherty & Ovando, 2009, p. 10). The district encompassed more than 26,000 students and improved passing rates in all state assessment areas with each student population group. The study collected data through 18 semi-structured interview participants, observed over 12 hours of meetings, and examined over 40 district documents. The findings revealed that “district-level leaders were the catalysts for the processes that created [the district’s] success” (O’Doherty & Ovando, 2009, p. 12). Data from the secondary analysis revealed three drivers that reduced diverse learner achievement gaps. The primary driver was district-level leaders with the two secondary drivers being the district systems and culture (O’Doherty & Ovando, 2009). This study was unique as it attempted to show a direct cause and effect relationship in instructional outcomes with diverse students between district leaders and the systems and culture they cultivate. However, this study did not specifically address the role of the superintendent in closing achievement gaps with African American and Hispanic students.

While the above studies attempted to illuminate how school districts collectively strive to reduce achievement gaps and improve overall student success, they did not directly address the role of the superintendent. Therefore, it is imperative that additional researchers focus on the role of the superintendent to enhance student academic success for all. As suggested, further research could focus on what districts are doing to reduce achievement gaps in a post-NCLB era to draw comparisons with those that have not

reduced achievement gaps to examine why reform is not working (O'Doherty & Ovando, 2009).

One of the common participants in each study of district-wide reform appeared to be the district superintendent, which bears the questions: If the district superintendent is part of district-wide reforms, how is this leader contributing in closing achievement gaps and what tactics are utilized to define successful district learning systems and a school culture focused on equity?

The Role of the Superintendent in Reducing Achievement Gaps

The role of the superintendent in closing achievement gaps, although not extensively, has been the focus of a few studies. Four studies were reviewed to understand the types of research that has been conducted examining the role of the superintendent in closing achievement gaps. These studies (Harris, 2014; Price, 2007; Waters & Marzano, 2006; Wright & Harris, 2010) shed light on the emerging research focused on the role of the superintendent in closing achievement gaps with diverse youth.

First, Waters and Marzano (2006) conducted a meta-analysis study of district-level leadership. The focus of the research was to find the district leader's impact on student achievement, the district leader's responsibility correlated with student achievement, practices used by the superintendent to reduce achievement gaps, and the correlation with district-level leadership and student achievement. The samples for the meta-analysis were all available studies involving district leadership or variables related to district leadership in the United States from 1970-2005. Over 4,500 non-repeating

titles were retrieved with over 200 documents that met the researchers' parameters. Of those examined documents, 27 met the final criteria. These final 27 documents involved 2,714 school districts, 4,434 rated superintendent leadership as a focal point in the study, and an estimate of 3.4 million student achievement scores. While the majority of these studies surveyed superintendents, the information from other interviewed participants included school board members, district-level administrators, and teachers. At the time of the study, it was regarded as the largest meta-analysis of superintendents' roles in reducing achievement gaps. The findings suggest that the superintendent's responsibility in reducing achievement gaps had significant correlation with average student achievement through leading: the goal-setting process, non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction, board alignment with and support of district goals, monitoring the goals for achievement and instructions, and the use of resources to support the goals for achievement and instruction. In addition, the researchers found that superintendents had significant impact on student achievement through an autonomous environment and the establishment of a central administration focused on the right issues and overcoming the bureaucratic stigma. Finally, the researchers revealed superintendent practices that led to the closing of achievement gaps. These practices included, but were not limited to: developing a shared vision, modeling and understanding the instructional design establishing clear priorities, and adopting instructional and resource management systems supporting implementation of the district's instructional philosophy. This meta-analysis framed the positive impact a superintendent can have in closing the achievement gaps, but the analyzed studies did not solely focus on the superintendent

roles, but rather included studies involving the entire central office team. It is also not clear if the studies focused primarily on African American and Hispanic students.

In a second study, Price (2007) interviewed five white male superintendents of culturally diverse districts located in or near Houston Texas with the purpose to investigate the role of the superintendent in leading the district to become more culturally proficient, resulting in the narrowing of the learning gap. Each district had a minimum of 30% student enrollment from each demographic group other than white. TEA lists four other populations, which are referred to as sub-populations for accountability purposes: African American, Hispanic, Asian, and low socio-economic. Each of the superintendents represented districts that achieved TEA Recognized or Exemplary district ratings, at some point, during the 2002-2006 school years or the district had made improvement in closing the learning gap during this same time frame. Also included in the criteria was that each district had experienced a minority population increase of at least 10% over the three year period from the 2003-2006 school years. Price (2007) reported the following:

The findings and the emerging themes of the study noted the importance of vision, hiring practices, recognizing the need for change, understanding the quickly changing demographics, increasing student achievement, providing training for culturally proficient teaching, improving staff understanding of cultures, increasing connectivity with all students, and responding with urgency. The study also found that superintendents' educational and personal background

knowledge impacted their district when they recognized the importance of this based on their willingness to change. (p. 108)

Price's (2007) research brought forth the superintendent's role in facilitating the closing of achievement gaps with diverse populations found in the state of Texas. Further, Price (2007) recommended that, "future studies include[ed] investigations in changing such variables as participant selection, district size and location (p. 115).

A third study by Wright and Harris (2010) investigated the contributions of eight superintendents of small school districts that had narrowed the achievement gap with diverse students. "The role the superintendent in leading the district to be more culturally proficient resulting in the narrowing of the achievement gap in culturally diverse small school districts" (Wright & Harris, 2010, p. 221) was the primary focus of the research. This study was an extension of Price's (2007) study mentioned above, and Wright and Harris (2010) used the same Texas district criteria for examination, except their focus was on small school districts of less than 2,300 students. Findings from this research suggested that the superintendents' beliefs about cultural proficiency set the expectation for academic success for all students. In addition, developing relationships with all district stakeholders, and leadership were essential to address cultural proficiency to lead districts to reduce achievement gaps. The study's findings were similar, but not in total congruency with the study they replicated (Price, 2007). The superintendent's role was identified in reducing achievement gaps with all diverse learners in a Texas school district; however, the study only focused on small school districts and may not be replicable to midsized and large urban school districts.

Finally, Harris (2014) conducted a study to examine the superintendent's role in closing the achievement gap with three acting superintendents leading diverse districts with student populations over 10,000 students. The researcher's specific intention in this qualitative study was to specify the superintendent's actions, strategies, and techniques that facilitated the closing of achievement gaps between African American and Caucasian students on the 8th grade Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress Plus. Three superintendents were interviewed in this study. The findings in this study suggested that the superintendent's role in closing achievement gaps between African American students and Caucasians included interrelated themes: communication, high expectations, hiring practices, quality professional development, and data interpretation. Although the purpose of the study was to examine the superintendent's role in reducing achievement gaps with African American and Caucasian students, it did not examine the role of the superintendent in closing the achievement gap with the nation's fastest growing population, Hispanic students.

The aforementioned body of research depicts the importance of understanding the superintendent's role in enhancing academic achievement for diverse youth. While Waters and Marzano (2006) meta-analysis did reveal that the superintendent has a significant role in reducing achievement gaps, the meta-analysis documents were not solely focused on superintendents. Price (2007) studied five school district superintendents in the Houston, Texas area based on their results for closing achievement gaps with diverse youth. However, the interviews were only conducted with these five superintendents and did not provide an internal perspective of the

superintendent's impact, if any, related to closing achievement gaps. Additionally, Price (2007) recommended similar studies to be conducted in other districts. Write and Harris (2010) extended Price's (2007) study on small school districts located in Texas and it may not be replicable to midsized and large urban school districts. Finally, Harris' (2014) research on the role of the superintendent in reducing achievement gaps between African American and Caucasian students did not encompass the nations fastest growing population, Hispanics. Therefore, further research is needed to understand the role of the superintendent in closing achievement gaps with African American and Hispanic youth, not only from the superintendents themselves, but also from members within the district they lead.

Theoretical Framework

Organizational leadership can be seen as a complex matter. Bolman and Deals' (1984) research on understanding and managing organizations was used since their research adequately provides a clear and precise understanding of organizational phenomena. In 1984, researchers Bolman and Deal released their findings on a study examining approaches to managing organizations coined *Modern Approaches to Understanding and Managing Organizations*. This study clearly and precisely described organizational dynamics and practices with relevant case studies. Over the course of almost three decades, a total of five volumes have been published, each reflecting the modern organizational era through updating case study examples, providing latest developments in managerial practice, addressing salient concepts, and answering questions prior volumes failed to address (Bolman & Deal, 2011, 2012). The large body

of research, theory, and practice, from both the private and public managerial sectors, framed and reframed organizations into four overarching frameworks: *structural, human resource, political, and symbolic*. A superintendent's actions and leadership attributes could be embedded within these four frames and these actions determine the organizations identity, longevity, and culture. Each of these frames, to be used as a theoretical framework, are briefly described according to management processes related to strategic planning, decision making, reorganization, and evaluation (Bolman & Deal, 2012) connecting the frames to effective leadership tactics.

- *Structural Frame*: Relates to organizational design and structure. Goals, tasks, organizational charts, groupings, and concepts relate to situational pitfalls and successes. Aligning effective strategies to structure or restructure an organization is key to maximizing human potential and organizing collaborative groups. Structural strategic planning initiatives align to objectives to coordinate resources. This frame utilizes a rational sequence to systemically produce the right decision. Realignment of roles and responsibilities are created to fit tasks to responsibilities. Evaluation is used as a tool to distribute rewards or penalties and control employee performance.
- *Human Resource Frame*: Explores the intersection of people and the institution. This frame illustrates how the leader's perception of human capital leads to alienation, hostility, commitment, and motivation. The underlying theme is interpersonal working dynamics plays a significant role in the success or failure of institutional initiatives. This frame strategically uses gatherings to promote

buy-in and participation. An open process for shared decision-making facilitates organizational commitment with human organization balancing between the needs and roles of each team member. Individual evaluative feedback helps members of the organization grow.

- *Political Frame*: Refers to how individuals and groups compete to acquire their provincial view of power. The area of political dynamics in decision-making is vast and profound interfacing political actors, social trends, and economic factors. These political agents lead to conflict, competition for resources, bargaining, and power plots within the organization. The mismanagement of this dynamic can destroy the establishment. Effective skills of a constructive leader enable the proper diagnosing and navigating of the political realities, agendas, and networks to allow for effective and ethical negotiating. Arenas are used in this frame to address concerns and align or realign power for strategic planning. Decision-making is as an opportunity to exercise positional power and the goal of reorganizing is to redistribute power and form new coalitions. The evaluative process reinforces positional power.
- *Symbolic Frame*: Outlines the cultural elements defining an organization through myths, heroes, stories, rituals, and ceremonies. The symbolic frame is central in defining organizational purpose and performance. The overarching goal of this frame is to create a culture that bonds people through a uniform goal, mission, and identity. The shared stories, the achievements celebrated, and the rituals practiced transform an organization to a high functioning team. Strategic

planning creates symbolic meaning of the organization. In this frame, decision-making is a ritual to confirm organizational practices, values, and beliefs while creating an opportunity to unite on common ground. The symbolic frame reorganization practice is to establish new social order, establish accountability standards, and be responsive to the needs of the organization. The symbolic evaluation process relies on role-playing procedures through shared rituals (Bolman & Deal, 2012, p. 315).

Evidence of these frames is found in organizational leadership practices.

Superintendents in the public school system implore these practices to facilitate the mission, vision, values, and goals of a school district (Blankstein, 2013; Bolman & Deal, 2010; DuFour et al., 2005). What the literature did not identify is how superintendents are the drivers on effectively utilizing the four frames to facilitate district-wide reform to closing achievement gaps.

Conclusion

Criteria for measuring organizational effectiveness are often value-based, conflicting, and as varied as the theoretical models used to describe organizations and the constituents that have some interest in their functioning (M. Edwards, 2006; Olivárez, 2013). In assessing the effectiveness of school organizations, educational leaders must maintain intense focus on instruction (M. Edwards, 2006; Fullan et al., 2004), due to the federal and state emphasis on state testing, NAEP scores, and college entrance exams as measures of effectiveness. A review of the literature highlights the complex nature of the superintendency, particularly as it relates to facilitating and

promoting effective instructional practices in the present era of high-stakes accountability to reduce achievement gaps.

Researchers (Fullan et al., 2004; Harris, 2014; Price, 2007; Rorrer et al., 2008) revealed that in order to reduce achievement gaps, district leaders need to fully understand instructional design and how it relates to student performance particularly with diverse learners. In this era of heightened accountability standards, the need is clear for school district chiefs to be highly skilled in instructional oversight in order to provide a high quality education that meets the needs of all students, with a growing emphasis on meeting the unique needs of minority students. In districts with a rapidly growing minority population, the skillset of the superintendent may be the key to resolving the achievement gap and merits further exploration. As the responsibility for reducing achievement gaps ultimately rests on the superintendent's shoulders (Houston, 2001), an educational leader must identify and support the use of practices that have shown success in improving minority student achievement, but he or she must do so, not on a single campus, but within an entire district system. As researchers observed, ultimately, the instructional leadership of the school superintendent has a direct impact on the students served in the district and the academic preparation they receive as their foundation to attain the American Dream (Lashway, 2002; Moore et al., 2005). While a body of research exists on the topic of district level actors in instructional change and strategies to promote minority student achievement (Fullan et al., 2004; O'Doherty & Ovando, 2009; Rorrer et al., 2008), and there is emerging research on the superintendent's role, through instructional leadership, in closing achievement gaps

(Harris, 2014; Price, 2007; Waters & Marzano, 2006; Wright & Harris, 2010), there is a need to add to the body of research targeting the sole role of the superintendent in leading educational improvement, especially for African American and Hispanic students. Thus, this study is an attempt to add to the literature by examining the sole role of the superintendent in reducing achievement gaps. Building on prior research recommendations to examine superintendent instructional tactics (Mora, 2010; O'Doherty & Ovando, 2009), and seeking to deepen an understanding of the practices that superintendents utilize to reduce student achievement.

Chapter Three: Methodology and Procedures

The intense expectations of superintendents and their multiple roles can distract school executives from enacting the essential role of instructional leadership (Houston, 2001; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Platt, 2000). The literature points to a need for further research regarding superintendents as the instructional drivers to reducing achievement gaps at a district-wide level.

This chapter describes the methodology and design for the study. Included are the purpose of the study, research questions, methodology, and design. This chapter also specifies data sources, description of the sample, procedures for data collection, methods for data analysis, and strategies to promote trustworthiness.

Purpose of the Study

In an era of public school accountability, superintendents must have the instructional precision and skill to effectively sustain student achievement systematically throughout the entire district (Harris, 2014; Price, 2007; Waters & Marzano, 2006; Wright & Harris, 2010), but specific information related to the superintendent's role in reducing achievement gaps with African American and Hispanic students is still limited. The purpose of this phenomenological case study was to determine the specific role of the superintendent in providing a district-wide learning system that reduces achievement gaps. In addition, this study explored the superintendent creation of systems, strategies, and tactics used to increase diverse student academic achievement.

Research Questions

This case study examined a Texas school district superintendent whose district is reducing achievement gaps, and student enrollment demographics resembles Texas' average, in a district with a superintendent tenure of a minimum of three years.

Therefore, the research was guided by the following questions:

1. What is the role of the superintendent in reducing the achievement gap for African American and Hispanic students?
2. What systems did the superintendent create to reduce the achievement gap for African American and Hispanic students?
3. What strategies does the superintendent use to create a system-wide culture that is responsive to reducing the achievement gap for African American and Hispanic students?
4. What tactics are used by the superintendent to facilitate reducing the achievement gap for African American and Hispanic students?

Methodology

This study used a qualitative methodology with a case study design, and a phenomenological approach. The sections that follow explain the rationale for the study characteristics and outline the specific procedures for data collection and analysis.

Qualitative methodology. The purpose of the study was to determine the specific role of the superintendent in providing a district-wide learning system that reduces achievement gaps and lead to asking researchable questions best approached through a qualitative design (Merriam, 2009). Qualitative research supports this study as

it provides a “means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2009, sec. 367-368). Qualitative data collecting processes aligned with this methodology allowing: (a) emerging methods; (b) open-ended questions; (c) interview data, document data, audio/visual data; (d) text and image analysis; and (e) themes, patterns, and interpretation (Creswell, 2009, sec. 601). Further, “research focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making a difference” (Merriam, 2009, p. 1). “Qualitative research is undertaken to improve the quality of practice of a particular discipline” (Merriam, 2009, p. 3) and aligns with the purpose of the study to examine the role of the superintendent in reducing district-wide achievement gaps with diverse learners.

Case study design. The study used a single case study design. Case studies are “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit (Merriam, 2009, p. 46). Thus, the case study was the best means for answering research questions as they relate to understanding strengths and limitations of a phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). The added benefits of case studies are: the approach offers a means of investigating complex social issues anchored in real-life situations (Merriam, 2009); insights expand the readers experience (Hays & Singh, 2011; Merriam, 2009); and the experience can provide a model for emulation or further research (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). Given the purpose of the study, it was conducted within a high achieving district, with a student population that resembles Texas’ demographics by fifteen percentage points in the Hispanic, and Economically

Disadvantaged student categories, and ten percentage points of African American student categories.

Phenomenological approach. The study used a phenomenological approach to determine the superintendent's instructional leadership role, systems, strategies, and tactics that reduce diverse student achievement gaps through the lived experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009; Mora, 2010). Phenomenology is defined as “a qualitative research tradition whose purpose is to discover and describe the meaning or essence of participants' lived experiences, or knowledge, as it appears to consciousness” (Hays & Singh, 2011, p. 429). Qualitative phenomenological studies are commonly applied to educational settings (Hays & Singh, 2011; Merriam, 2009).

Phenomenological studies provide:

- An emphasis on universal and divergent aspects of the experience
 - Participants' direct, immediate experiences with their own words
 - Researchers with *fresh* perspectives and refrain from subjective interpretation
- (Hays & Singh, 2011, p. 45)

Data Sources

Sources of data included review of documents, interviews, and a reflective researcher journal (Creswell, 2009, 2013; Hays & Singh, 2011; Merriam, 2009).

Documents such as organizational charts, list of district distinctions, district planning documents, and media articles enabled the researcher to gain a historical perspective of the district (Creswell, 2013). The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with the superintendent executive team, a total of 12 participants, that consisted of: one

district superintendent, two district-level administrators, three campus principals (representatives from elementary, middle, and high school), three district teachers (representatives from elementary, middle, and high school), two parents, and one school board member. Interviews were approximately 60 minutes long. Interviews were recorded with verbal participant permission and were transcribed for data analysis. The use of multiple sources of data, documents, interviews, and research journals, enabled the researcher to validate findings, to ensure reliability, and have an accurate reflection of the studied experience. More detail of the types of data sources used for this study is outlined later in this chapter.

Site and Participant Selection

Case study site selection. This study used a purposeful selection process to generate a list of districts that met the specific criteria. The final site was selected through convenience methods (Merriam, 2009) based on the districts accessibility and availability. One Texas public school district served as the study site, United Public School District (United PSD). This case study, in which the researcher had an intrinsic interest, was designed to examine a single phenomenon within a single school district. Therefore, the school district had to meet specific criteria to draw logical conclusions (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). A district was selected based on the following criteria:

1. The district scored in the top quartile of Index 4 on the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) assessment receiving a distinction. This index measures post-secondary readiness.

2. The district demographics closely resembled Texas' African American, Hispanic, and Economically Disadvantaged student population.
3. The superintendent was in the district a minimum of three years.

Using the *distinction* data found in Index 4 of the STAAR exam, the study sought to focus on a school district assumed to be reducing diverse student academic gaps and to determine successful superintendent instructional practices that could be replicated in rural, urban, and suburban school districts. From the over 1,100 public school districts found in the state of Texas only 26 school districts received this distinction. From those 26, the case site was required to be a Texas public school district with student demographics that closely resemble the state average within +/- 15% of Hispanic and Economically Disadvantaged enrollment and +10% in African American enrollment. This reduced the number of public school districts to four. With these four, the criteria of a superintendent who had been employed in the current school district for a minimum of three years was applied. The list narrowed to only two school districts that encompassed all the required criteria. Finally, the larger of the two districts was chosen for this study.

Participant selection. A purposeful participant selection process was used to identify the superintendent and central office participants in this study (Creswell, 2013; Hays & Singh, 2011; Merriam, 2009). The superintendent had to be in the district for a minimum of three years, and the central office administrators had to be cabinet members at the time of the study. Therefore, participants included one superintendent and two central office administrators.

The remaining participants were selected through referral sampling (Hays & Singh, 2011; Merriam, 2009), as the researcher asked the district superintendent to supply names of principals, a board member, parents, and teachers. This included three campus principals, three teachers, two parents, and one school board member. One of the three teachers had a title as a strategist. This strategist is under the teacher pay scale and is a campus based employee used to enhance instructional delivery in core areas, in this case science. The parents of the study were also volunteers in the district. As a result, a total of 12 participants were invited to interview based their expertise and employment experience in the identified district. The goal was to select participants that could give solid details related to the phenomenon, not just to meet a certain sample size (Hays & Singh, 2011; Merriam, 2009). Table 1 offers an account of participant roles and experience.

Table 1

Participant Roles and Experience

<i>Role</i>	<i>Years in Current Position/Role in the District</i>	<i>Total Years as a Professional Educator</i>
School Board Member	8	N/A
Superintendent	4.5	34
Deputy Superintendent of Instruction	10	41
Assistant Superintendent of Elementary Schools	2	22
High School Principal	1	17
Middle School Principal	7	17
Elementary School Principal	3	20
High School Teacher	16	20
Middle School Instructional Specialist	5	17
Elementary School Teacher	7	7
Parent Volunteer 1	10	N/A
Parent Volunteer 2	7	8

The interviewed participants held a total of 203 years of experience with 80.5 of those years employed with United PSD. The longest tenured individual accounted for 40 years with the district at the time of the interview, and provided historical background on the demographic changes the district has faced for the past two decades. The participants' education experiences span K-12 with other members engaged in the school system through parental and board volunteerism, giving a holistic picture on the multifaceted instructional operations of the district.

Procedures

Institutional approval. To protect the rights, privacy, and welfare of participants, the researcher applied for review and approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) from The University of Texas at Austin and was approved to conduct the study (Appendix A). Steps were taken to ensure all IRB guidelines and processes were followed to warrant the anonymity of research participants.

Documentation, such as the approval form from the selected district, waivers, interview data, research notes, journals, and codes were not disclosed and kept secure. The researcher contacted all selected participants and completed all required paperwork to conduct human-inquiry research, which IRB determined, had minimal risk and approved for verbal consent for participation and audio recording (Appendix B).

Data collection: Document review. The essence of qualitative research is the use of multiple primary sources of data to solidify credibility on the study being conducted (Creswell, 2009, 2013; Hays & Singh, 2011; Merriam, 2009). To gain a historical perspective of the case study district's culture, documental data was examined

before interviews. Documents for review were, but not limited to, web articles, organizational charts, district improvement plans, district achievements, strategic plans, state assessment data results, list of instructional programs, district recognitions, state ratings, hiring practices, and district video(s) found in social media (Creswell, 2013; Hays & Singh, 2011; Merriam, 2009). Reviewing the aforementioned documents generated a deeper understanding of the district prior to interviews, connections to be made during the interview process, as well as “for the accidental uncovering of valuable data” (Merriam, 2009, p. 150).

Data collection: Interviews. Prior to beginning the interviews, participants were provided with an informed consent form (Appendix B) (Creswell, 2009; Hays & Singh, 2011; Merriam, 2009). The researcher read the consent form for participant verbal consent to be interviewed and audio recorded. Interviews were transcribed for coding. The researcher stored interview transcripts in a locked file cabinet, separate from coding documents.

The semi-structured interview process was piloted and peer reviewed and was designed for two rounds of interviews. This allowed the researcher to establish which questions needed rewording, which questions were confusing, and which questions provided useless data (Merriam, 2009). This process served as interview practice and feedback (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, by vetting through this process, the researcher effectively used the interview protocol to gather meaningful data. Based on the pilot test and feedback from peers, the researcher fine-tuned the interview protocols before the

official interviews. The final interviews were set to question each participant for two 60-minute semi-structured interviews.

The researcher contacted the superintendent to schedule an interview, which was held at a time and place of the superintendent's convenience. The researcher asked the superintendent to refer additional participants, who were contacted via email, to schedule an interview. The primary round followed a face-to-face interview protocol while the second round of interviews, by face-to-face and a few by phone, was designed to provide clarification on any gaps found by the researcher and for the participant to review the initial interview transcripts and expand on any information they feel was misrepresented.

A convenient face-to-face meeting place and time for the interviews was established with the participants. However, to accommodate travel and scheduling, interviews were also conducted via phone, video conferencing, or electronically (Hays & Singh, 2011). Each interview session was scheduled for approximately one hour. The second round of interviews was conducted to ask clarifying questions, fill research gaps, and gain participant reflection and clarification to provide more detail on a certain item. The researcher provided participants with transcripts of the interviews to enable member checking (Creswell, 2009; Hays & Singh, 2011; Merriam, 2009). It was the responsibility of the researcher to memorialize all interviews through recording, transcribing, and journaling. Each interview, and subsequent rounds, were reviewed and followed up, as necessary, to ensure clarity of purpose (Creswell, 2009, 2013; Hays & Singh, 2011; Merriam, 2009). The first round of interviews was completed face-to-face.

The majority of the second round of interviews was completed face-to-face with a few done by phone.

Data collection: Reflective researcher journal. Keeping adequate notes and reflections through the qualitative data collecting process was essential (Hays & Singh, 2011). The researcher journals created a reflection process on how the participants, data collection, and analysis were impacting the researcher (Hays & Singh, 2011). It also permitted the researcher to describe, analyze, and memorialize findings as they developed throughout the study (Creswell, 2009; Hays & Singh, 2011). The journaling process aided reflection on subjective aspects of the interview experience that lead to assumptions, impressions, attitudes, ideas, hypothesis, profound quotes, and extensive thought on the experience (Hays & Singh, 2011; Merriam, 2009).

Data analysis. Data analysis consisted of coding district documents, journaling, and transcription of interviews from the 12 participants. IRB regulations specify that all participants must be de-identified and unidentifiable. Due to the small sample size, some demographic data were disguised to protect anonymity. Thus, only titles, years experience in the current role/position, and total years in education were included in Table 1. In terms of educational longevity and professional experience, 89% of the professional participants had a minimum of 15 years experience with 100% having at least five or more years of educational experience.

Data analysis for this study began with the initial data collection through the interview process. Interview transcripts were coded using start codes and emergent categories. The theoretical framework codes were developed from the literature and

based on the theoretical framework for this study. However, to not limit the analysis through the sole use of priori codes (Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 2012), additional codes were added to the existing theoretical framework coding configuration as they emerged during the analysis of interviews and archival documents.

Archival documents, such as the District Improvement Plan, district fact sheets, the district organizational chart, web based articles, and board meeting minutes were gathered and de-identified. These documents were coded using the same coding process that was applied to interview transcripts. Reflections and all modifications on the coding structure were logged in a research journal.

Three types of coding were applied during data analysis: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. An initial analysis was completed using open coding, providing a detailed review of the data. Axial coding narrowed the codes and highlighted relationships found within open coding and allowed code consolidation of open codes in a concentrated method (Mertens, 2012). Selective codes were applied to provide a deeper understanding and interconnection of the axial codes (Creswell, 2009). The combination of all three coding techniques was utilized to analyze the data process and is often utilized in phenomenological studies (Creswell, 2009). Categorical analysis was collapsed into broad themes. The findings were then analyzed through the theoretical framework, including Human Resources, Structural, Symbolic, and Political Frameworks by Bolman and Deal (2012).

Essential themes were identified and facilitated the final categories. Data analysis followed steps set by Hays and Singh, which are:

1. To organize text: Transcribe data, convert, and expand field notes, and create data management tools;
2. To code: Label or tag *chunks* of data; Using Open, Inductive, and Selective Codes;
3. To identify themes and patterns: Higher-order codes grouped together to describe a phenomenon;
4. Create a codebook: A document that lists codes, sub codes, and patterns through etic and emic labeling; and develop a main narrative or theory. (2011, pp. 296-303)

Measures to Promote Trustworthiness and Validity

Essential to the design and integrity of the study were the intentional structures of multiple strategies to maximize trustworthiness (Hays & Singh, 2011). Such strategies included peer debriefing, member checking, thick, rich description, clarifying researcher bias and triangulation of data (Creswell, 2013; Hays & Singh, 2011). The following summarizes how the researcher utilized the mentioned structures to strengthen reliability and validity to the study.

Peer debriefing. “Peer debriefing allows for another check outside of a designated research team...to include colleagues, classmates, or individuals within the community in which the phenomenon is investigated... Peers should play devil’s advocate” (Hays & Singh, 2011, p. 211). Peer debriefing was used before the initial interview round and any subsequent rounds. Peers provided feedback on interview protocols, partook in rehearsing interviews, reviewing codes, and reviewing coding. The

feedback was used to strengthen the interview process and effectively use the correct coding strategies when analyzing data.

Member checking. Member checking is a research validity method where the researcher validates information with each participant. Two participant checking processes utilized were probing during data collection and clarifying participant responses (Creswell, 2013; Hays & Singh, 2011; Merriam, 2009). To clarify participants' responses, the researcher provided them with the interview transcripts and provided each one with the opportunity to clarify or modify responses.

Thick, rich descriptions. Descriptions enabled a full understand of meanings through vivid and thorough accounts of the study (Hays & Singh, 2011; Merriam, 2009; Mertens, 2009). "Thick description goes beyond providing details of participant accounts...it refers to an account of the details of a study's form and process, and the situational-specific reflections that build on the account of those details" (Hays & Singh, 2011, p. 213). Thus, the context of the study and its participants were thoroughly described.

Clarifying researcher bias. Clarifying researcher bias provides transparency as the researcher disclosed experiences, biases, and prejudices that shaped the study's findings (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009).

Researcher's lens. The bias was found in the researcher's professional interests of this study, as a superintendent of a majority minority school district and with a career history of working with impoverished diverse youth. While attempts were made to limit bias and to evaluate data through a clear lens, the researcher's biases may have

unintentionally surfaced and impacted data interpretation. Also, during the course of investigation the researcher may have interpreted data through personal experiences and administered member checking practices, such as having each participant review transcribed interviews, to ensure personal experiences did not permeate into the research.

The researcher conducting this study is currently a superintendent with 19 years of public education experience. During his career, he has been a middle school teacher, middle school, and high school assistant principal and principal, and an associate superintendent in a large minority based Texas public school district. He is a doctoral student at The University of Texas at Austin, and this doctoral experience has significantly enhanced his skills in leadership, fiscal responsibility, and maximizing and inspiring human resources. Furthermore, this researcher was familiar and able to conduct qualitative research through research knowledge gained through his preparation program.

Triangulation of data. Triangulation is the process used in qualitative inquiry, which requires using multiple forms of evidence to effectively describe findings (Hays & Singh, 2011, p. 207). Triangulation of data is not limited to the use of sources, it also includes participants (Creswell, 2013; Hays & Singh, 2011; Merriam, 2009). The researcher triangulated data through the use of multiple types of participants to include; a school district superintendent, central office administrators, campus principals, teachers, parents, a board member, and three other data sources including using semi-structured interviews, a review of documents, and a reflective researcher journal.

Summary

This chapter outlined and described the methodology to study instructional leadership roles of superintendents that enhance diverse student achievement in an academically successful Texas public school district with demographics that mirror the state average with a minimum of three years of superintendent tenure. A phenomenological case study was utilized to provide detailed accounts of successful instructional actions taken by the district superintendent. Research-based data gathering and analysis guided the study. The chapter also delineated how methods of trustworthiness and validity were assured through peer debriefing, triangulation of data, clarifying researcher bias, member checking, and thick, rich description. Chapter four offers a profile of the single school district focus of the study.

Chapter Four: Context of the Study

Introduction

We have looked at diversity and change as a positive. I love to walk through our schools and see the different kids. I love to go to open house events or multicultural nights and seeing the diversity. We are so much better for all of the different diversity and culture and background thoughts and religions. That, to me, is what makes our community great.

Board Member, United Public School District, 2014

The superintendent's role in the district-wide closing of achievement gaps for African American and Hispanic students was the focus of this study. A purposefully selected district, *United Public School District (United PSD)*, was the subject of a single case study to uncover the role of the superintendent in addition to the systems, strategies and tactics used, as the district made progress in the closing of achievement gaps with African American and Hispanic students. The district was assumed to be successful in reducing achievement gaps based on the research criteria of having received an Index 4 STAAR Distinction in 2014; having a student population that resembles Texas' demographics within fifteen percentage points in the Hispanic and Economically Disadvantaged student categories and within ten percentage points of African American student categories; and a public school district with a superintendent tenure of at least three years.

The following sections provide a description of the district context to adequately frame the researched site. The background of United PSD includes: demographic trends;

the district vision, mission, focus, goals and graduate profile; the district organizational structure; district academic achievement results; and relevant documents.

United Public School District Background

According to historical documents, United PSD opened as a public school system in 1854 to educate children of local farmers, small business owners, and others who had migrated with the development of a rail system in a growing metropolitan area. By 1914, a two-story brick schoolhouse was erected to educate those within their school boundaries.

United PSD boundaries encompass over 38 square miles and include three different municipalities. Texas' reports show how this once rural district has grown to educate close to 40,000 students. The two-story brick schoolhouse now serves as the district central office. The core values that were at the foundation of the district's establishment are still remnant as district officials and members of the community proudly reflect the message on their website that states:

Although, the world has changed dramatically since railroads were the newest form of transportation across the country, the importance of a strong educational system that provides children with skill to be productive citizens in our society is still a priority for our community.

Instructional actions within the district reflected this statement and are believed to be the core of the continued academic success of United PSD.

District Demographic Trends

Two decades ago, United PSD was described as an affluent school district with Anglo student enrollment of 64%, making it a White majority school district. A demographic shift of ethnic diversity has occurred in the past 20 years, a trend common when urban areas encroach in the respective suburbs, causing affluent families to migrate elsewhere (Orfield, 2002). Table 2 displays this shift in demographics in United PSD through comparing data from the school district in the 1994 and 2014 school years, while relating it to the Texas average in the same period. Noticeable changes in each category have transpired during this time. United PSD historically has been above the state in African American student enrollment percentage and has increased 5.7% over these 20 years. More significant is the increase in Hispanic student enrollment from 10% to 35.5% and 21.2% to 57.7% in Economically Disadvantaged student enrollment between 1994 and 2014 respectively, with a vast decrease of -37% in Anglo student representation found from 1994 to 2014. In 1994, United PSD was -23.9% under the state average in Economically Disadvantage percentage enrollment and in 2014 had close to a -2% difference. During the same period, United PSD was 17.1% over the state average with White student representation, which has only a -1.6% difference in 2014. In 2014 Hispanics were approximately 12% underrepresented in the district when compared to the state average percentages. This Hispanic percentage difference between district and state is closing. In 1994 the gap was close to -24% and in 2014 it was at -11.8%. The total student enrollment in United PSD in the year 1994 was 33,495 and in the year 2014 it was 38,169.

Participants consistently noted these changes due to the encroachment of the metropolitan area, a migration of diverse cultures from other countries into their community, and a demographic and affluence shift toward poverty with families with less formal education. The deputy superintendent, who has 40 years of service with the district, gave a historical perspective of the demographic shift.

We started becoming very diverse in the late 80s. The way that diversity started was, we got a local university in our city, and we had many Asian parents and parents from the Middle East, who came over to either go to school at the university or be professors. Many of our kids came from very educated backgrounds at first, but still there were language issues and some culture issues in all. We also had a whole bunch of people come from Sweden. Although they spoke English, there were some cultural issues there. Then we started getting refugees. The first I recall was the Vietnamese kids. Then we got the Kurdish tribes and they had been in Saddam Hussein's camps for years. These kids had not had any education. Then we got immigrants from Africa and Burma was our latest. I don't know why here, but we have a very diverse population and we get kids that are highly educated in their own language and we get kids with no education. Then of course the Hispanic population has built up quite a bit. We have a large bilingual program and it goes from Pre-K through sixth in our district because we have sixth grade in elementary.

The documented increase of Economically Disadvantaged students and the increase of English Language Learners, found within United PSD, from 3,139 in 1994 to 9,488 in 2014 support participant insights.

Table 2

Student Demographic Percentages for United PSD and Texas for 1994 and 2014

Year	UPSD African American	Texas African American	UPSD Hispanic	Texas Hispanic	UPSD White	Texas White	UPSD Econ. Dis.	Texas Econ. Dis.
1994	16.6%	14.3%	10%	35.5%	64.8%	47.7%	21.2%	45.1%
2014	22.3%	12.7%	40%	51.8%	27.8%	29.4%	57.7%	60.2%

Vision, Mission, Values, Focus, Goals, and Graduate Profile

With the changing demographics in the past 20 years, there remains a commitment to education excellence in United PSD. Created and approved by the board in 2010, 2020 Vision states:

United PSD – Where all students, learn, grow and succeed.

The Mission statement states:

To serve and prepare all students for their global future.

Values set for:

Integrity, Inspiration, Inclusiveness, Innovation

A Focus of:

Students are the primary focus of United PSD. Staff is the primary focus of administration.

And Goals that state:

Students are highly engaged in their educational life. Profound curriculum is the foundation for learning. United PSD has high performing, student focused teachers. United PSD ensure excellence in operations.

These district commitments are found throughout the district and have been disseminated and posted throughout the district and found on the district website to be obtained by the year 2020. These Vision, Mission, Values, and Goals have also been used for superintendent interviews. A board member stated:

That is what we look at as a board. We set those aspirations that are aligned with our vision, mission, and goals. There are no surprises because we go back to those and we are grounded in those.

United PSD also created a Graduate Profile with five categories, with descriptors for each. The expectations for United PSD are to have a graduation class that: Seeks academic knowledge; exhibits strong character and personal qualities, demonstrates 21st-century skills; applies technology skills; and understands the global society. The Graduate Profile aligns with the district Vision and Mission and is seen as the anchor for district-wide instructional focus and initiatives.

District Organizational Structure

The 2013-2014 Texas Academic Performance Report detailed United PSD employees' total 4,806 staff members. Of this total, 3,368 are professional staff to include 2,406 (51.9%) teachers and 48 (1.0%) central office administrators (Table 3). Table 4 delineates the demographic distribution of employees at United PSD (Texas Education Agency, 2014a).

Table 3

United PSD Staffing Report from 2013-2014 Texas Academic Performance Report

District Role	Teachers	Professional Support	Campus Administrators	Central Administration	Educational Aides	Auxiliary
Percent of Staff	51.9%	14.5%	2.6%	1.0%	5.4%	24.5%

Table 4

2014 United PSD Teacher Ethnicity Percentage Comparisons to Student

Demographic Percentages Distribution

<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Teacher Distribution</i>	<i>Student Distribution</i>
African American	10.8%	22.3 %
Hispanic	11.1%	40%
White	73.9%	27.8%

Table 4 displays that the district student demographics were not aligned to teacher employment by ethnicity. When combining teachers and staff, United PSD employs 1,662 minority school related personnel.

Texas public schools have an elected body of individuals to govern the district. In United PSD there are seven board members that serve three year staggered terms. The following commitments are displayed on the district website:

The Board of Trustees has the executive power and duty to govern and oversee the management of [United PSD]. Acting as a collective body, the Board sets the direction for the school district. Some of the Board’s general responsibilities include: Setting district policies and supporting administrators and teachers in the execution of those policies; employing and evaluating the superintendent;

adopting the annual budget; levying/collecting taxes and issuing bonds;
performing specific duties imposed by the state.

One board member stated:

This board takes very seriously our board role and the governance role. If you look at the roles and responsibility for board members, it is to set the vision, mission, and goals. It is to hire and evaluate the superintendent. It is to set and approve policy and it is to approve the budget. Within those five roles, we are viewed as an oversight team and a reflector...we believe very strongly in the governance line and that we're an oversight body and that it is up to the education experts, if you will, to identify the best practices and best instructional practices that are going to help us achieve our goals.

In alignment with this statement, it is posted on the district website:

School boards and superintendents work as a team. In United PSD, the Board of Trustees sets the exemplary standards that best serve the interests of the children and patrons of the district. Working together, each has its own responsibilities: the board set policies and priorities and the superintendent and his staff carries out those policies.

In 2014, no minorities were on the school board, which was comprised of four women and three men. The trustees included two newly elected members, two members with 2-4 years experience, two members with 5-10 years experience, and one board member with over 15 years experience. It is important to note that historically there have been minorities who served as school board members at United PSD.

United PSD has over 55 campuses and maintains a total of 70 district facilities. The district has four comprehensive high schools, one early college, one high school learning center, eight junior high schools, 36 elementary schools, four elementary magnet/academy schools, and one primary school. Each campus has an administrator to oversee campus instruction and operations, with additional administrative staff aligned to enrollment and programs of each campus.

The resources to support campus efforts are coordinated through central office. A superintendent hired by the board of trustees leads central office, and the district. As earlier noted, the board of trustees gives the superintendent the authority to organize the district as needed in order to meet board goals. Since 1946, there have been eight superintendents at United PSD, not including interims during leadership transition. Two of the eight superintendents have been women and no minorities have been hired as superintendent. The 2014 organizational chart consisted of two deputy superintendents to supervise instruction and finance. The Deputy Superintendent of Instruction manages Assistant Superintendents of Elementary, Secondary, Technology, and Human Resources. The total administrative executives led by this division are four assistant superintendents, one chief executive director, 17 executive directors, two coordinating directors, and 13 directors. The Deputy Superintendent of Finance supervises five executive directors, five directors, two managers, and one risk manager. The vast majority of supervision for the district is through the Deputy Superintendent of Instruction. Central administrative roles and responsibilities are coordinated to support and enhance campus performance. In 2014, the organizational chart was modified to

include new instructional personnel such as executive directors aligned to support elementary schools, junior high schools, and high schools and an administrator to oversee K-12 instructional and program alignment. The superintendent stated:

One thing that I did this year, because I felt like it was really important, was move to a K-12 alignment. We have had elementary coordinators and secondary coordinators and their main responsibility has been within their realm in the elementary level with some coordination in-between. I felt like we needed to be more structured and more purposeful about that alignment.

A central office administrator's perception was:

Although there was an assistant superintendent of elementary, it encompassed everything, and the three executive directors' charge was to directly supervise the principals. The new alignment allows them to really keep the focus. Keep the focus on instruction. It allowed for focus on the curricular side of things while not getting distracted by the operations.

The district also employs instructional specialists to coach and support teachers on instructional alignment and delivery. While there is not the financial means of having a campus instructional specialist for every content area at every campus, there is a district plan designed for support for each site. An elementary school teacher gave a snapshot of the human support provisions given by the district.

Our school has always had at least one Math specialist, a Reading specialist, we have a STEM coach at my school who does Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math, and just helps a lot with our Science labs.

This support structure was created to foster instructional continuity and consistency across the district while giving each campus the individual support needed to achieve the goals set by the district. In district meetings, utilizing feedback from these specialists facilitates calibration of the district system for systematic support and intervention.

District Academic Achievement Results

Texas public school districts must meet the metrics set at the federal and state level. In 2009, under House Bill 3, the 81st Texas Legislature created a bill for the commissioner of education to develop a transition plan for a new student assessment system. The Transition Plan for House Bill 3 contains a detailed description of the process the commissioner of education uses to develop and implement the provisions of House Bill 3 (81st Texas Legislature, 2009), as required by Section 68 of the bill. The new State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) program would have full implementation in the 2011-2012 school years. The STAAR program includes annual assessments for students in:

- Reading and mathematics, grades 3-8
- Writing at grades 4 and 7
- Science at grades 5 and 8
- Social studies at grade 8
- End-of-course assessments for English I, English II, Algebra I, Biology and U.S history

(Texas Education Agency, 2013b)

Districts and the campuses they serve are evaluated under four indexes, which are:

- Index 1: Student Achievement
- Index 2: Student Progress
- Index 3: Closing Performance Gaps
- Index 4: Post Secondary Readiness

Before this student assessment system, districts in the state of Texas received a rating for their overall scores. The highest rating under the former student assessment system, Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), was Exemplary, then Recognized, followed by Academically Acceptable, and finally Academically Unacceptable. Under the current system, starting in 2014, the only distinction a district could get was for Index 4. Index 4 evaluates Post Secondary Readiness through longitudinal graduation rates combined with graduates taking upper level courses and the percentile of students scoring in the Level II and Level III range in the STAAR. In order to receive a district distinction, 70% of the campuses in the district must receive an Index 4: Post Secondary Readiness distinction. In 2014, the first year of implementation of this standard, only 26 out of over 1,200 public school districts qualified for this distinction with the majority being small school districts of less than 15,000 students and only four of the 26 reflecting the state demographic average.

United PSD historically has attained consistent instructional state recognitions. From 2006-2012, United PSD received a *Recognized* rating from the Texas Education Agency. In 2013, the district received a rating of “Met Standard” with 30% of its schools earning at least three academic distinctions under the new Texas accountability system, the highest large district in the state of Texas. In 2014, United PSD received Index 4:

Post Secondary Readiness distinction. The significance of this distinction is at least 70% of their campuses had to have high student performance to earn an Index 4 distinction. The district has not been under any federal or state sanctions from low student performance on state assessments.

United PSD district prides itself on instructional excellence. On the district website it showcases how United PSD average 2014 SAT composite scores are above the state average in all three areas; Critical Reading, Math, and Writing. The district also incorporates an ACT initiative where the district has every students take the exam. The 2014 district average results from the ACT exam are also higher than the state average. In 2013, United PSD district average Advanced Placement passing rate was over 50% of AP tests taken were passed with a score of a 3, 4, or 5; over 4,800 AP tests were administered. Other instructional accomplishments include, but are not limited to: STAAR passing rates exceed the state average in every subject; in 2014; 85% of United PSD schools earned at least one distinction compared to the state average of 53%; in 2010; named the Best Academically Performing school district in Texas by the Education Resource Group; in 2013, all four United PSD high schools were named among America's Best High Schools by Newsweek; a total of 23 Department of Education national Blue Ribbon Campuses; 14 Dell Scholars in 2012 and 2013 (Top Five in the Nation); and in 2011 United PSD had 15 campuses awarded by the National Center for Education Achievement Higher Performing Schools, top 10 in Texas.

It is assumed that Texas school districts that attain an Index 4 distinction are closing achievement gaps. This is based on the requirement that in order for a district to

receive this distinction, a vast majority of campuses within the district must also receive the Index 4 distinction. With only 26 school districts that obtained this notoriety, and only four of these notable districts resembling the state average demographics in African American, Hispanic, and Economically Disadvantaged students, it showcases how this district is reducing achievement gaps.

Select District Documents

United PSD's instructional success derives from the District Improvement Plan (DIP). A variety of instructional programs were implemented to enhance instructional delivery in order to maximize student performance. The 2014-2015 DIP development was led by the Deputy Superintendent of Instruction with the following representation: one school board member; five business representatives; four parents; 27 staff members; one superintendent; and 20 district administrators. The DIP focuses on four major goals:

- Goal 1: Students are highly engaged in their educational life.
- Goal 2: Profound curriculum is the foundation for learning.
- Goal 3: United PSD has high performing, student focused teachers.
- Goal 4: United PSD ensures excellence in operations.

In United PSD, the belief is this is a living, breathing document that is the catalyst for the development of each schools' Campus Improvement Plan (CIP). The assistant superintendent of elementary schools stated the following about the CIP process:

The team was there to help, not just develop goals for the campus, but take the goals from the district level, customize those goals so that they connect it with campus. I think you could ask 41 out of 41 elementary and 14 and out of 14

secondary campus principals, talk about the district improvement plan and they can walk through the purpose. They can walk through how it's developed and then how it's communicated and how it impacts them at the campus level.

The superintendent commented about monitoring district and campus improvement plan implementation:

They are monitored; we have directors and coordinators that are the keepers of the action plans. There was a lot of stakeholder input in the action plans but they were reviewed at facility meetings. They are reviewed at our in-house administrator meetings; they are reviewed at what we call our CAM meetings, which are our meetings with campus administrators. There is a lot of oversight and monitoring. Then we have formative evaluations throughout the year.

The District Improvement Plan reviewed outlined instructional initiatives for the 2014-2015 school year with priority goals in Career and Technology Education, Teacher Retention, Bond 2016 Preparation, and Long Range Planning for Secondary Growth. The District Improvement Plan also delineated instructional strategies that were being implemented to support district Goal where students are highly engaged in their educational life, with the objective to deliver a rigorous and relevant curriculum using instructional strategies, as named by the United PSD DIP, designed to engage learners in meaningful learning experiences. Such elementary instructional strategies included, but were not limited to, School Wide Enrichment (SEM) and Differentiated Instruction (DI). Instructional strategies for the secondary level included, but were not limited to, Project

Based Learning (PBL) and Differentiated Instruction (DI). Participants commented on the importance of these strategies on student performance.

An elementary teacher discussed Differentiated Instruction stating:

2020 Vision, and it was something that the district was doing to look for 2020, and the district thought, “Why is every child getting the exact same thing? Education should not just be this packet where we say, here; this is what you learn in second grade for everyone.” Administration implemented the program of differentiation.

The assistant superintendent of elementary schools described the importance of Differentiated Instruction on closing achievement gaps.

It helped us close gaps and re-mediate a few things. It is ultimately what really pushed us and now we are a level where every one of our students, regardless of the campus, are achieving. I am thinking specifically elementary but I know it’s a K-12 perspective.

The assistant superintendent of elementary schools further described school wide enrichment programs.

The school wide enrichment model is the big umbrella that includes the GT focus, the enrichment focus, and then differentiated instruction. It’s a way for us to pull together and articulate exactly how differentiated instruction can look and really emphasizing how important it is for the teacher to know their students, because you can't differentiate if you don't know your students...the school wide

enrichment model was based on GT concepts and strategies. That was a different approach for us.

A high school principal spoke on how differentiation and Problem Based Learning (PBL) is reflected at the secondary level.

Differentiation automatically benefits all students. It definitely targets African American, Hispanic, and low socio-economic students. You should differentiate based on not only the skills of the students, but also their learning needs or backgrounds. I think differentiation is one of those pieces and PBL promotes flexible grouping. PBL promotes teamwork. PBL promotes student talking.

The deputy superintendent of instruction summed up the purpose of these instructional strategies by stating:

We have had a good long time to build toward that goal of trying to get kids every opportunity. What we have found along the way is whatever you do to provide and gauge Hispanic kids who need to learn more English, who haven't had the experiences, even the kids who can speak English and have had the experience, all benefit from engaging work.

United PSD's DIP also displayed other academic systems used to amplify students' abilities. The district was committed to continue to provide professional development to also support Technology Integration (TI) and Professional Learning Communities (PLC). United PSD has incorporated a Professional Learning Communities model where education professionals have a coordinated time to collaborate to focus a common effort on meeting or exceeding board, district, and

campus goals. Online access to the curriculum and instructional pacing charts, lesson plans, and academic resources provide the teacher the time to properly align pedagogy to student expectations with rigor, continuity, and consistency.

Other initiatives included in the DIP were: enhancement of the new teacher mentoring program; enhancement of ELL programs; improvement on all state accountability ratings; teacher retention; survey results; a focus writing score improvement; continued professional development on the district's student Response to Intervention model; Springboard Pre-AP/AP instructional resources; and access college readiness.

While the DIP indicates a continued focus on self-improvement in closing achievement gaps with all students, to include minority students, data on college readiness distinctions indicates that the district has made progress to improve academic achievement for all students in the district. The programs in the district were implemented and utilized with purpose and with a district commitment to integrate them with fidelity. Stakeholder input, job-embedded professional development, access to resources, relevance in all learning, and continuous communication for program evaluation of the program facilitated ownership and buy-in. Therefore, over a period of time, strategies are part of the district culture. However, the leadership attributes of the district superintendent were the focus of the study, not the types of district-wide educational programs and their impact on student achievement.

Chapter Five: Findings of the Study

“We have to be able to take our ego out of this picture and realize that there’s never a point where we stop learning ourselves”

Deputy Superintendent of Instruction.

Findings

Examination of interviews with participants, combined with the analysis of documents, such as the District Improvement Plan, board meeting agendas, and web articles, uncovered themes relevant to actions and structures that the participants believed the superintendent utilized to reduce district-wide achievement gaps. This chapter presents the findings addressing each research question.

1. What is the role of the superintendent in reducing the achievement gap for African American and Hispanic students? The role of the superintendent was defined as the district leader who is a driver of the entire learning system with the focus of reducing achievement gaps with African American and Hispanic students. One primary theme emerged from this study revealing that the superintendent’s primary role is that of an instructional leader in closing achievement gaps for African American and Hispanic students. According to the participants, the superintendent is seen as the driver of the school district efforts through construction or approval of instructional enhancements, promotion of academic success for diverse students, understanding instructional outcomes, embracing data driven decision making, focusing on college and career readiness, reliance on curricular framework expertise, and integration instructional planning models.

Instructional leader. Participants in the study continually expressed how the superintendent was a primary driver, as an instructional leader, in instructional programs and initiatives and attributed her efforts that led to district-wide initiatives that closed achievement gaps. The superintendent expressed that the importance of the district leader's instructional leadership role is driven through the use of the District Improvement Plan (DIP).

The responsibilities of a superintendent are huge, but the instructional leadership, the instructional focus, and the school climate culture measures have to be in place. The fact is, our district-planning document is a living, breathing document and is re-visited often. We benchmark and we look at data. We use data to drive instruction. We do not just access, or bench mark a survey just to do it to say we have done it. Data-driven decision making ensured plans geared to meet expectations.

The DIP and student achievement data, along with survey data, were used to create instructional strategies and practices that should close achievement gaps. The deputy superintendent of instruction elaborated on how instructional leaders use data.

We review data in June, looking at gaps, plugging up the holes in this curriculum and rolling new strategies out in August. It includes the concept to be taught. It includes strategies suggested for kids that have all types of learning styles and abilities and disabilities. It also includes pacing guides and a year at a glance.

The superintendent role as an instructional leader has permeated to the instructional level of enhancing teacher pedagogy through the creation of instructional planning documents. These documents are easily accessible through an online portal. The development of the documents from the district goals, were created to enhance student performance. The success was found in the instructional impact with students, in particular, with diverse learners. This achievement was evident through, as detailed earlier, at least 70% of the campuses receiving an Index 4: Post Secondary Readiness distinction, the district not being under any federal or state sanctions from low student performance on state assessments, average 2014 SAT composite scores are above the state average in all three areas, the 2014 district average results from the ACT exam are also higher than the state average, and in 2013 United PSD district average was over 50% of AP tests passed with a score of a 3, 4, or 5.

The community also expressed confidence in the superintendent, as an instructional leader, based on the entire district meeting their high instructional expectations. As a parent volunteer expressed this community sentiment to sustain high student performance,

I think they realize that they have certain challenges and the district is working on those pieces. That is the greatness of United PSD. When they see that they are not achieving, they expect to achieve and the community and the parents expect them to achieve, and the community doesn't really need to speak up loudly because United PSD does a good job of knowing that there is an issue and

making those adjustments through curriculum and instruction and the kind of the curriculum that they are writing.

The superintendent added, “The process for us on curriculum is just continuous; it never stops.” This attitude of continuous improvement was imperative to ensuring instructional designs were living documents. The urgency for district faculty and staff to embrace the instructional design was attributed to the shifting of student demographics toward poverty and students of color and not wanting district excellence to falter.

The deputy superintendent of instruction explained,

Once we have figured out that things had changed and it was not going to go back to the United PSD of the old days, we just figured out what was going to have to work for us. What was going to have to work for us is hard work and systems to help people get kids moving forward... We figured out that kids could not afford for us to take forever to turn a corner. We vowed to be a little more agile.

A parent also emphasized the instructional urgency, “It grew so quickly that I don't think everyone had time to be stagnant.”

With the changing demographics, executive team leaders called for an examination of how minority students were disciplined and how their culture was connected to the school. In an effort to connect these executive members to minority students, a task force was formed to acquire knowledge and skills through focused training, and in turn, trained other professionals within the school district. A United PSD

middle school principal was part of this team of individuals and was an assistant principal at the time. He recalled,

Early in my administrative career, about 12 or 13 years ago that was when I became a part of the process of helping develop a solution to increase the academic achievement of our Hispanic and our African American students. They sent me to Atlanta to a conference, a 3-day conference on the African American adolescent and learning more about how teachers that don't mirror that background or that ethnic group can work with those types of students.

District-wide reforms came from this undertaking,

We evaluated every handbook for every campus and we looked at the outliers, we looked at the things that were good, the things that were bad and came up with a more unified system of disciplinary procedures. This has now evolved into our district code of conduct you see it today. We also put together trainings for all the administrators, who in turn then went back to the campuses to train their staffs on better ways to interact with minority students. Helping them understand that there are the cultural differences in our Hispanic students, in our African American students, and there are the communication differences between these different groups of people.

According to the board member, the instructional improvements required a change of mindset modeled by the superintendent.

We need a paradigm shift. That is good. You have these paradigm shifts. I think that is the part that I was pleased about as we looked at it and we said, there are some things we do better but to do better, we are going to have to do things differently. Not all districts want to take a risk.

The board member expressed the sentiment that the risks involved when changing instructional programs and practices must be supported,

You can celebrate success but you can also have fabulous failures and as long as you understand and do this continuous improvement. Yeah, you may drop, but if you are going to say, okay, in order to bring that up again we are going to have to change some things. What we had to do as the board was to be patient and said if you are going to make these big changes, you may drop.

Apparently, when the board of trustees supports the superintendent's recommendations on instructional enhancements it also expects "fabulous failures," it empowers the superintendent to take calculated risks with the expectation to close achievement gaps.

However, changing instructional structures and practices was achieved with thought and precision. A middle school principal explained,

That continuous improvement model kicks in then. The questions asked are: Who is going to implement it? How are we going to know it is working? When are we going to put checkpoints in place so that we can see if it is working? Aligning it with? Where is the curriculum right now? Where does it best match the curriculum that we have in place? Instead of, okay, is it just an add-on?

Meaningful student instruction and programs, created and approved by the superintendent, were attributed to the closing of achievement gaps.

Another elementary principal added,

Over time, we have evolved into moving away from tips and tricks and strategies that are going to get you to pass a test to how are we developing a learner as a whole? Do they understand how to critically think? Do they understand how to apply the text in all the different forms that it is asking? [We are] [d]efinitely moving away from that formula towards more of the student's own thinking.

The assistant superintendent of elementary schools further explained how the superintendent as an instructional leader can create confidence in the learning system, "What really started to happen is we started to see success. That is when people started to say, okay, I think we might have something here."

A board member affirmed the importance of a district instructional leader in creating an instructional system with high expectations,

I think what we saw when there was a transition at the end of TAKS and then transition into STAAR, we were very proud that we were the largest, most diverse, recognized district for six years. But we said, you know what, that has great but what was good enough to get our kids to where they are today is not going to be good enough to put them where they need to be tomorrow. Not to discount the great work that we have done, but we were really at a point where we needed to evolve. We needed to really incorporate more 21st-century learning into our curriculum and our instruction.

The board member further noted how the district leader's recommendations lead to instructional program enhancement, and how the district evolved,

We have evolved over the years. We have brought in magnet programs in our elementary schools, our junior highs, and our high schools once again to give people options and to give them choice. I am very proud of that. I am very proud of our college and career focus. We are exposing kids to different opportunities whether you're economically disadvantaged or my kids. And then we are saying, okay, we are going to get you college and career ready for when you to walk off the stage.

An elementary school principal elaborated on the benefit of strong instructional leadership through the implementation of differentiated instruction, where teachers have students learn at their ability not taking a one size fits all. Since this differentiated instructional practice was introduced, it has evolved over the years. This principal explained,

I think one of the most prominent things that I have experienced recently has been the change with differentiated instruction. I now have a differentiation expert who comes to my campus every other week and spends time with my teachers to help them plan and to implement differentiated instruction in their classrooms. I am seeing that first hand. That is tangible. I did not have that last year. I had a differentiation expert, same one, she worked with four of my teachers. Now her role has expanded, where she has the opportunity to work with all of my teachers.

According to the participants, the district was dedicated to perfecting processes, thus evaluating practices that reduce achievement gaps. It is also important to note that the superintendent consistently credited her teams for the instructional enhancements found throughout the district. However, each respondent credited the superintendent for her instructional knowledge and acknowledged it was her empowerment and final approvals that enabled each instructional initiative to come to full fruition. The confidence in the instructional changed by the leadership was summed up best by a middle school principal, “I don’t see any of the changes that have happened [being] changes that should not happen or haven’t been helpful.”

2. **What systems did the superintendent create to reduce the achievement gap for African American and Hispanic students?** Superintendent systems were defined as the superintendent’s use of an organized framework made up of diverse but integrated and interdependent parts used to facilitate the closing of achievement gaps with African American and Hispanic students. Analyzing data from interviews and district documents, two themes emerged as superintendent instructional systems used to enhancing all student achievement. These themes were a *program evaluation system* and a *student centered belief system*.

According to the participants, the superintendent construction or approval of components on a district-wide evaluation system was based on students’ needs. The superintendent created evaluation systems that would consistently assess the district’s effectiveness to meet the district vision, mission, and goals aligned to student outcomes. The use of data from surveys, informal conversation, formal town hall meetings, and

student assessment data facilitated the review process. Participants indicated that this process enabled the review of district initiatives such as, personnel roles and responsibilities, Advanced Placement programs, SAT and ACT preparation programs, Gifted and Talented programs, differentiated instructional models, problem based learning models, and student enrichment models with the expectation that all students will excel. In most cases, when a program needed to be fully examined for effectiveness, an outside auditing agency was commissioned to undertake the task. Key indicators found in data analysis for a system of a program evaluation system were: auditing processes, program evaluation, feedback systems, outcomes, and measures. Indicators found for a student centered belief systems were: high expectations for all, student success, student priority, hope and students come first. The central belief system of the district was their collective student body. All executive decisions made, to include the superintendent, were based with the students' needs in mind.

Program evaluation system. The superintendent of United PSD incorporated many of the components in the program evaluation systems found in the planning cycle continuum (Figure 2). The cycle consisted of: a mission statement; comprehensive needs assessment; long-range goals; strategies; resource allocation; formative evaluation; and summative evaluation (Dick et al., 2005; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Region 10 Education Service Center, 2000; Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007; Yarbrough et al., 2011). The superintendent explained the use of this plan for program evaluation,

Those four district goals have remained the same since 2010. What has changed every year, are systems in different target areas within those different areas.

What we did when these goals were identified, we had many committees in place with a lot of stakeholders. They brought recommendations about strategies to address in different areas... We gave a report to the board and then we actually put action plans in place, very specific around each of the recommendations, with strategies, activities, resources, outcomes, and evaluation measures. That is a working document; we had given one update to our board of trustees on where we are, where the action plan is, so it is a continual process, a lot of in-house monitoring and assessment of those action plans.

The superintendent continued with “we have formative evaluations throughout the year.”

A board member expanded on the district evaluation system, We receive various performance updates, various data points over the course of the year. As a part of our district improvement plan and a part of the goal-setting process, we pride ourselves on continuous improvement for years. As we receive updates, what you will hear this board say is, as the results are presented back to us, what barriers exists to meet the needs of the students that are within our jurisdiction, whether it be budget, whether it be focus that we can mend and influence or impact?

The board of United PSD has given the superintendent the authority to make the needed changes to reduce achievement gaps. A middle school principal confirmed how the superintendent is the primary actor in forging this system with and the multiple committees used to gain comprehensive feedback.

The superintendent is very good at gaining feedback. The superintendent will call a reflector committee meeting together in a heartbeat, for all things, everything. The superintendent definitely looks to see if there are committees that have teachers, parents, and students. Committees must have true representation of all the people that would be affected by certain things. I am sure she did it using all of the feedback that she gathers from year to year because they do tons of surveys with the students, the staff, the parents, and reflector groups of all types.

The deputy superintendent supported the importance of the evaluation system by stating, “We finally convinced everybody that monitoring every program is very important.”

The superintendent provided expertise on the importance of consistent program evaluation system with all district stakeholders,

What we’ve done since then and it’s an annual revolving process, each year in the spring we bring in a stakeholder group: that’s staff members, it’s community members, it’s business people. We review the goals that are in place and where we are and have we met our targets... We survey our parents, our staff, and our kids each year with a climate survey, which assesses leadership in culture and climate and expectations and engagement. We do many data points, touch points, and fold it into what we are working on. Sometimes it is hard to look at, but the data is what it is. If it is an area that needs to be addressed, then we own it and make no excuses and we move forward.

The goal of the audits is to exceed the expectation set in the district 2020 Vision document and the District Improvement Plan. Feedback cycles with the mentioned committees and surveys are only one approach to on-going evaluation. The superintendent also incorporated outside audits to evaluate programs and instructional models. The assistant superintendent of elementary schools shared how audits are part of the superintendent evaluation system,

Ultimately, we constantly evaluate the curriculum. We use the data along the way to make changes. We have incorporated audits. We have had curriculum audits along the way. We had one recently for English Language Arts and Social Studies. Before that, we had GT, dyslexia, and special education external audits done.

The superintendent clarified what programs were evaluated and the rationale behind the program assessments,

Actually, I felt like we had some weaknesses in our AP curriculums, so within the first year I was here we did an audit of our AP curriculum. What we have done since I have been here are audits of special programs because I felt like we needed to make some advancements and improvements with special programs. We have, in the last two years, completed audits of special education, dyslexia, and gifted and talented programs. In this past year, we looked at our ELA curriculum and social studies curriculum. Our scores on writing were not where we wanted them. The entire state of Texas was low in writing, but we felt like we needed to take a deep dive. We have done just a lot of in-house checks and

validations and then had some external audits as well. The key thing is are our kids performing.

An elementary school principal shared her understanding of the evaluation system including audits,

For a sub population we did an audit for the special education department. How are we meeting the needs of our special education kids? We had an outside group come in that did an audit, and then was able to report some of the findings and changes were made based on what they found. They did feedback forms at the different elementary schools where these changes were going to take place to get community support and allow parents to share some of their concerns.

A high school principal summarized how the program evaluation system engages all. “You are going to look at how the parents react to them, how the students reach to them. Ultimately, are they consistently producing a good product in the field?” Further, the evaluation system was used to enhance program and instructional effectiveness to address achievement gaps. In this case, the evaluation continued with parental stakeholders to ensure their concerns were being met, while using the feedback to further enhance the evaluated program.

The use of data contributes to determine which programs and methods of instruction become a priority for the system to evaluate. As the superintendent stated, “We did not audit math or science because our performance on math and science has been incredibly strong at the state level as well as the national level on ACT and SAT.”

A high school principal further explained on the district's evaluation system, Clearly, a teacher who has not been successful has students that are not being successful. You can key in on that data, go back, and provide that teacher with some support. You are going to evaluate programs based on many different things. You are going to use survey data. You are going to use raw data. You are going to use community survey data. You are going to use everything at your disposal depending on the particular program that you are evaluating... I think it greatly depends on the program, but it is looking at every facet of it, either hard data wise or survey data wise and not just based on a feeling you have.

Often, the feedback from surveys and audits depicts challenges and difficulty of implementation of programs or instructional models. The superintendent had a premise of *own it* regarding unfavorable feedback from evaluations. The superintendent detailed one such occurrence in reference to a district-wide secondary school initiative, Project Based Learning,

We started to work with project based learning at a secondary level and we engaged in a nationally respected model. We ran with that for a year and really had some good feedback. We also had some negative feedback; that the program was not really aligned with the state curriculum, that teachers had to go and do things differently since it was not aligned. We audited that feedback and we parked that model for about a year and looked to see if there was another model out there that was more suited to Texas, so that our teachers would not feel like they had to abandon some of the state curriculum to do these other things. We

went with another model at the secondary level. It was all about promoting student engagement in the classroom.

According to the participants, the evaluation system enabled experimentation with different programs to determine the fit for the district. The system was fluid enough that it stalled and emerged a year later under a style of program. Thus, meeting the goal of any assessment, to ensure it is optimally used to reach a desired goal. An assistant superintendent of elementary schools reminisced on how the evaluation system led to make process in closing achievement gaps with African American and Hispanic students,

I think that was really when things changed. It was what really helped us focus on was the student populations that were falling in in the gaps that we were creating. We were teaching as though we were the old United PSD, which looked very homogeneous and had a low population of students from low Socioeconomic Status (SES) backgrounds. That's not who we are, and that's not who we were at the time but I think some folks just kept teaching and kept leading as though that was still the way we were. The funny thing is, you could see it happening, and I think that the blessing that I was blessed with was being a teacher at the time, being an assistant principal, and a principal, and an executive director. Eventually, trying to continue that pattern, we were missing entire groups of kids. Things changed and we started incorporating pacing guides and instructional planning meetings and my executive director coming to me and talking to me about my benchmark scores as a campus and what my plan was to

re-mediate or intervene. That had not happened before. There was some general discussions planned but we were getting down and dirty with, “Let’s take a look at your benchmark scores. Talk to me about 3rd grade because you got a group of Hispanic students or economically disadvantaged students or African students... Why are they not performing as well?” The reason was that we were not focused. We did not strictly target one population over another but what it boiled to was the instruction. The instruction was not differentiated enough nor was it focused enough to really have every student get where they needed to be.

The assistant superintendent’s comments illustrate the importance instructional program system has on student performance.

Student centered belief system. The data uncovered that a central belief system of the district was their collective student body. All executive decisions made by the superintendent and the central office team, were based with the students’ needs in mind. Participants continually spoke about high expectations for all, students’ needs must be at the forefront, and that they are the voice of every child. As the deputy superintendent of instructional recalled, the focus on student success was not necessarily new as the district previously emphasized ensuring student learning was of paramount importance. As she recalled from a speech that delivered several years ago,

The superintendent back then, as the district started to change in demographics, I will never forget in a speech she said, she made it clear that we will have high expectations for all students and we will have high academic achievement for all students. All students can learn and achieve at a high level. She put her stake in

the sand and really drew a line in the sand and said, this is the way it is going to be.

All interviewed participants shared the same student centered belief that in order to reduce achievement gaps for African American and Hispanic students and decisions must have student needs at the forefront. Although interview questions focused primarily on professional systems, strategies, and tactics (Appendix C, D, E, & F), a student centered belief system consistently surfaced as essential to reducing achievement gaps. The deputy superintendent described how the student centered belief system evolved:

We used to hear, “There’s no hope. There is no help from home.” We cannot control that. We still have to do what we have to do here. You do not hear teachers saying, “There is no help from home. Parents do not care.”

A board Member expanded, “I really go back to that mantra of all means all not all means some. It is a voice for every child. We believe in as a community.” This board member continued describing the student focus,

We are exposing kids to different opportunities whether you are economically disadvantaged or my kids, and then we are saying, okay, we are going to get you college or career ready for you to walk off the stage. It is what is good for everyone is going to be good for my child. You do not see that everywhere but that is really a part of the fabric (of the district philosophy).

The superintendent, further ascribed the district's ability to closing achievement gaps to, "the culture, the belief in kids, high expectations, and no excuses, that you feel, it is almost palpable."

An instructional strategist expanded on the student centered belief system's impact to put students first,

One thing I would say is that I think the people in United PSD, they love kids.

They want what is best for kids and we are all committed to making it happen for all of them, regardless of their backgrounds and their experiences. That we are here for them and we believe they can all succeed.

A high school teacher supported the student centered belief system by stating, "I feel like, across the board, everyone is here for the kids." This teacher gave an example of how the district puts this system into action,

We do not care at all about the percentages. In some AP programs, teachers will brag about, "I have a 90% passing rate. I have 95% passing rate." Throughout that year, that teacher has weeded out the kids that may not perform. Our goal is, how many kids did you take from the beginning of the year, and then get them through the course, and then have them make a qualifying score? Again, even if they do not, you had a kid experience a very rigorous class, that is a college course, and they are better off for it.

A high school principal added that the student focus of United PSD is to "teach students not content," adding, "the bottom-line is we are all supporting teachers. From

the superintendent on down, we all are supporting teachers who are supporting students.”

A middle school principal created a unique committee to emphasize the student centered belief system, “We have a student motivation committee that just purely works on ways to motivate students in all areas.” The principal further stated,

Everything that we do revolves around what can we do to help them more be here and help them learn. If we have to take them boxes of food we will take food to their houses, we will do whatever it takes because they are children.

He cited one of his actions to support the student centered belief system, so that teachers to better understand the students they serve,

We worked on the ways in which we can connect with those students. I put them (teachers) all on buses. I put them on buses and drove them through the neighborhood and the apartment complexes to let them see this where their students live; this is where they come from. Just kind of working through, helping them understand the differences in the cultures.

The data revealed that students also have a voice in the district. Their opinions are so important that the superintendent created a video to show district-wide,

We have clips of real kids in real classroom and authentic feedback from kids and teachers about the differences we have made in their lives, or what they are seeing in the classroom. Their success and their ownership really breeds from the success and ownership of other kids and teachers.

Another decision in the student centered belief system was hiring personnel that reflected the district student demographics. According to the superintendent such hiring was a top priority,

Hiring that represents the cultures that are here in our district is important. We are very targeted in terms of trying to diversify our teaching staff, our administrating staff, so that they are people within our organization who represent the kids who come. It has been something that we believe has been very important.

The superintendent continued on the district-wide student belief system, “four years ago we started at the elementary level and built a college and career readiness culture where the expectations are that all our students can do this. We are trying to build that dream and build that ownership.”

A high school principal exhibited a student focus with the following statement, We have to look at are we meeting the needs of our kids? When we look at our sub-populations, when we look at all of that data, where are we in this process to make sure that we meet the needs of the students?

Further, as a middle school teacher explained, student commitment means, Since we have such a diverse population and we have a large at-risk population, the amount of tutoring and support that we give our kids is huge. I know not all districts are like that, but the people here are really committed to their time and giving the kids what they need, whether it is a Saturday school, pullout tutoring,

or late camps, this kind of support is necessary. It would be great if we could do it all in the classroom, but ultimately you do not have tons of time. For some of them (students) they just need a little bit more, and everyone is really committed to that.

A high school principal spoke on superintendent instructional initiatives that were modified to meet the needs of diverse students populations,

Differentiation, that focuses on individual student abilities is leading to the closing of diverse learner achievement gaps, the district is differentiating based on not only the skills of the students but also their learning needs or backgrounds, everything. The focus on students has proven beneficial with the district continually closing achievement gaps, especially with African American and Hispanic students.

The superintendent summed up the district's student belief system that has led to the reducing of achievement gaps,

That is just part of who we are, we deal with issues as anybody else does. It is that belief in what we are doing and valuing all of our kids, whether they are rich, poor, educated, uneducated, at the top of the class, or five years behind. It just does not matter. We are going to love them, and we are going to help them be successful.

The assistant superintendent of elementary schools also validated the student centered belief system, "we are fortunate to have a focus that is on kids first."

3. What strategies does the superintendent use to create a system-wide culture that is responsive to reducing the achievement gap for African American and Hispanic students? Superintendent strategies were defined as the superintendent's careful plans used to meet goals crafted to reduce academic achievement gaps with African American and Hispanic students. Data revealed two themes, *building relationships* and *planning and goal setting*.

Each participant, including the superintendent, identified relationship building as the single most important strategy that the superintendent creates gradually to facilitate the instructional process that reduces achievement gaps. Each participant shared examples of how the creation of relationships was genuine, purposeful, honest, transparent, and impactful. Specific methods for the superintendent to effectively form relationships with internal and external groups primarily focused on continuous communication and interaction with these stakeholders. This reciprocal exchange of innovations, trepidations, beliefs, and perceptions fostered positive working environment and forged purposeful, positive, and genuine interactions. The resulting relationships included the consistent use of communication, active listening, feedback, meetings, honesty, and transparency. The presence and consistent message of the superintendent forged relationships that fostered trust. These working relationships were also seen as the catalyst that permitted a collective buy-in with district-wide instructional initiatives.

Planning and goal setting was seen as another superintendent strategy. According to data, the use of the evaluation process facilitated strategic planning and the setting of

district goals. Participants detailed the methods used for planning purposes and credited the superintendent for not only approving the creation of these strategies, but also for being an active member in each step of the process. Furthermore, the planning and goal setting process fostered district-wide instructional articulation.

Building relationships. According to participants' consistent and continuous communication sustained the development of relationships by the superintendent to optimize human resources to improve student performance. Furthermore, comprehensive communication with members of the administrative cabinet, principals, teachers, parents, and board members was the primary driver in building relationships. The United PSD superintendent of schools encapsulated the importance of relationship building through the following statement:

I spent a lot of time, when I first got here, just visiting and trying to establish relationships. I really wanted to get a sense of the people who were here to understand what their goals were, what they had done, and what are their successes. I had many conversations with individual principals and with individual central staff in terms of what they had done, what their hopes and dreams were, and for me, when you spend time, you really get to know the people and develop those relationships. You get a sense of who people are, what they're about, what they believe in, what they stand for, what their capacity is, what their potential is, and what their interest is. It is all about the right fit, but even more basic than that for me, there has to be a genuine passion, a belief in kids, and wanting to make a difference.

The building of relationships by the superintendent is apparently recognized at all levels of the district. For instance, a parent volunteer summarized how the superintendent strategy of building relationships works:

It comes from the top and it comes all the way down. It comes through every administrative building down to each grade level team or each type of teacher...

It has to start at the top and work its way down. It has to be done in a very positive, very motivational, non-punitive way. That is what makes the difference.

A middle school principal described how the superintendent uses this strategy through active listening with the leadership team to capitalize on established relationships toward promoting quality of instruction.

The leadership team is very effective at listening and allowing those in the trenches, who know and see what's going on out there, to help drive what instructional changes need to be made, what operational changes need to be made.

For this middle school principal, while the superintendent models positive relationships, this strategy is embedded in the culture of United PSD and has been embraced by all stakeholders.

Two-way communication happens typically in monthly meetings and then with follow-up phone calls and visits. Throughout the years and the different leaders, that is one of the things United PSD, in my opinion, has always done well.

In fact, this middle school principal credited these visits with building relationships strategy that enabled a “better understanding of what we’re doing on the campus.” This campus leader has a strong connection to the district leadership team, evident in the following statement: “When I leave this meeting, I will probably walk up there and say hi and see who’s in the office, have a drink, and just informally talk about things and see if there’s some feedback.”

However, to successfully form and sustain relationships, it is essential to have planned strategic formal meetings that are meaningful to the participants. The superintendent detailed such meetings, by sharing.

In the beginning of the year, mid-year, and end of year, I meet with my elementary principals by cluster. I have about 14 or 15 at a time. Then I meet with my junior high principles as a group and I meet with my high school principals as a group at three different times during the year. I have checkpoints with them and then it is a luncheon meeting and a conversational meeting.

A middle school principal further supported the superintendent’s relationship building strategy with the following statement:

We have lunchtime sessions where we will bring brownbag lunches and sit and talk and there is feedback, they are called power hours. If there are particular new things that come out in legislation, like with [special education], an optional power hour will be offered to come in and learn more about the topic, share, and get some feedback.

Clearly, sustaining professional relationships is based on everyone's trust relaying on their commitment to collaboratively work together. According to the participants the various meetings appeared to be optional. However, participants appreciate such meetings as a forum to voice concerns or acquire job related knowledge and skills in a safe, nonthreatening environment.

Additionally, the assistant superintendent of elementary schools shared how the superintendent's relationship building influences the Campus Administrator Meetings (CAMs).

The CAM was set up so that principals were free to give feedback and it really forged the relationships that were built with the executive directors. It was much easier for me as an administrator to sit down and have a one-on-one conversation with the principal, to walk around with the principal, and to do a little observing of my own, but then also to get feedback along the way.

The assistant superintendent of elementary schools used this approach to build relationships with campus teachers through teacher talk meetings.

I do teacher talk meetings where I have the teachers come in and sit with me and give me feedback. We actually just had a session yesterday. They talk to me about what's working and what's not working. What I love is that the teachers are very honest and they will say, "No. This part is too fast. This part is not aligned. I know it looks like we should be able to do this, but we can't even do this yet." What I do is I take that feedback and I go back to my team of executive directors and curriculum directors and try to make sure that our instructional

documents are as focused as they can be based on the feedback that I received.

These teachers are using the curriculum. They are the ones that are delivering it.

We need to set them up for success.

Thus, the relationship building strategy was practiced through all levels of the leadership team, reflecting the superintendent's leadership practices and expectations, evident through the assistant superintendent's statement detailing how relationships have an impact on instruction:

I love the fact that I am in a district that has allowed me to do teacher talks. It has really changed how I lead and how I see things. What I do not want to do is forget how the decisions we make, whether they are systemic in nature or just a tweak in terms of instructional planning, impact the people in the rooms that we are expecting to do all the work.

Yet, relationship building strategies go deeper than forming committees and soliciting feedback. For the superintendent, "honest and candid conversations are a two-way street." This was supported by an elementary school principal who stated that "in our district we do a really good job of asking for feedback and creating an environment where you can feel safe to say this is working, this isn't working."

This principal emphasized how meetings were utilized at the campus level to give central administration honest feedback on what initiatives are or are not working.

On my campus, we have [an] Instructional Leadership Team. My specialist and I sit down every Monday and have about a two to three hour meeting asking about

what is going on in our campus. The information and the feedback that I get, I forward to my executive director. I inform my executive director on problems and issues.

As earlier stated by a parent volunteer, the expectations for relationship building begin with the superintendent and move their way through the organizational nexus. In this case, professional relationships provided collaborative feedback to enhance learning systems. “We’re already answering a lot of questions through two-way communication and how it’s developed with uniformity, sharing, and needs assessments,” specified a campus instructional specialist.

An elementary school teacher detailed how relationship building assists the organization to thrive with consistent communication from the teachers to the superintendent.

I think the superintendent’s role is to facilitate and make sure everybody under that umbrella is taking care of what is needed to ensure the students are succeeding. In addition, I think it is the superintendent’s job to be innovative and flexible. When our leader hears that something is not working, it gets fixed. Our superintendent does a great job of this. If something is not working, we are not going to keep marching with it because it was the superintendent’s idea. Our superintendent is the first person to say, “Stop. Let’s fix this.” I think that is what is necessary at the top, to help the people at the bottom become successful.

According to the data, the superintendent highlighted communication expectations in administrative meetings. “When they come to the table they need to be able to give me an update on the different initiatives and every single principal speaks.” More importantly, the superintendent always concludes with “What supports are needed? What can I help you with?” This conveys the message that there is a reciprocal working relationship. The expectation that everyone will provide honest feedback is seen as a salient factor in building relationships.

The assistant superintendent of elementary schools further elaborated on relationship building through communication,

Communication is really what holds it all together. The infrastructure, in terms of central, has to stay in close contact with the principals so that if something is changing or something is working or not working, we know about it along the way instead of it’s at the very end and we find out it was worthless when it is too late.

Further, these relationships were built on honesty and transparency. “We work very hard with our front line people, like our principals and our front offices to build relationships and trust...when you have to have that hard meeting, it’s not the first one you have,” explained the deputy superintendent of instruction. Honesty is not only used to hold difficult conversations, it is also used to vet ideas to modify program initiatives. This reciprocal exchange is embedded in United PSD’s culture. It was used to ensure instructional programs are being implemented at their optimal level based on constructive feedback.

As an elementary principal explained,

One of the things that I love about United PSD is that we really are feedback based. Feedback is very important. It comes in a non-judgmental form. I want to know. If you come to my campus and you see something good, bad, or indifferent, I really want to know about it because then I can do something about it. That seems to be one of the underlying philosophies in our district. We rely on each other's feedback. We utilize it to make changes or to continue doing things in the right way. If we are getting feedback we see these things are working, we keep them in place. If it is not working or there is a problem, give me that feedback, so that I can do something about it.

For the superintendent, the need for building district-wide communication channels was a priority. The goal was to construct relationships that capitalized on professional expertise to enhance student performance. The superintendent explained,

How can we create a vehicle so that teachers, administrations, and specialists have an opportunity to talk about these things, to share data and to share our best practices and have the candid conversations? "This is not working for me, I cannot do it. I need help." To connect that person with, "You know what, I have had success in this area and this is what I have done," to have those conversations.

Planning and goal setting. The data revealed that the superintendent was seen as a primary actor in setting and overseeing district goals. "While the board provides a

vision and overall goals, the superintendent is the one that oversees it,” explained the deputy superintendent of instruction.

However, planning and goal setting also requires board commitment and oversight. A board member expressed the importance of strategic goal setting:

You have to go back to our vision, our mission, our goals. That’s what we look at as a board. We set those aspirations that are aligned with our vision, mission, and goals. There are no surprises because we go back to those and we’re grounded in those. If you look at what our four goals are, from a profound curriculum, highly-engaged students, high-performing student-focused teachers, and efficiency and effectiveness in operations, and then the quantitative goals that are up under that, that is the superintendent’s road map.

The Superintendent reflected on the importance of goals setting in United PSD: Our district planning process really kicked off my first year here in the Spring.... The board at that time had just wrapped up on a new process where they re-evaluated the vision and mission and goals for the district and that will stand for the board of approval.

The board member also shared that districts with a robust vision, mission, and goals that are applied to district practices are more likely to succeed than the school districts that do not, “I believe this vision, mission, and goal is what drives it. You can see underperforming school districts, you can always go back to the fact that they don’t have robust vision, mission, and goals.”

A nonnegotiable in the district was always honoring the district goals. “If you become flexible with your goal, you don’t really have one. That has been a big key to why we’ve been successful with some of our student groups where historically, that was not always our strength,” expressed the assistant superintendent of elementary schools.

This goal planning process, according to participants, begins with the District Improvement Plan (DIP). The superintendent specified the use of the DIP as,

It is a living, breathing, working documents and I can actually say that because it is revisited many, many, many times during the year in many different avenues.

This is even a bigger, a more global process, than our particular audits.

According to the participants, the DIP had to be relevant to the district mission, vision, and practices and utilized to guide individual Campus Improvement Plans (CIPs) development. An elementary school principal explained,

As a district, as a campus, we are looking at the goals that we have set. We are looking at our District Improvement Plan, our Campus Improvement Plans, and we are always keeping that in mind to make sure that we are meeting those needs of the different groups.

The deputy superintendent supported the planning and goal setting strategy by stating, “All of our schools, their campus improvement plan and they’re very coordinated with needs assessment. They target every weakness they have plus any district priority goal that is set out. The principals know to monitor that.”

The design of the DIP with useful campus integration was by intention. The superintendent solicited proven planning guides to support with its development. The superintendent expanded,

Really, a large part of this document was developed on some of the principles of the TASA visioning document, student engagement, clear and college readiness, digital learning. Those things are embedded within here. There were four goals and it was student engagement, profound curriculum, high performance student focus teachers, and then excellence in operations.

The superintendent also explained the importance of the DIP and how the document is part of her personal board summative evaluation,

In May or June, my evaluation is held. I share with trustees the progress on every single objective and every single activity and strategy within this document. It is part of my evaluation. As part of that evaluation process, the board has an opportunity to identify priority goals that they feel are important for the following years.

It appears that the feedback received during the evaluation process and data from heterogeneous professional forums held during the school year leads strategic planning actions. The superintendent explained,

We take those priority goals and the feedback that came from the district planning committee and we roll that into our planning process, which we call Summer Leadership. It is Summer Leadership that is in July or August, and we

have our principals come in and they bring an instructional leadership team. It is generally their assistants, counselors, specialists, and teachers for their campus.

The first part of Summer Leadership is organized around the goals.

An assistant superintendent of elementary schools agreed with the purpose of Summer Leadership, “the purpose of campus administrator meetings was in part, refocusing on goals.” A middle school strategist further explained,

We have an instructional day for the leadership team before school starts and before all the teachers come back. It’s usually a big and exciting day just because it gets everybody back from the summer and it’s all of the leadership teams from all the secondary campuses. It just gives you a time to sit down as a group again, and think about the coming year, and what is it that we want to be different from the year before. Then there are some things the district wants us, obviously, to address in our CIP.

Data revealed that to promoted a deeper understanding of student academic performance gaps, a summer leadership institute was created to promote data driven decision making. A board member stated, “what everybody talks about is truly, we are committed to data-driven decision making.” The superintendent further explained this Summer Leadership process,

Then the second part of Summer Leadership is using very specific and measurable student performance data. When you go to the back (referencing the DIP), the back is where we have specific goals we set for student performance

specific goals. For each area we have our district data, the number of tests and percent performance, and then what the Texas percent is. We look down here at the bottom the number of goals met over above state and then the percent of the goal. That is STAAR data. Then we also have a very specific measurable plan for graduation rate. What we've got on graduation rate, we've got a snapshot on what the four high schools are, but we don't set goals for the high schools. That is just a data point to figure and give board members and trustees an idea of how we have developed the goals for the district.

The DIP student performance goals were not limited to standardized state assessments and graduation rates; they also included AP scores, ACT scores, and SAT scores. It also appears that such data is used by the board for superintendent performance evaluation purposes. Thus, ensuring the superintendent is engaged in setting instructional goals and planning, and is responsible for student outcomes. The superintendent explained,

I have goals and then at the end of the year I am held accountable for how many are met or are not met by the percent of the goal. We also do that with the dropout rate, ACT, and SAT.

4. What tactics are used by the superintendent to facilitate reducing the achievement gap for African American and Hispanic students? Superintendent tactics were defined as the superintendent's planned specific actions to accomplishing the closing of achievement gaps with African American and Hispanic students. Five themes emerged through examination of the research

reflecting superintendent tactics used to increase student achievement with diverse learners. The five themes were: *being visible and accessible, building trust, sharing accountability, and sustaining a culture of high expectations.* Each of these themes are described below.

Being visible and accessible. The ability to be seen and reached by all stakeholders in the district and beyond emerged from the data as a powerful tactic. According to participants, actions the superintendent used to enhance visibility and accessibility included having open communication, attending district and community events, working late, engaging with plural members of the district and community, and classroom visits. A majority of the participants emphasized that the superintendent was always visible and accessible and each of her actions were enacted with a focus on student outcomes. The superintendent visibility and accessibility was evident in two forums, the district and community.

District visibility and accessibility. Highlighted by the interview participants, superintendent district visibility and accessibility was seen as a primary superintendent tactic in promoting an instructional focus. The assistant superintendent of elementary campuses best stated this sentiment,

You hear people say open door policy. I can open my door all I want, but sometimes I have to go out and get people and pull them in so that they can talk to me. I can say I have an open door but it does not mean 10 teachers from five different campuses are going to come talk to me.

The deputy superintendent of instruction captured the tactic by simply stating, “We’ve learned, after lots of magic bullets, that there isn’t a magic bullet. No one has really truly invented that magic bullet. All we can do is be out there.” Clearly, working out of the office with an open door policy is not enough. It was evident from the data that the superintendent took a proactive approach to consistently have a presence. Aware of the visibility and accessibility, the superintendent explained, “the work of the day got done in late hours and on weekends. I felt like it was very important to get out there, to see, to be seen, to be visible.” By sustaining an ongoing presence throughout the district, the superintendent was able to develop relationships and trust. “My first year when I came onboard in late March, between March and the end of the year, I visited every single class room, every single campus, every single facility in the district.” This practice has continued as the superintendent makes these same visits every semester, “I try to do that in the fall and in the spring, so it takes all year to get out and visit and I generally try to designate a portion of the day on Friday and sometimes on Monday just block out time.”

The superintendent visibility appears to be appreciated by all staff and faculty alike. For instance, an elementary teacher stated, “I can say the superintendent has been in my classroom at least seven times.” This teacher details the experience as the superintendent is,

Just walking through, it is nothing scary. The superintendent comes in, talks to the kids, has fun with us, and I think the superintendent is just very in tune to what is happening in the district and is not somebody that sits at the desk all day.

In addition, the data revealed that by modeling visibility the superintendent has created an expectation for the whole district. “They are always in the schools. Everybody is just always in the schools,” explained an elementary teacher. The elementary teacher stressed the importance of visibility of district and campus leaders in the classroom, “I think everybody here remembers what it’s like to be in the classroom.”

It also appears that visibility of the superintendent at district and campus levels is used to improve instructional performance. A high school principal concurred on visibility and accessibility as instructional tactics, “to improve instruction you ultimately have to be physically getting in the classrooms and participate in grade level meetings, department meetings, and PLC meetings.” Furthermore, this principal reinforced the importance of central administration to engage in the same behaviors, “specialist come out to the campus visiting classrooms for instructional rounds. Instructional rounds are a great way to monitor what’s going on with classrooms.”

The assistant superintendent of elementary schools elaborated, “my executive directors, for example, will go together to a campus, in our own version of instructional rounds...just do observations throughout different classrooms calibrating among themselves.”

Further, a middle school principal provided an account of central office visibility, Central office staff will periodically drop by the campus and sit down and say, “hey let us walk around, let us see what is going on in your classes.” As we walk and talk you can share information about what is going on in your classes, explain how are your students [are] behaving, detail how are they performing,

and what needs your teachers have. They always ask, “What can we do to better support you as you support your campus?” There are many visits.

Visibility and accessibility appear to serve several purposes, in addition to sustaining a reduction of achievement gaps. These tactics have contributed to also provide adequate instructional resources when requested. A principal explained,

When I ask for certain things, it is not just, “I do not really know what you need but okay.” It is more like, “yes, the program that I saw when I visited your campus; I do see that there are needs.”

It appears that district visibility and accessibility aided the walls between central office and campuses to be withdrawn, while establishing confidence that the superintendent and executive team had a true pulse of what was transpiring within the district.

Community visibility and accessibility. Equally as important as district visibility, is the superintendent being highly visible and accessible to the community, enabling a broader audience to have a connection to the district leader and learn about district accolades. United PSD superintendent stated, “One thing that I’ve tried to do is always be one of the biggest advocates for this district. I am out engaging in numerous presentations, meetings, many times a week giving a district update.” In addition, the superintendent is visible to convey district related messages. Initiatives, like the annual district convocation, where all employees of the district come together to kick off a new school year, or the annual state of the district address, where administrators and special guests from the community view a district presentation given by the superintendent, are

means to bring individuals to the district and establish professional rapport. To this end, the state of the district address was modified from a passively sitting session to an engaging round table experience. The fresh design enabled the superintendent to be more accessible to the audience.

“The new format took it down to a much more calm, much more approachable level than the superintendent standing at the front of the room at the podium with a PowerPoint” explained the deputy superintendent of instruction and added. “It just took it down to a conversation like we are having.” In order to optimize visibility, the superintendent does not limit the state of the district presentation to just one. This presentation was also taken to the PTA and Chamber of Commerce. The deputy superintendent of instruction conveyed, “occasionally I’ll be at a chamber meeting where the superintendent will be, making a presentation on the state of the district or something like that.”

According to participants, visibility and accessibility are not limited to superintendent presentations and appearances. The District Improvement Plan is a document used to drive and enhance instructional practices at United PSD, and involved multiple individuals in the review and assessment process to include parents, businessmen, and community members. Through this forum, participants used data provided by the district to evaluate program progress. These individuals participated in the process and gave their input on what measures were needed to meet established goals.

Although the district superintendent does not lead the process, the superintendent is engaged with community representatives. “We went through this very rigorous, a six or nine-month process bringing in all of the stakeholders to talk about what is our vision, our mission and our goals,” explained a board member. This community visibility and accessibility provided an advantage when the district moved to pass a bond in 2011, to provide another source of support for the district to enhance instructional outcomes.

The superintendent highlighted the instructional benefit of the bond, “We had a bond election in May of 2011; 30% of it was for technology. We bought a number of devices and phased it in over a 4-year period, to put devices in the hand of teachers and kids to promote student engagement, active learning, and technological resources.”

In addition, the United PSD superintendent visibility and accessibility appeared to come across as genuine and essential parts of the superintendent leadership style. Visibility and accessibility has given community members a personal connection to the leader, while delivering a deeper level of understanding about district initiatives. The parent volunteer stated,

The superintendent comes to every PTA council board meeting with a district update. The superintendent cannot always stay the whole meeting, but we also have two principal representatives assigned every year by the superintendent that attend our council board meetings and report on what is going on in the secondary and the elementary level, which is huge. It is huge a benefit.

It is evident from the data that the superintendent used these appearances to also gather community input on their perceptions of the district. The Superintendent emphasized,

I also met with city council and city managers and city leaders and... I just wanted to get a sense of what the district was like. To me, being out, being visible was a huge part of what you do and it is a great way to pick up in a non-formal way, but a very authentic way what is really going on.

The data also revealed that superintendent visibility and accessibility are used to connect and engage with all stakeholders, from city council members to business leaders and parents. As a parent volunteer put these actions in its simplest terms by affirming, “It is just that grass roots around here.”

Building trust. The data revealed that the superintendent was intentional in building trust to completely assure reliance and certitude regarding the character, capacity, strength, dedication, and truth of everyone involved in the district. Furthermore, according to participant comments, trusting was highly valued, expected, and practices within the district and the larger community.

Further, the superintendent’s efforts to gain and maintain trust throughout the district was well known by the district executive team, campus leaders and teachers, as well as by parents. The data clearly revealed that building and maintaining trust required time and constant engagement, reminders and modeling through specific actions. It is worth noting that the majority of the interviewed participants felt that success started with strong central leadership and the superintendent was seen as the primary driver of

the district team. Words to describe the superintendent tactics of building trust were: support, safety, nonjudgmental, protect, positive climate, honesty, and trust. The assistant superintendent of elementary education explained how the building trust tactic positively contributed to student success,

You can meet with people and be visible, but you have to allow for opposing viewpoints...that just builds the trust along the way so when there are some of those bumpy moments, we still stay focused on the student success.

The superintendent expanded and detailed how trust enabled all team members to ask for support, with total security.

They have seen tangible evidence and never, ever, have I utilized something that came up, that they've shared with me, to go back or to put them in a tough situation or an I got you position. I have protected them from that, but I have addressed issues that have been present. I think that they feel that they can trust me, that I'm going to do what I said I'm going to do, that I'm not going to put them at a bad spot.

The superintendent further explained how trust also contributes to positive dialogue,

I have tried to do that and I have tried to form healthy relationships with the easy conversations as well as the hard conversations. I have had many conversations with people who were struggling at different points in their life. I think they leave with their head up rather than their head down because I try to point out positive things and things that they can do to improve and tell them what I

appreciate about them, or tell them that I believe in them and that they can do this.

Modeling by the superintendent, trust also aides to promote confidence from campus teachers and other administrators within the district. As an elementary teacher reinforced the superintendent's building trust tactic,

There are many people saying, "I am not here to judge you, and I'm here to help." Just that trust, I feel like in my campus, we do many activities to get to trust each other and get to know each other. I know if the Math specialist is coming in my classroom, she is not going to report anything and say, "Oh, she didn't challenge the kids enough." I mean, it is never anything intimidating. It is just very, very open. I think that just goes back to the principals creating a positive climate. I think they do a really good job of that.

Similarly, trust appears to be evident between district team members and campus principals. The assistant superintendent of elementary schools spoke about having trust with campus administrators,

The principal knew that it was okay to tell me her thoughts about this benchmark and maybe some other questions [he or she] did not think were very fair. She knew I was not going to just run back and tell my boss. It was a dialog.

A parent also expressed how trust created honest communication with central office administrators to help solve campus related issues.

Before school, we had a little meeting with a central administrator. We had some issues. I said, “I could tell you a lot of things about your schools.” I hear it differently. I also feel like as someone who is a teacher, I see it differently too. Not just as a parent, because that is the wrong word, but a parent who has not seen the other side of it.

As part of gaining and sustaining trust, the superintendent also hosts Parent Advisory Committees. This committee brings in parents from every campus and addresses their concerns. What is unique about this advisory committee is the meeting minutes are coded to become a Frequently Asked Question (FAQ) document that is posted on the website, bringing a new level of transparency on the discussions and providing information on how the district is handling the matters. A parent on the committee described the process,

The district has on their website an FAQ page and for as long as I’ve been involved. In fact, I was the PAC rep for a couple of years. Administration would post the questions that were asked at these meetings, but it was in a PDF format on the website, and it was meeting-specific. If a parent came to you and said, “I have a question about boy’s cross-country, why isn’t it being offered in the junior highs?” If you wanted to find out if that answer had already been discussed or that question had already been discussed, you would have to go through every one of those PDFs to find it and odds are you were not going to do that. The district took all of those, this summer, and put them into the actual FAQ web page and organized them by topic. It allowed the superintendent, another

parent, and me to sit down and look at what the questions have been in the past and evaluate if there was an area that has not been covered. Was there something that has happened in the past six months that we feel like parents maybe did not quite understand or their needs to be more communication about?

Having a transparent process in addressing parental concerns appears to promote parents' familiarity and knowledge regarding how the district handles critical situations, building trust with parents, which has resulted in fewer parents vocalizing similar concerns.

Addressing concerns is accomplished in a diplomatic, supportive, and trusting environment. A high school math teacher explained it best when describing a person not meeting expectations and how trusting in administration support leads the person in question to the desired expectation,

If you are not where you think you should be, or your principal thinks you should be, there are ways to get you there, instead of hammer down, you are in trouble. "What is wrong with your scores?" It is not that way. It's, "hey, there is a five day conference coming up this summer, let us hit that. College Board is providing a 2-day update conference. Hey, you can go over to another high school and watch Mr. Smith and I will pay for your sub."

The same teacher also illustrated how profound the effect of trust was given her scope of work and how it contributed to enhance student performance,

All the teachers that I know and talk to, they have just a perfect relationship with them (specialists). It's completely removed from PDAS, and they know that if I need help, I'm calling Jane or I'm calling, whoever it is, and I'm going to see if they'll come sit with me in class, and just watch my lesson, and give me some feedback that has no repercussions at all. They're simply there to help. The feedback on that has been 100% positive, that I have heard. I would say, and I would give that same feedback that having those campus specialists, it allows the curriculum director to do their job effectively.

Further, a middle school principal explained the benefits of these professional trust practices,

In my opinion, that is why teachers are happy and love working in United PSD. They are given the tools that they need at a rate in which they can understand it; they can digest it; they can take their time and integrate that into what they are doing.

However, trust took a deeper level. According to teachers, district leaders are seen as working just as hard as the teachers, thus gaining trust at the campus level. An elementary teacher detailed this feeling,

I have heard that the superintendent is the first to arrive, the last to leave, which I appreciate because the teachers are working really, really hard. If you know someone in admin is working hard with you, it just helps. It makes you feel a lot better about all the time you put it in and knowing that somebody is not just

leaving 3:00. It means a lot, because I think many people get into management roles and they think, “Oh, I can sit back. I don’t have to do anything.” It is not like that here at all.

Furthermore, district administrators conveyed that they do not feel the need to spearhead initiatives alone, as they prefer and trust group actions in initiating evaluating or supporting instructional programs and initiatives. “I think that instead of the focus on a person, the focus was on instruction, so that whomever assumes the role of executive director, assistant superintendent, superintendent, it became the way we are in United PSD,” expressed the assistant superintendent of elementary schools. This leader further illustrated how much such individuals are trusted,

What I would do is pull together my support group, so to speak. It sounds funny, but the people who I work with and I supervise are ultimately the people who are going to be impacted by my thinking. If I am thinking this is a quality program to help with extending the curriculum or enriching it or whatever, it is not really an isolated decision. I would pull in, for example, the curriculum and instruction department, or a curriculum director specifically if it is reading or math or science. I would still pull in the executive directors for instruction and operations because those are the folks who work with the principals. I would take a step back. I honestly wouldn’t be in that proposal or information meeting with the vendor or the product, so to speak, by myself.

These professional trusting practices are also extended to the principals. A middle school principal described how the district allowed the campuses to have a balance of mandatory initiatives with optional initiatives based on campus needs,

We are not micromanaged to the point in which if I have some specific things that I feel I need to do on my campus, because that might not be the same in other campus, then I have the ability and freedom to do so with my campus. We have a menu of options for our teachers, some are mandatory, and some are optional. If I feel you need to know more about differentiated instruction and some strategies to use in class then that is what I'll consider a mandatory session. If you want to learn more about Google sites or how to use Google classroom for electronic submission of work, et cetera, then you can choose that optional session.

With so much district participation in district initiatives, the superintendent was careful when evaluating the work and progress of these initiatives. The superintendent did not want to give the impression that the work did not meet central administrations' expectations, did not want to damage any trust afforded to the staff, and wanted the process to be as objective as possible. To ensure a collective trust was maintained, the superintendent systematically has external audits conducted on curriculum and instruction initiatives. The superintendent illustrated this tactic,

We actually used external consultants to come in because we have people, we have directors, [and] we have an elementary and secondary director in each of the core areas. They are responsible for any curriculum changes, working with

our principles, our specialist, our teachers, providing the professional development. We actually wanted some more validity to the process, so we engaged external audits and actually worked with TASA to get a name of who could help...in terms of our ELA and social studies curriculum for special programs. We did some research in national firms on two of them and regent service center on one of them.

The superintendent, further, explained that trusting the community allows addressing concerns in a timely fashion. For instance, a parent concern triggered one of the audits, For special programs, we just had some concerns that were bubbling up from parents about services and what we were providing and timelines and identification criteria. We were in compliance but felt like we could do more to move forward with those practices.

The data revealed that building and sustaining trust take time and collective efforts from all. The superintendent details how the honest and open dialogue practices have evolved over time and is a result of building a trusting environment,

The first year, administrators, were a little hesitant to be frank and candid. Now they know it is not about, "I am going to get you for that." It is about, "How can we support you better?" They are very honest about, "This is a struggle, been struggling with this" and the rest of them say, "We are too." Or, it may be that only one or two people are struggling in an area. Then you have all these other principles that have success stories.

While trust was valued and practiced throughout the district and campuses, the superintendent was very explicit about ensuring that the present study did not attribute the development of trust only to district leadership. The superintendent was adamant that all accolades were a result of the efforts of every member of the district. The superintendent did not want to violate the trust that all accolades were created to do what is best for students, not for personal attention.

Sharing accountability. It appears from the data that responsibility with consequences is not only expected and practiced by the superintendent alone. On the contrary, it is collective as the superintendent is seen sharing accountability with all stakeholders. Participants continually spoke about the superintendent's tactic of shared accountability. When describing the actions of the superintendent, words such as mutual ownership, shared responsibility, and partnership emerged. "When I came onboard it was putting that to work and being involved in it and getting my ownership in it as well and getting a lot of our district involved in it," the superintendent explained on the importance of creating a culture of shared accountability. As mentioned earlier, the superintendent was wary of this study potentially undermining the efforts made to create a team atmosphere and the sense of ownership in the instructional practices that were used to reduce achievement gaps. However, the vast majority of the interviewed participants frankly stated that the primary instructional driver was the superintendent and the tactic of sharing accountability was instrumental in the closing of achievement gaps with African American and Hispanic student populations.

According to the data, it appears that shared accountability is practiced both horizontally and vertically. A high school principal expressed how shared accountability is permeated between the board of trustees and the superintendent,

I think ultimately, it is a shared responsibility between our board members and our superintendent. Our board members should feel accountable for our scores as well because they are making a lot of critical calls and votes. The superintendent provides direction for the board, provides information for the board, fits the right people on the bus, that sort of thing.

In addition, participants were also quick to detail how in United PSD, everyone has a role and is responsible for closing achievement gaps.

An elementary teacher said it best,

I think everybody is responsible. I mean, I think the students are responsible. It starts from the very, very bottom level. I feel like the students are... They are responsible for their own learning. They have to have that motivation, and it is my job to build that motivation. I think, at every step, it just gets bigger, and bigger, and bigger all the way up to the superintendent.

It seems like, United PSD was not always a district that exhibited shared accountability and was not always as united. The assistant superintendent expressed that dissension occurred in the past, “what I remember as a principal at the time was that we had two very distinct parts of town.” He continued,

The resources that you would need at your campus could be vastly different compared to another campus with some students coming in pre-educated and can pass the test without even trying. That left you to your own devices. You just try to find a way to make it work. That was not a district perspective. That was an individual campus perspective... We had 41 elementary schools or however many we had at the time. That was a recipe for disaster... The culture change of everybody doing their own thing had to be broken down and that came with some bumps and bruises along the way too.

The deputy superintendent of instruction described the general feelings of discomfort when the district moved toward unification and shared accountability, “what we had was many little fiefdoms in the district. We pulled all of that in. At first, that was a negative thing because nobody wants to give up their kingdom.” She continued on the instructional program transition from a mandated, scripted curriculum towards a shared instructional planning document process.

I will tell you something that happened and it surprised us all. You know how I told you we got a lot more directive with pacing guides and year at a glance. We laid it out. Here are your resources. Teachers chafed a little bit, at feeling that they were not able to bring their skills and gifts into their classroom. Four or five years down the line, people would come to us and say, “You know, I think we got the teachers. We’ve got this system.” And principals would say it, “We’ve got this system down. I think we can step back a little bit from the lockstep.” We were able to do that.

The sentiment, expressed by the deputy superintendent of instruction during the interview, reflects how accountability evolved from an individual to a collective responsibility, “we also feel like we have professionals. That is their job to do, and we do not want to step on their toes.”

Further, the assistant superintendent of elementary schools elaborated on the instructional benefit of a district with united accountability standards,

It is a collective responsibility. Again, it goes back to I think how we have evolved. When we had east side, west side, we had individual school districts.

We had individual campus school districts. For our more affluent campuses, they did not have to worry about testing. Their kids are performing well. They did not have low SES. They did not have a lot of ethnic diversity. They were just coasting...even though students deserve to be pushed and they need to make progress. But at the time, that is, [this is] why we had such a wide gap between our student demographic groups and our economically disadvantaged groups.

When we pushed that focus on every campus on instruction, it benefits everybody regardless of your status. If you are a high SES, when we focused on instruction, you benefited.

This associate superintendent also delineated on how the superintendent tactic of sharing accountability permeated throughout the district, “It is everyone, because if I narrow it down to an individual, then I would worry that it appears as though everyone else is responsible to a point and then it’s all on you.”

A high school principal's perceptions on the sharing responsibility tactic was, "the reality of it, it's a shared responsibility. Oftentimes I feel I am in charge of their success, but I do that because I feel like I should be." These ownership conversations occur within the organization.

An elementary principal detailed a conversation with her supervisor on a campus incident on how she embraced shared responsibility,

This responsibility question, this exact question, came up two weeks ago where there was a little issue on my campus and my executive director said to me, "who is responsible for this?" I said to him I am. I am the principal.

Although, there are collective sentiments on high levels of professional ownership on closing achievement gaps with African American and Hispanic students, organizational charts were redefined and scheduled meetings were incorporated into the teachers' schedules to amplify efforts and sustain the culture of shared responsibility. A parent expressed confidence in the recent personnel reorganization, "I think this re-organization takes us in a better direction, even more than we had before."

A high school principal explained that the reorganization of central office roles and responsibilities will enhance shared accountability, "now, we have a specific executive director that supports junior high and a specific executive director that supports high school. A much more intelligent system because you're treating each level differently because they are different."

The deputy superintendent offered details on how the reorganization of the central office instructional support personnel will further develop shared accountability to further reduce achievement gaps,

I have an elementary assistant superintendent and I have a secondary. They have executive directors that are boots on the ground at the schools. Elementary has three executive directors and they have either 13 or 14 schools each. They also are working with elementary curriculum directors, teacher leaders; we call them cluster specialists, at the elementary level. These individuals can be deployed out to where we feel like we need content area strengthening, or we have a new teacher who is struggling. They provide tons of professional development throughout the year, whether it is embedded through rolling staff meetings, or however it is done. The secondary level, she has two executive directors. One of them focuses on junior high and the other one focuses on high school. They have a specialist who they can deploy out and use them where we might have struggles. Even though those people are deployable, they also have their own schools that they are responsible for embedded staff development and all. In addition to the curriculum we developed, the strategies we've developed around the curriculum, the pacing guides, the resources that we provide, you've got these humans that can go out there and make sure that everybody knows what's what and can implement with fidelity.

Shared accountability for these instructional strategies are embedded within the teacher workday. The goal is to sustain collaboration, continuity, consistency, and collective accountability.

The high school principal also expressed certainty with how embedded time is sustaining shared accountability tactic,

We have common unit assessments that we encourage teachers and PLCs to manipulate to meet their needs. Project Based Learning [is] also built-in. You have many options as far as resources for teachers to use. The other thing I think you get is buy-in from teachers because they are actively participating and tweaking it and making edits to it and actually writing it.

A middle school strategist expressed her satisfaction with the PLC initiative, “Two or three years ago is when they really started PLCs, and every year we are getting better and better and better at it. That is one of my favorite meetings during the week.” She also voiced that PLCs are necessary since “we are not independent. They’re looking at all of us together” in terms of assessment accountability and reducing achievement gaps.

The deputy superintendent best framed it when she spoke of the impact the sharing accountability tactic has on the current culture at United PSD, “It's not about you. It's about us.”

Sustaining the culture of high expectations. The final superintendent tactic that emerged from the data is sustaining a culture of high expectations through ongoing support and upholding expectations for all to maintain the district level of excellence.

Although the superintendent's tenure, at the time of this study, was four and a half years, the culture of high expectations was set within the district. It was the superintendent's goal to maintain this level of excellence, and the goal was met through purposeful superintendent actions and collective efforts from the executive team. Evidence of this tactic, through the data analysis, was found in participants' descriptors such as: how the superintendent has maintained district success, how the district continues to evolve, and that the district remains in the forefront. The superintendent's efforts to hold up high expectations were well known to the community as well. For instance, parents were aware of how the district was prior to the superintendent entering and how, with tactical precision, district-wide excellence was maintained. A parent volunteer stated,

A child is going to be as successful as you expect them to be. They are going to live up to the expectation you put upon them. We say that about students all the time, but I think it works all the way down. You are only going to be as successful as you are expected to be. If you are expected to be academically unacceptable or you are expected to be, "Oh, they're just that way," then that is how you are going to be.

This parent volunteer expanded about the district historically having high expectations,

It has always been here as part of this district and that is its greatness. I mentioned before, for many years, the district was somewhat not realizing or not seeing the change in diversity. However, I think the benefit part of that they always had a high expectation for kids.

The progress made in closing achievement gaps in United PSD is a testament to this statement of maintaining the district's tradition of success with all students. It starts with expectations for all, the deputy superintendent expressed, "First of all, we clearly communicate that failure is not an option. There are no excuses for any kid. There are high expectations for all."

Further, a board member explained when the culture of high expectation began with a long tenured superintendent,

The superintendent, back then, as the district started to change, I will never forget in a speech, she said, we will have high expectations for all students and we will have high academic achievement for all students. All students can learn and achieve at a high level. She put her stake in the sand and really drew a line in the sand and said, this is the way it is going to be. That has really been our guide. We are talking almost 20 years ago. From there, we have a saying that we like to use in our district, all means all, not all means some.

The assistant superintendent of elementary schools also recalled how a different former superintendent set the stage for a district culture of high expectations,

The superintendent knew that there is really no excuse for the district of our size, of our reputation and resources to not be a recognized district, not just in a sense of TAKS at the time but just recognized for being a trendsetter.

It appears from the data that a high expectations spirit remained in the district regardless of changes in central office leadership. As the assistant superintendent explained, "We

have had superintendents, different superintendents since. The expectation is the same. This is it. In our minds, we see ourselves as a premier district with a diverse population and that is what makes us so awesome.” The significance of these statements is that there is a tradition of superintendents as the primary actors in setting high instructional expectations from to the mid 1990s, to the current superintendent, in 2014. The district employees hold themselves to a high standard and expect district-wide consistent and clear communication. The assistant superintendent reinforced high expectations with communication must, “continue without sacrificing the expectations, and the same time supporting along the way.” This established in United PSD, a culture of high expectations is just as important as providing effective communication and supporting resources and structures.

It is also apparent from the data that high expectations go beyond the district level and are highly regarded at both campus and classroom levels. The deputy superintendent spoke about the established expectations of *all means all* when servicing student needs, “Remember we built a culture where, whatever the kids need, we may need to make a U-turn. That’s what we’re going to do and we’re going to do it fast because kids don’t have time to lose a year.” The deputy further stated, “What was going to have to work for us is hard work and systems to help people get kids moving forward,” setting the expectation of the workforce in both energy and plan execution.

A middle school teacher also supported the tactic of holding high expectations by saying, “[I] think the greatest outcome is, I think you can’t be a slacker teacher in our

district.” Similarly, an elementary school teacher noted how high expectations permeate throughout the district including campuses,

I set my expectations for my students. I have very high expectations. I think, again, they trickle down; my principal has very high expectations, and her boss, then all the way up. The State of Texas has high expectations. We all know that. Sometimes a little ridiculous, but that is what it is. We have to do it. I just think everybody’s setting high expectations.

These expectations contributed to district-wide positive student academic results and facilitated a collective buy-in to maintaining excellence. A high school principal explained why positive student achievement has continued, “I think that has sustained because we have experienced some success during that time and success tastes and feels good. That accountability and that success, we have not wanted to deviate from.”

The current superintendent immediately discovered that a culture of high expectations for everyone in the school district was already in place, regardless of the diversity of the students, when first she became the district leader. The superintendent explained,

As different cultures and populations from all over the world have moved here, it has been seen as strength. People have embraced diversity and seen that as a value, working with all kids. You do not find that everywhere. I think initially there just some of the changes, but, there were no excuses, no resentment, it (diversity) was embraced.

As a result, upholding a culture of high expectations became the superintendent focus and included all the various instructional programs and initiatives. For instance, a high school teacher spoke on present district expectations on college readiness exams,

We have an AP (Advanced Placement) expectation. We expect 90% of our kids that go through an AP class, to sit for the AP exam. We expect 50% of those kids to make a qualifying score or higher. The district does have an expectation.

This high school math teacher described how the district established systematic processes to evaluate the progress toward meeting expectations. One of the processes, called *teacher checks*, evolved from district-wide benchmarks. He further described the evolution of the assessment process while sustaining high expectations,

At first, when we called them (district-wide content assessments) benchmarks, a long time ago. When I first came here in 99, we did not benchmark anything. We had the TAAS (Texas Assessment of Academic Skills, back then. TAAS then moved to TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills). We did benchmarks very soon after that, and those were gotchas. The teachers knew it. Being a teacher, and, obviously, if you knew a benchmark was coming, and that it was going to be a gotcha kind of benchmark, you were going to prep your kids for that as best you could. I took a benchmark, and my kids didn't do very well on it, I got yelled at, sort of. It did happen. Then, in 2000, I still had that TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills) check from the previous year, so I would teach to that test, to make sure my kids were successful, because I did not want to be yelled at. What evolved from that was, we are going to get people in the

help that are not people that evaluate you. We call them teach checks. That is where we are checking periodically. Every campus, every school, will take an Algebra 1 teach check. There is not necessarily a passing rate for that. What we do look at, or what the district does look at, is the levels. If we are all about the same level, we are still going to have the conversation about, how could we get better? But, if there is a gap, that is when you're going to have, "Now we need to talk."

Further, in order to motivate the district of high expectations, the superintendent built on district accolades. Using such recognitions, the superintendent was able to maintain expectations in a nonthreatening manner.

It was evident through the participant responses that the superintendent entered a district with the cultural mindset that all students will learn, regardless of their race, creed, or economic status. It apparently takes a unique leadership skill ensuring the sustaining of this mindset. The superintendent understood the culture of high expectations and used a belief system to not only sustain the high expectations, but also to redefine the focus of instruction. The superintendent added, "The culture and the expectations and the importance of relationships are some of the driving pieces that are embedded and threaded throughout the culture here." However, the superintendent felt that there was too much focus on rote-learning and moved to focusing more on impactful and engaging instructional strategies,

We had conversations about, "Okay that's a given, that we are going to be held accountable for the state assessment. We know that it is a 1-year; a 1-day

snapshot on our effectiveness and it may or may not accurately represent what we are doing. What can we do in spite of that to promote student engagement in the classroom (The superintendent would ask)?” Everything was too regimented, all the districts are teaching to the test, and teachers don not have the freedom to do the things they used to do, it is not fun teaching anymore or it is all watered down. All our conversations went into that (making the mission work) in 2011. We were really set about making our mission work, “What can we do around that to promote engagement and have continuous improvement? That is when we brought in and researched enrichment clusters of the elementary level. Then the following year we started to work with project base learning at a secondary level.

By sustaining a culture of high expectations, the superintendent was able to aim to achieve the STAAR Index 4: Post-secondary Readiness distinction for over 70% of the campuses.

The superintendent recounted a conversation that further inspired the sustaining of high expectations. “The deputy superintendent of instruction also told me, when I first came, that failure is not an option. We meet our kids head on wherever they are, whatever their needs are, and that is what we have built.” Such inspiration and the contributions of the district team set the stage for the superintendent’s actions to reflect the maintenance of the district’s culture of high expectations.

Theoretical Framework Findings

For the purpose of this study, Bolman and Deal’s (2012) organizational framework was used to further analyze the data. This framework places organizations

into four distinctive categories: structural, human resource, political, and symbolic. The structural frame encompasses organizational design and structure.

This structural framework emphasizes organizational design and structures. When applying this framework it was apparent from the data that the role and responsibility of the superintendent has evolved to become an instructional leadership role, which created shared accountability throughout the district. Furthermore, the creation of a program evaluation system is also aligned with this framework. In addition, the strategy of planning and goal setting also reflects what this framework spouses for organizations to maximize student achievement outcomes.

The human resource frame explores the intersection of people within the organization assumes that positive interpersonal working dynamics may influence the success of an institution. Reviewing the data suggests that the superintendent has strong focus on human resources by relationship building, trust building, and being visible and accessible in order to enhance the human capital of the district.

Finally, the symbolic frame outlines the cultural elements defining the organization through myths, heroes, rituals, and ceremonies. The symbolic frame is central to the definition of an organization's purpose and performance. In applying this framework to the findings of the present study, it was discovered that the strong student centered belief system is in concert with one of the attributes of the symbolic framework, mainly beliefs of the individuals of an organization. The overarching goal of this frame is to create a culture that bonds people through a uniform goal, mission, and

identity. Evidence of these frames was found in this study in sustaining a culture of high expectations.

While the findings of this study echo the organizational framework as advanced by Bolman and Deal (2012), to some extent, it is imperative to note that not all four categories were reflected in the findings of this study. Furthermore, it is apparent from the comparative analysis that the two most pertinent frameworks found in the United PSD are human resources and symbolic.

Summary

United PSD serves a culturally diverse student population of over 35,000 students, which reflects the state of Texas' demographic average. In 2014, it was one of only four districts in Texas that received an Index 4 distinction of Post-secondary Readiness that served diverse student populations and economically disadvantaged rates reflecting the state average. This study was conducted to identify the superintendent's instructional roles, systems, strategies, and practices that led to reducing achievement gaps with African American and Hispanic students.

Data gathered through the research process revealed that the superintendent's role in reducing achievement gaps with diverse learners was as an instructional leader. The systems used by the superintendent to close achievement gaps were program evaluation system and student centered belief systems. Strategies related to the superintendent improving academic performance with all learners including building relationships and planning and goal setting. Superintendent tactics related to reducing achievement gaps with African American and Hispanic students were: being visible and

accessible, building trust, sharing accountability, and sustaining a culture of high expectations.

While it appears that the district has made instructional gains in closing achievement gaps with African American and Hispanic students, evident through receiving an Index 4 distinction, each participant stated that they were not satisfied with this progress and will continue to evaluate instructional effectiveness to further reduce achievement gaps.

Chapter Six: Summary of Findings, Conclusions, and Implications

Introduction

Ultimately...the buck stops here. But I see it, as it is all of us. It is our teachers in the classroom, it is our specialist, it is our principals, it is our directors, our coordinators, and our assistants. Everyone knows that they are in those positions because they have been entrusted with helping our district as a whole, meet the goals, and to move forward and to support instruction.

Superintendent, United Public School District, 2014

This chapter presents a summary of this qualitative, phenomenological study. It is organized in three parts. First, an overview of the study is presented including: restatement of the problem, purpose, research questions, and methodology. Second, this chapter provides the summary of findings, offers an account of each research questions and connections to the extant literature, followed by prepositions advanced by this study. Third, implications for practice and further research are offered.

Overview of the Study

Few studies of the superintendent have focused on his or her capacity to lead a district to achieve high level of academic attainment for diverse learners (Lashway, 2002; Ragland, Asera, & Johnson, 1999; Waters & Marzano, 2006). However, the intricacies and complexities of being a superintendent have not been fully addressed.

According to Olivárez (2013), facilitating the learning process while yielding positive achievement results is a task that involves three of the ten functions of public

school leadership, namely curriculum and instruction, elementary and secondary campus operations, and instructional support services.

Although these three instructional capacities are essential, the remaining seven functions (governance operations; human resources; accountability, information, management and technology services; administrative, finance, and business operations; facilities planning and plant services; external and internal communications; and operational support systems) often take much needed time and attention away from instruction (Fuller et al., 2003; Lashway, 2002; Waters & Marzano, 2007). Yet, there are studies revealing the positive impact a superintendent and central office executives can have on student achievement through a centrally focused instructional design (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2001; Fullan, Bertani, & Quinn, 2004; O'Doherty & Ovando, 2009; Price, 2007; Snipes & Casserly, 2004). There are also emerging studies on the role of the superintendent in closing achievement gaps with diverse learners (Harris, 2014; Mora, 2010; Price, 2007; Waters & Marzano, 2006; Wright & Harris, 2010). Lessons learned from these studies on how district-wide reform can facilitate reducing achievement gaps include: building instructional leadership and teaching capacity through professional learning communities (Fullan et al., 2004; O'Doherty, 2007; O'Doherty & Ovando, 2009), the creation of a shared vision that is the anchor for instructional decisions (Skrla et al., 2000; Waters & Marzano, 2006), a collaborative culture focused on results (Fullan et al., 2004; Harris D., 2014; Price, 2007; Snipes & Casserly, 2004; Wright & Harris S., 2010), and supplying the resources needed to facilitate the teaching and learning exchange (Fullan et al., 2004; Snipes & Casserly, 2004).

Restatement of the Problem

Previous research suggested that the superintendent might significantly contribute to reducing the existing achievement gaps. However, it is noted that additional research should be conducted in other districts. In addition, others have focused specifically on the role of the superintendent in closing achievement gaps in culturally diverse districts (Price, 2007; Waters & Marzano, 2006), as well as, the role of the superintendent in reducing achievement gaps in small Texas school districts (Harris & Wright, 2010). Yet, others have focused on the role of the superintendent in narrowing the learning gap between African American and Caucasian students (Harris D., 2014). However, these studies did not focus on closing achievement gaps with African American and Hispanic students and did not examine the superintendent's role from those working with this leader in the school district and community they serve. Further, the systems, strategies, and tactics used by the superintendents have not been examined and shared so current and aspiring superintendents can learn and emulate actions that have facilitated reducing of the achievement gap at the district-wide level.

Purpose of the Study

In an era of public school accountability, superintendents must have the instructional leadership precision and skill to effectively sustain student achievement systematically across the entire district (Harris D., 2014; Price, 2007; Waters & Marzano, 2006; Wright & Harris S., 2010), but specific information related to this instructional leadership domain in closing achievement gaps for African American and Hispanic students is limited. Therefore, the purpose of this phenomenological case study

was to determine the specific role of the superintendent to provide a district-wide learning improvement to reduce achievement gaps. In addition, this study explored systems, strategies, and tactics a superintendent used to increase student academic achievement for diverse learners, specifically African American and Hispanic students.

Research Questions

The case study examined a single Texas public school district superintendent with tenure of at least three years. This district was selected due to the progress made in reducing achievement gaps, for students resembling Texas' enrollment demographic.

Therefore, the research was guided by the following questions:

1. What is the role of the superintendent in reducing the achievement gap for African American and Hispanic students?
2. What systems did the superintendent create to reduce the achievement gap for African American and Hispanic students?
3. What strategies does the superintendent use to create a system-wide culture that is responsive to reducing the achievement gap for African American and Hispanic students?
4. What tactics are used by the superintendent to facilitate reducing the achievement gap for African American and Hispanic students?

Methodology

The study employed using a qualitative methodology with a single case study design using a phenomenological approach. The bounded system for the case study was a single school district located in Texas. The case site was a Texas public school district

with student demographics that closely resemble the state average within +/- 15% of Hispanic and Economically Disadvantaged enrollment and +10% in African American enrollment. The district received a performance distinction on Index 4 – post secondary readiness, on the state accountability index, and the superintendent had at least three years tenure in the district. The purposefully selected participants included the superintendent and two central office members. The remaining participants were selected through referral sampling, as the researcher asked the district superintendent to supply names of principals, a board member, teachers, and parents involved in the district instructional design. The total of 12 participants consisted of the superintendent, two central office administrators, three principals (a representative from elementary, middle, and high school), three teachers (a representative from elementary, middle, and high school), a board member, and two parents or community volunteer representatives. Data was collected through interviews with each selected participant, and review of selected historical and documents available at the time of the study.

Findings

This section offers a summarized account of the findings, to address each research question. These are followed by connections to the literature.

The role of the superintendent in reducing the achievement gap for African American and Hispanic students. Results from this study strongly suggest that the district superintendent had a vital instructional leadership role in facilitating district-wide student academic achievement. The ultimate purpose of this role is to cultivate trust to empower instructional teams to effectively enhance the learning environment for

the betterment of all students. To this end, the superintendent collaboratively creates and approves instructional initiatives to enhance student performance; promotes academic success for diverse students; understands instructional outcomes; embraces data driven decision making; focuses on College and Career Readiness; curricular framework expertise; and integrates instructional planning models. The role of the superintendent in Unified PSD's academic success has lead to the closing of achievement gaps with African American and Hispanic students suggests that the district leader has a significant role in district-wide student achievement. This finding supports research from Price (2007), and Waters and Marzano (2006) that the superintendent is a driver of district-wide instructional improvement and a vital actor in the process. Furthermore, findings suggest that the superintendent does not act alone. The executive team and others contribute to efforts to introduce change and reform needed to enhance all student academic success. This is congruent with the assertion of Fullan et al. (2004) that in order for a district to successfully achieve district-wide reform, "district leaders must build a coalition of leaders who pursue the vision in practice. Like distributed leadership at the school level, large scale reform requires pluralized leadership, with teams of people creating and driving a clear, coherent strategy" (p. 43). Therefore, the superintendent relies on different teams and plural coalitions found within the district and community, to effectively execute the instructional changes and initiatives in an effort to meet desired outcomes.

The superintendent, as an instructional leader, becomes the primary driver, in facilitating the reducing of achievement gaps with diverse learners and accelerating

student achievement. This is consistent of prior research by Harris (2014), O'Doherty (2007), Price (2007), Waters and Marzano (2006), and Wright and Harris (2010) linked the superintendent's instructional leadership as a primary driver for reducing district-wide achievement gaps with diverse learners. While the instructional role of the superintendent has been established it is important to note that the superintendent leadership is multidimensional and might include roles such as political, managerial, and educational (Johnson, 1996).

Systems used by the superintendent to reduce a system-wide culture that is responsive to closing the achievement gap for African American and Hispanic students. Results from this study suggest that the superintendent created and support two district-wide systems; a program evaluation system and a student centered belief system.

The program evaluation system included, but was not limited to: The creation of consistent assessments of the district's effectiveness to meet the district vision, mission, and goals; use of data from surveys; informal conversations; formal town hall meetings; and student academic data, outside auditing agency; internal auditing processes; feedback loops; and measurement outcomes that directly lead to the reducing of achievement gaps and were primarily related to Bolman and Deal's (2012) Structural Frame. Findings also reflect the planning components of the Planning Cycle Continuum (See Figure 2). Furthermore, this finding is congruent with Yukl's (2012) assertion that the assessment of outcomes should have a continual evaluation process as a regular part of the planning process. In fact, Skrla et al. (2000) showcased how Texas districts that

were closing achievement gaps had comprehensive monitoring systems that closely collected and interpreted data to gauge effectiveness. It was also noted that the superintendents of these school districts regularly discussed the results in leadership meetings to further promote reform efforts and in turn, these leaders had the same conversations with those they supervised. The monitoring, or constant evaluation, of instructional programs, systems, and practices allowed the organization to drive improvement efforts (Skrla et al., 2000). The superintendent of United PSD utilized monitoring systems to enhance instructional outcomes that lead to the closing of achievement gaps for African American and Hispanic students.

The student centered belief system included, but were not limited to: A strong focus on district collective student body; executive decisions made with student needs in mind; high expectations for all students; and a collective unified voice to address every child's academic, emotional, and social needs. This echoes previous notions that by keeping a strong focus on students' needs, school districts can ensure quality education for all students (Owen & Ovando, 2009). Furthermore, the findings of this study associated with student centered progress is in concert with previous research in that district leadership, which keeps students' success as a primary goal, make progress in closing achievement gaps (O'Doherty, 2007). This system reflects Bolman and Deal's (2012) symbolic frame in that the belief that all students can be successful is an important part of the district culture.

Strategies used by the superintendent to reduce the achievement gap for African American and Hispanic students. Results from this study depict the district

superintendent as a primary actor in utilizing instructional leadership strategies such as: relationship building and planning and goal setting. According to others (Owen & Ovando, 2009) forming positive and productive relationships with all stakeholders enables superintendents to also create coalitions with a strong sense of commitment to enhance student achievement for all. Furthermore, forming relationships is aligned with Bolman and Deal's (2012) Human Resource Frame in which continuous communication and interactions with plural stakeholders; exchanging of innovations, trepidations, beliefs, and perceptions; having presence; and delivering consistent messages are conducive to make progress in reducing achievement gaps.

The planning and goal setting strategies reflect recent notions that the superintendent is instrumental in the development of long-term goals with aligned strategies. As Yukl (2012) states,

Leaders value flexibility, innovation, and adaptation; they care about people as well as economic outcomes, and they have a longer-term perspective with regard to objectives and strategies. Managers are concerned about how things get done, and they try to get people to perform better. (p. 6)

Planning and goal setting also appeared to be aligned to the structural frame according to Bolman and Deal (2012). Furthermore, the superintendent's organizational actions include: Active engagement in planning sessions; vertical and horizontal instructional alignment planning; setting future goal; creation or approval of planning documents; and instructional coordination, planning, and development. All participants retold how the superintendent demonstrated these strategies through the leaders forming

of committees, approval of recommendations from the committees, and the creation and approval of processes that enhance instructional achievement for diverse youth.

Bolman and Deal (2012) further suggest that goal setting must be congruent with organizational circumstances to have a positive impact.

The right structure depends on prevailing circumstances and considers an organization's goals, strategies, technology, people, and environment.

Understanding the complexity and variety of design possibilities can help create formal prototypes that work for, rather than against, both people and collective purposes. (pp. 68-70)

The leader of an organization, in this case a district superintendent, is a primary driver in the creation and implementation of strategies that effectively reduce achievement gaps with African American and Hispanic students.

Tactics used by the superintendent to facilitate the reducing of achievement gaps for African American and Hispanic students. Findings suggest that the four tactics are implored by the superintendent in order to make progress in reducing achievement gaps. These included visibility and accessibility, trust, shared accountability, and sustained culture of high expectations. According to Yukl (2012), "the use of different influence tactics is compared in terms of their relative effectiveness for getting people to do what the leader wants" (p. 13). A leader can employ tactics in a variety of forums (Bolman & Deal, 2010). While others suggest that superintendent tactics can be used in the political forum to influence decisions by governmental agencies (Bolman & Deal, 2010; Yukl, 2012), this study finding suggests that the

superintendent of United PSD mostly used human resource tactics to focus on maximizing human potential to attain desired instructional outcomes, such as success for all students including African American and Hispanic students. Specifically, visibility and accessibility were found to be practiced at two levels—district and community. This finding is in concert with the assertion that visibility of the superintendent serves to “establish commitment to the school district” (Owen & Ovando, 2000, p.160).

Building trust was to be an important tactic used by the superintendent. Trust is not only critical to engage all students in endeavors aimed at reducing achievement gaps, it is also essential to reducing emerging conflict in order to create a safe and productive environment (Owen & Ovando, 2000). According to this study, trust building requires that the superintendent and the leadership team be nonjudgmental, honest and supportive. In addition, it is affirmed that development of trust may heighten stakeholders’ confidence in superintendent decision making (Johnson, 1996).

The superintendent tactic of sharing accountability was practiced through collaborative partnerships, district-wide ownership, and a shared responsibility on district instructional initiatives. Findings also suggest that by sharing accountability, the superintendent was able to expand ownership, create partnerships, and cultivate collective accountability to reduce achievement gaps. As prior researchers noted, shared accountability enhances “collective moral” commitment from all. Fullan et al. (2004) note:

Collective moral purpose makes explicit the goal of raising the bar and closing the gaps for all individuals and schools... district leaders must foster a culture in

which school principals are concerned about the success of every school in the district, no just their own. (p. 43)

Finally, the superintendent's tactic to sustain a culture of high expectations through promoting the district's level of excellence, she was able to keep the district in the forefront. Sustaining the existing culture of high expectations contributed to the districts evolution to high levels of student success. As others suggest, promoting high expectations may lead to the enhancement of learning for all groups of students (Harris, 2014). It should also be asserted that creating a high expectations culture, by bringing together stakeholders to focus on the unified strong belief that all students will be successful, is aligned to the symbolic frame advanced by Bolman and Deal (2012). Furthermore, superintendents need to assess the status of a school district culture and decide whether or not changes are needed. According to the students a superintendent further developed an existing level of excellence.

It is apparent from the study findings that the superintendent genuinely cares about the students and individuals associated with the district. The superintendent takes time to understand and appreciate the uniqueness of each individual encountered, to know who they really are, what they stand for, and what intrinsically drives them. Further, finding common ground to build a foundation of trust and motivating inspires change. According to the findings, individuals' shortcomings were addressed with candor by the superintendent but without fear of severe repercussions. Participants attributed the closing of academic gaps to the superintendent and the instructional leadership tactics used to maximize employee potential.

In United PSD, superintendent leadership and interaction tactics with internal and external stakeholders led to clear understanding and commitment to the district vision and goals. More importantly, such intentional interactions led to district-wide capacity building (Fullan et al., 2004; Rorrer et al., 2008). This interaction and connection to the community enabled the superintendent to effectively model desired behavior; align work through communication, planning and collaboration; monitor instruction; monitor goals; and improve transparency and accountability (Rorrer et al., 2008). This constant interaction also fostered an interconnectivity of schools within the district (Fullan et al., 2004). This was evident in United PSD as the superintendent's leadership tactics supported the transformation of the district to move from a feudal system of independent campuses working in isolation toward a unified system with singular goals and outcomes.

Emergent Instructional Leadership Framework

An Instructional Leadership Framework surfaced from the study findings. This framework is depicted in Figure 3. As it can be observed in the graphic representation of the framework, the superintendent's role for reducing achievement gaps with African American and Hispanic students is that of an instructional leader.

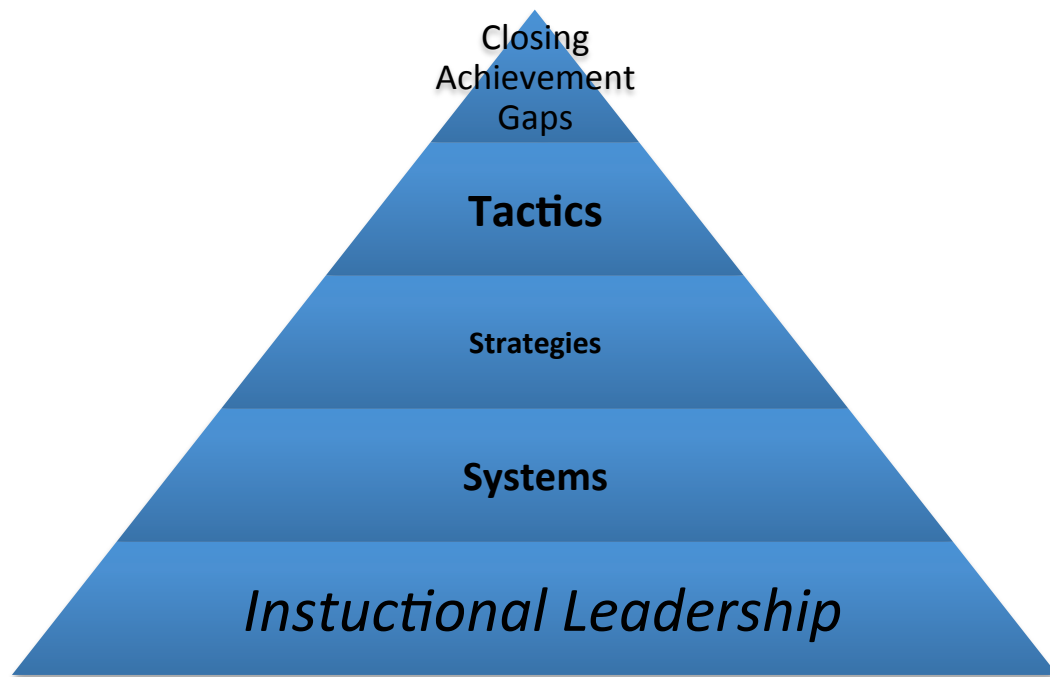


Figure 3. Superintendent Instructional Leadership Framework

The graphic represents the superintendent's leadership as the base to drive district-wide instructional effectiveness to reduce achievement gaps with African American and Hispanic students. The instructional leader role of the superintendent facilitates the creation of systems. From these systems, the superintendent applies strategies and tactics to ensure instructional goals to close achievement gaps for all students. This framework is built in a pyramid form with the superintendent leadership at the foundation. The foundation supports the instructional systems layer, which in turn are actualized with specific strategies and superintendent tactics that lead to reducing achievement gaps at the tip. This framework may serve to guide future studies to fully comprehend how the relationships between the superintendent and the district's stakeholders positively affect the entire instructional environment and increases student achievement leading to the

closing of achievement gaps. Each system, strategy, and tactic was found to be a contributor to enhancing the influence of the superintendent over the entire district's learning environment. It was further found that the systems, strategies, and tactics were significantly aligned to the characteristics of the Human Resource Frame as advanced by Bolman and Deal's (2012), thus demonstrating how positive human interactions can be catalyst to drive district-wide reform and initiatives to close achievement gaps.

Propositions

Based on the nature of qualitative nature of the study and findings, the following propositions.

- Effective superintendent instructional leaders focus on amplifying the talents of internal and external district stakeholders by building relationships, being visible and accessible to all stakeholders, building trust, and establishing shared accountability.
- The superintendent's leadership forms a foundation of trust enabling stakeholders to openly embrace an ongoing program evaluation system and a student centered belief system.
- To ensure the systems operate at optimum levels, the superintendent strategically builds relationships and sets goals, utilizing specifically designed tactics, such as: (a) being visible and accessible, (b) building trust, (c) sharing accountability, and (d) sustaining the culture of high expectations, the superintendent leads pedagogical enhancements. However, these must be contextualized to the needs of the school district.

- While the role of the superintendent is seen essentially as an instructional leadership role, this role of the superintendent is actually becoming a multidimensional one, encompassing expanded responsibilities.
- A strong student-centered belief system leads superintendents, central office teams, as well as principals and teachers to fulfill the ultimate goal of closing achievement gaps.

Implications

The study findings have implications at two levels, for practicing and aspiring superintendents, and for preparation programs. In addition, implications for further research are also offered.

Implications for Practice

The superintendent's role in school reform to reduce achievement gaps with diverse youth has been a research focus across the nation (Harris, 2014; Price, 2007; Waters & Marzano, 2006; Wright & Harris, 2010). However, few researchers have focused on closing achievement gaps on African American and Hispanic students. Thus, given the findings of this study, the following implications for practice are highlighted. While it was proposed that the system, strategies, and tactics used by the superintendent as an instructional leader, this must address the needs and characteristics of school districts. Therefore, aspiring superintendents should keep in mind that assuming the role of an instructional leader will require their commitment to embrace a student-centered belief system. However, to actualize such a system, future superintendents will need to

balance their actions so that they may be able to enact the multiple additional roles expected from them.

It is also important for practicing superintendents to conduct assessments or curriculum audits of the school district's state at the time they are selected and appointed. By doing so, they will be able to avoid reinventing strategies and instead sustain initiatives and programs that have proven to contribute to educational excellence. Similarly, superintendents must understand the positive impact human relations and interactions have on enhancing learning systems.

In addition, findings of this study may also inform preparation programs regarding the need to develop understanding and leadership capacity with a high commitment to address the needs of all students. Preparation programs should provide academic learning opportunities for aspiring superintendents that enhance their capacity to maximize their leadership. Similarly, field-based learning opportunities should expose candidates to examples of successful superintendents who in collaboration with their central office teams, have made significant progress in closing achievement gaps for all learners. Such exposure will also enhance candidates' understanding of the changing student demographics that affect existing programs.

Recommendations for Future Research

Bodies of research exist examining the positive impact central office executives can have on district reform and emerging studies examined the superintendent's specific role, systems, strategies, and tactics in reducing achievement gaps. The uniqueness of this study is that it examined the role of the superintendent on instructional initiatives

through the lens of the superintendent executive team that consisted of, the superintendent, central office members, campus principals, teachers, and parents found in the district, as opposed to the vast majority of studies examining the instructional role of the superintendent by solely surveying these leaders. Only purposefully selected participants, including the superintendent, were engaged this qualitative study to gain a deep understanding of the superintendent's instructional role, instructional systems, strategies, and tactics that they believed have affected student performance resulting in the reducing of achievement gaps. Data was collected through interview and document reviews only and no actual observations were conducted. Further, no attempt was made to directly systems, strategies, and tactics to actual data of the student academic performance.

Given the qualitative single case study design used, findings may only apply to the district subject of the study and may not necessarily be generalized to other school districts. Therefore, additional research is needed to further clarify the role of the superintendent and the executive leadership team. For instance, this study may be replicated with other Texas public school districts that met the same research criteria allowing for data comparisons. A similar study can also be conducted with school districts found outside the state of Texas to confirm finding and determine transferability. Further studies may: (a) examine other smaller, urban and rural, Texas school districts that attained a district distinction on Post-secondary readiness; (b) examine a broader random selection of participants and expand data sources to observe

actual superintendent performance; and (c) conduct comparative studies on districts that have reduced achievement gaps to those who have not.

Appendix A

IRB Exempt Determination for Study



OFFICE OF RESEARCH SUPPORT

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

P.O. Box 7426, Austin, Texas 78713 · Mail Code A3200
(512) 471-8871 · FAX (512) 471-8873

FWA # 00002030

Date: 10/29/14

PI: Ruben D Olivarez

Dept: Educational Administration

Title: Closing the Achievement Gap: A Case Study Examining the
Role of the Superintendent Executive Team in Improving
African American and Hispanic Student Performance in a
Texas School District

Re: IRB Exempt Determination for Protocol Number 2014-09-0125

Dear Ruben D Olivarez:

Recognition of Exempt status based on 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2).

Qualifying Period: 10/29/2014 to 10/28/2017 . *Expires 12 a.m. [midnight] of this date.*
A continuing review report must be submitted in three years if the research is ongoing.

Responsibilities of the Principal Investigator:

Research that is determined to be Exempt from Institutional Review Board (IRB) review is not exempt from ensuring protection of human subjects. The Principal Investigator (PI) is responsible for the following throughout the conduct of the research study:

1. Assuring that all investigators and co-principal investigators are trained in the ethical principles, relevant federal regulations, and institutional policies governing human subject research.
2. Disclosing to the subjects that the activities involve research and that participation is voluntary during the informed consent process.
3. Providing subjects with pertinent information (e.g., risks and benefits, contact information for investigators and ORS) and ensuring that human subjects will voluntarily consent to participate in the research when appropriate (e.g., surveys, interviews).
4. Assuring the subjects will be selected equitably, so that the risks and benefits of the research are justly distributed.
5. Assuring that the IRB will be immediately informed of any information or unanticipated problems that may increase the risk to the subjects and cause the category of review to be reclassified to expedited or full board review.

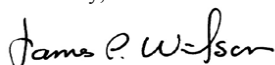
6. Assuring that the IRB will be immediately informed of any complaints from subjects regarding their risks and benefits.
7. Assuring that the privacy of the subjects and the confidentiality of the research data will be maintained appropriately to ensure minimal risks to subjects.
8. Reporting, by submission of an amendment request, any changes in the research study that alter the level of risk to subjects.

These criteria are specified in the PI Assurance Statement that was signed before determination of exempt status was granted. The PI's signature acknowledges that they understand and accept these conditions. Refer to the Office of Research Support (ORS) website www.utexas.edu/irb for specific information on training, voluntary informed consent, privacy, and how to notify the IRB of unanticipated problems.

1. Closure: Upon completion of the research study, a Closure Report must be submitted to the ORS.
2. Unanticipated Problems: Any unanticipated problems or complaints must be reported to the IRB/ORS immediately. Further information concerning unanticipated problems can be found in the IRB Policies and Procedure Manual.
3. Continuing Review: A Continuing Review Report must be submitted if the study will continue beyond the three year qualifying period.
4. Amendments: Modifications that affect the exempt category or the criteria for exempt determination must be submitted as an amendment. Investigators are strongly encouraged to contact the IRB Program Coordinator(s) to describe any changes prior to submitting an amendment. The IRB Program Coordinator(s) can help investigators determine if a formal amendment is necessary or if the modification does not require a formal amendment process.

If you have any questions contact the ORS by phone at (512) 471-8871 or via e-mail at orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu.

Sincerely,



James Wilson, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board Chair

Appendix B

Waiver of Consent Script

Ricardo López
The University of Texas at Austin
IRB #2014-09-0125

Thank you for agreeing to speak to me regarding your possible participation in my research study. Your participation is voluntary. The purpose of this research is to examine the role of the superintendent executive team in improving African American and Hispanic Student Performance in a Texas school district. To complete this study, I have identified a school district that reflects Texas' student demographics, is reducing achievement gaps, and has a superintendent with tenure of over three years. In this district I have identified a pool of twelve (12) participants to include the superintendent, a board member, two central office administrators, three principals, three teachers, and two parents/community members within the school district. Following two 60-minute interviews, your participation is complete.

The research study design calls for the following:

- A one-hour interview with you to gain your perspective of the effective practices to which you attribute to closing achievement gaps.
- A one-hour follow-up interview to clarify information and understandings.
- All data collected will be at a public location you deem appropriate, will be audio recorded, transcribed, de-identified, and coded. You may also participate by telephone, if you prefer.
- You will not be identified or identifiable in any reports of this research. For the analysis phase, you will be assigned a code number, which will be removed in the final document. In the dissertation and other publications, you and your district will not be identified or identifiable.
- At the conclusion of the research, the recordings will be destroyed.
- Following publication, all transcriptions will be destroyed.

The results of this study will be disseminated in a variety of formats to enable educators, researchers, and board members the benefit of your experience, knowledge, and expertise as a participant in an academically successful Texas public school district. You may benefit from participation in this research through your personal reflection on your career and your practices.

Please be aware that your participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you may discontinue participation at any time. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your relationship with the University of Texas at Austin. Should you elect not to participate, there will be no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are

otherwise entitled.

If you have any questions about this study, please email me, Ricardo López, at rlopez42@gmail.com or my dissertation chair, Dr. Ruben Olivárez, at rolivarez@austin.utexas.edu. Any questions about the research can also be directed to the Office of Research Support at orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu.

Appendix C

Superintendent

Interview Questions

1. How long have you been working in the K-12 public school system?
2. How many years have you been a superintendent?
3. How many years have you been a superintendent in your current district?
4. What steps did the district take to evaluate the existing curriculum when you took over as superintendent?
 - a. What data did you utilize in this process?
 - b. What areas of strength and weakness did you identify?
5. What steps did the district take to create a comprehensive and viable curriculum?
6. What strategies were implemented to set instructional goals and objectives?
 - a. What strategies were implemented to coordinate resources to support the established goals and objectives?
 - b. What strategies were implemented to promote participation to review and develop goals and initiatives?
 - c. What monitoring and evaluation strategies were implemented ensuring the entire organization is moving in the right direction?
 - d. What strategies were implemented to address diverse student cultures?
7. How is two-way communication developed to address: uniform information sharing; needs-assessments; and a collective buy-in?
 - a. How is this information used?
 - b. What were some of the findings from this feedback cycle?
8. How were personnel roles, responsibilities, and authority realigned to meet instructional expectations?
 - a. How were these changes communicated to the entire learning system?
 - b. What was the feedback from the stakeholders?
 - c. If there was stakeholder feedback, how was it utilized?
 - d. What were the outcome(s) of the instructional reorganization?
 - e. In your opinion, who is ultimately responsible for the learning outcomes? Why?
9. What system(s) evaluate individual or program effectiveness?
 - a. How is feedback given for individual growth or improvement?
 - b. How is feedback given for program growth or improvement?
 - c. What strategies have proven successful?
10. What meeting protocols were set to address district instructional competencies?
 - a. Were they effective in transforming the culture? If so, how?
 - b. Were they used in decision-making? If so, what are some examples of the decisions being made? What was their instructional impact?
11. Looking at the instructional processes that got you to this point, what did and did not work?

12. What are your perceptions on why these actions did or did not work?
13. Is there anything else you would like to include in the interview?

Appendix D

School District Board Member

Interview Questions

1. How long have you been engaged with this K-12 public school system?
2. What is your current role?
3. How many years have you been in your current role?
4. How do you participate in the instructional aspects of the district?
5. What strategies were implemented to improve instructional performance?
6. How are members of the board utilized as a resource?
 - a. How do board members participate to review and develop district goals and initiatives?
 - b. What monitoring and evaluation strategies were implemented ensuring the entire organization is moving in the right direction?
 - c. How does the district address diverse student cultures?
7. How were personnel roles, responsibilities, and authority realigned to meet instructional expectations?
 - a. How were these changes communicated to the entire learning system?
 - b. What was the feedback from the stakeholders?
 - c. If there was stakeholder feedback, how was it utilized?
 - d. What were the outcome(s) of the instructional reorganization?
 - e. In your opinion, who is ultimately responsible for the learning outcomes? Why?
8. What system(s) have you been involved in for program effectiveness?
 - a. What strategies have proven successful?
9. Looking at the instructional process that got you to this point, what did and did not work?
10. Is there anything else you would like to include in the interview?

Appendix E

Central Administration/ Campus Leader/ Teacher

Interview Questions

1. How long have you been working/involved in the K-12 public school system?
2. What is your current position or role?
3. How many years have you been in your current position or role?
4. What steps did the district take to create a comprehensive and viable curriculum?
5. What strategies were implemented to set instructional goals and objectives?
 - a. What strategies were implemented to coordinate resources to support the established goals and objectives?
 - b. What strategies were implemented to promote participation to review and develop goals and initiatives?
 - c. What monitoring and evaluation strategies were implemented ensuring the entire organization is moving in the right direction?
 - d. What strategies were implemented to address diverse student cultures?
6. How is two-way communication developed to address: uniform information sharing; needs assessments; and a collective buy-in?
 - a. How is this information used?
 - b. What were some of the findings from this feedback cycle?
7. How were personnel roles, responsibilities, and authority realigned to meet instructional expectations?
 - a. How were these changes communicated to the entire learning system?
 - b. What was the feedback from the stakeholders?
 - c. If there was stakeholder feedback, how was it utilized?
 - d. What were the outcome(s) of the instructional reorganization?
 - e. In your opinion, who is ultimately responsible for the learning outcomes? Why?
8. What system(s) evaluate individual or program effectiveness?
 - a. How is feedback given for individual growth or improvement?
 - b. How is feedback given for program growth or improvement?
 - c. What strategies have proven successful?
9. What meeting protocols were set to address district instructional competencies?
 - a. Were they effective in transforming the culture? If so, how?
 - b. Were they used in decision-making? If so, what are some examples of the decisions being made? What was their instructional impact?
10. Looking at the instructional process that got you to this point, what did and did not work?
11. What are your perceptions on why these actions did or did not work?
12. Is there anything else you would like to include in the interview?

Appendix F

School District Parent/Community Member

Interview Questions

1. How long have you been engaged with this K-12 public school system?
2. What is your current role?
3. How many years have you been in your current role?
4. How do you participate in the instructional aspects of the district?
5. What strategies were implemented to involve parent and community members?
 - a. How are parents and community members utilized as a resource?
 - b. How do parent and community members participate to review and develop district goals and initiatives?
 - c. What monitoring and evaluation strategies were implemented ensuring the entire organization is moving in the right direction?
 - d. How does the district address diverse student cultures?
6. How does the district communicate with parents and community members?
 - a. How are parent and community partnerships established?
 - b. How do parents and community members support instruction?
7. How do you believe personnel roles, responsibilities, and authority were realigned to meet instructional expectations?
 - a. How were these changes communicated the community?
 - b. What was the feedback from the stakeholders?
 - c. If there was stakeholder feedback, how was it utilized?
 - d. What do you believe were the outcome(s) of the instructional reorganization?
 - e. In your opinion, who is ultimately responsible for student learning outcomes? Why?
8. What system(s) are parents and community members involved in for program effectiveness?
 - a. What strategies have proven successful? Why?
 - b. What strategies have proven unsuccessful? Why?
9. Looking at the instructional process that got the district to this point, what did and did not work?
10. Is there anything else you would like to include in the interview?

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Vita

Ricardo López has lived the majority of his life in El Paso, Texas and was a 1989 graduate of Eastwood High School in El Paso, Texas. He attended the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) as an undergraduate student, earning a bachelors degree in History with a minor in Secondary Education in 1995. He started his educational career at Ranchland Hills Middle School in the Ysleta Independent School District. In 2000, he was recognized as the campus, district, and Regional Service Center 19 Secondary Teacher of the Year. During this time he was also admitted into the Mariposa leadership academy, which provided scholarships and extensive leadership training to enhance the leadership capacity of future campus and district leaders. Mr. López used this opportunity to earn his Master of Arts in Educational Administration from New Mexico State University (NMSU) in 1999. He has served as an assistant principal and principal, at the middle and high school levels in the Ysleta Independent School District. His schools have been the subject of study for innovation in dual language and the reducing of achievement gaps. In 2010, he was promoted to as an Area Associate Superintendent in the Ysleta school district, leading three comprehensive feeder patterns that serve over 17,000 students. In 2012, he began his doctoral studies in Educational Administration at the University of Texas at Austin, as a member of the 23rd Cooperative Superintendency Program Cohort, commuting from El Paso to Austin for classes. In 2013, he moved to South Texas where he accepted a superintendent position at Mission Consolidated Independent School District, a district in the Rio Grande Valley serving 24 schools with over 15,500 students. He is currently employed at Mission CISD as their superintendent.

Ricardo López is a devoted husband to Linda, and loving father to his four daughters, Dani, Alysha, Lauren, and Alyssa.

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