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A School District's Decision-Making Process Regarding Implementation of School Choice: The Case of One Texas Public School District

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**A School District's Decision-Making Process Regarding Implementation
of School Choice: The Case of One Texas Public School District**

by

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Treatise

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Dedication

I dedicate this treatise to my family. Without each of you, I would be nothing. Thank you for your support and unconditional love. You are the reason that I continue to strive for my goals.

First and foremost, thank you to my husband, Chris. You picked me up each time I felt I could not go on. You encouraged me on a daily basis to reach my goals. You are the most loving and supportive partner I could ask for. Thank you for believing in me and guiding me through this process. I absolutely would not have reached this goal without you in my corner. I love you dearly.

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Abstract

A School District's Decision-Making Process Regarding Implementation of School Choice: The Case of One Texas Public School District

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2020

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As school districts are challenged with facing the many demands of meeting the needs of all students, school choice is presented as one way to meet those needs. School choice is anchored in the economic theory of competition in that if parents and students are offered options for choice, then they will choose the best educational opportunities presented. In addition, if competition is injected into the educational system, all schools will improve as a result. Benefits and challenges have been identified regarding school choice. Despite the challenges, many traditional public-school superintendents and school leaders consider school choice implementation as a method of school reform. While there has been research regarding school choice benefits and challenges, further exploration was warranted regarding the decision-making process used to consider whether or not to implement school choice.

The purpose of this study was to determine the decision-making process employed to decide whether or not to implement schools of choice within a single school district. It also focused on what factors contributed to the exploration of school choice implementation, and how the specific process employed, by the school superintendent, was influenced by the emerging factors considered for choice implementation. Thus, the researcher explored the actions taken by the superintendent and district leaders as they considered school choice implementation. The researcher employed a constructionism epistemology with a qualitative single case study approach. Data was collected, coded, and analyzed using a deductive process. The researcher used multiple data sources in order to triangulate the data.

Findings suggested that factors that influenced the superintendent and school district leaders to explore school choice implementation were competition with neighboring schools, student achievement and student interests, and building on early successes. The findings further revealed the decision-making process employed by the district that included five phases: setting a vision, gathering data, soliciting community input, researching programs based on data, and creating tightly aligned implementation plans. The findings of the study discovered that the emerging factors influenced the decision-making process to be student-centered, highly data-driven and research based, and collaborative.

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Chapter I: Introduction to the Study

The intent of school choice is to create an atmosphere where parents are able to select the best education setting for their children. Many schools are continuing to fail, and of those failing schools, many serve primarily students of color and students from the most economically disadvantaged families. Thus, choice is deemed as the answer to providing more equity within the education system (Lubienski, 2005). However, the thought that the market system of school choice is the answer to equity in our education system operates under the assumption that “schooling markets are often perceived to be open, unbiased, and fair” (Bell, 2009, p. 207). School choice is the notion that parents and students, buyers, are provided with numerous school options, suppliers, so that they have the autonomy to choose the best option to meet their perceived needs (Betts, 2005). Through introducing choice into the education system, a competitive market system will be generated. Therefore, the choosers in a market of supply and demand will benefit. This market creates competition among schools that will lead to improved quality for all schools (Lubienski, 2005). However, research also supports the notion that competition via school choice often leads to a greater degree of segregation among populations of differing socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds (Schneider & Buckley, 2002). Thus, does school choice really allow equity and access for all students and families to openly choose the education that will best meet their needs?

The beginnings of school choice can be traced back to Friedman (1955). Within his work regarding the function of government in education, he explores the practice of passing on the cost of educating children to the parents. Furthermore, by injecting

competition into the school system, a healthy variety of schools leads to more flexibility within the system. In addition, the development and improvement of all schools would be stimulated (Friedman, 1955). Friedman (1955) also introduces the implementation of vouchers so that students could attend the institution of their choice. Through the work of Friedman (1955), school choice is introduced as a way to establish a competitive market within the school system. While the economic theory of competition helps to provide a basis for why school choice has been introduced into the education system, it is important to consider how school leaders respond to the introduction of choice.

The definition of school choice has evolved over time. While school choice has traditionally been thought of as options for students through private or charter schools, school choice options have also surfaced in traditional public-school systems via stand-alone schools of choice and school choice programs. In traditional public-school districts, school choice can be implemented in various fashions such as in response to growing competition outside of the district or in response to the need for school reform or reconstitution. Choice options within traditional public-school districts often include choice or magnet programs, stand-alone schools of choice with a specific specialization, or open enrollment. Choice or magnet programs are specialty programs that are placed at campuses within a school district. As defined by Berends and Waddington (2018), “magnet schools have a specific focus, mission, and instructional design” (p. 2). With magnet schools, students within the school district have the option of transferring to the school with the specialized program. Examples of choice or magnet programs include integrating a liberal arts academy within an already existing campus and implementing a

two-way dual language program on specific campuses where students can then transfer in order to gain access to the specialty program. Magnets or choice programs are implemented on already existing campuses and not all students on the campus necessarily have access to the specialty program.

Open enrollment is another way for students and parents to choose within a public-school district. Babington and Welsch (2017) define open enrollment as “open enrollment programs allow students to attend schools outside the school district in which they reside” (p. 414). This choice option allows parents to have access to other districts while the receiving district benefits from increased enrollment. Many districts employ an open enrollment system in order to increase enrollment.

Stand-alone schools of choice are also implemented in some public-school districts. When referring to a stand-alone school of choice, the researcher is referring to any whole school that was developed or repurposed and is now open to all students within the district to choose from. A stand-alone school of choice often times has a curriculum and instruction focus such as a school that implements project-based learning as its school-wide instructional model or an early college high school where students are able to graduate high school while having simultaneously earned an associate’s degree. No matter the form, traditional public-school districts are implementing a variety of school choice options.

At the present time, school choice is a controversial topic in education. When President Trump took office and appointed Education Secretary, Betsy DeVos, school choice became a recurring topic in conversations relating to education. President

Trump's education platform included expanding school choice, especially to low-income African American and Hispanic children (Danilova, 2017). However, there is also research that supports the thought that competition via school choice often leads to a greater degree of segregation among populations of differing socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds (Schneider & Buckley, 2002). Competition is the concept that there is a large number of suppliers and buyers, such as schools and parents or students, in order to influence market outcomes (Betts, 2005). Substantial evidence does not indicate that the "competitive threat" of school choice "induces consistent or substantial improvements in public school districts" (Ni & Arsen, 2010, p. 118). Therefore, are schools of choice truly creating an atmosphere where low-performing schools are incentivized to improve, or does the system further create harm, a decrease in student outcomes or resources, for schools that exist within the mainstream public-school system (Ni & Arsen, 2010)?

While there is a belief that schools of choice will promote public schools to improve by providing a healthy market competition, there is also much debate around school choice in regard to funding. For instance, in the 85th Texas Legislative Sessions, Senate Bill 3 from the regular session and Senate Bill 2 from the special session attempted to create an educational savings account program and a tax credit scholarship program to subsidize private school tuition (Swaby, 2017). As noted in two Texas Tribune articles regarding the regular and special sessions, both bills were passed in the Senate, but died in the House. Despite these efforts being a priority of Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick, the bills failed to pass (Swaby, 2017). One reason for the bills not moving forward to the governor's desk included the push from rural lawmakers to not

divert any funding away from public schools to subsidize tuition for private schools. A primary reason for this position by lawmakers includes the fact that rural districts do not have choices that are geographically close for students. In addition, these lawmakers stated that funds should not be redirected from already underfunded public schools (Chang & Hill, 2017). Ultimately, competition in education is a complex and highly political issue that plagues our current education system at the district, state, and national levels.

Chapter one provides a brief introduction into school choice as a part of the economic theory of competition. The topics school choice and school leadership and decision-making are briefly introduced. The chapter then moves to defining the problem statement, purpose of the study, and research questions. An overview of the methodology is established followed by definition of terms, limitations, delimitations, and assumptions. Chapter one concludes with developing the significance of the study.

School Choice and School Leadership

The introduction of choice into the education system provides another layer of strain on school leaders. While the thought is that by introducing competition all schools will be forced to improve, many times this is not seen as the case. Early in choice implementation, superintendents from Arkansas, Iowa, and Minnesota were surveyed (Graham & Ruhl, 1990). At the time of this study, superintendents reported that the introduction of choice had not caused a decrease in enrollment for public schools. Collectively, the superintendents rejected all of the perceived benefits regarding school choice including improvement in parent participation, improvement in quality of schools,

expansion of education opportunities for economically disadvantaged and moderate-income families, and the identification of districts needing special services. Instead, superintendents believed that choice was synonymous with vouchers, choice will lead to segregation, choice will encourage athletic recruiting, and choice will eventually force school district consolidations (Graham & Ruhl, 1990).

While earlier perceptions of superintendents were that school choice did not have an impact on public school enrollment, the vast amount of choice options that exist today have caused superintendents and other school leaders to carefully consider how to respond. School leaders have responded in various ways in an effort to retain and attract students. Some districts make program changes and extend after school programs, while other districts develop choice programs within the school district (Ladner & Brouillette, 2000). The introduction of choice has placed pressure on low-performing schools to improve academic achievement. In addition, school choice is providing options to parents that could not otherwise afford it (Ladner & Brouillette, 2000). However, while the pressure to improve is present, many believe school choice has not necessarily forced all schools to improve as intended. Many school leaders have focused more on marketing their school rather than improving the quality. This was evident in a study conducted within the New Orleans school system (Jabbar, 2015). Regardless of the response, school leaders, mainly superintendents, must decide how to respond to the array of school choice options parents and students have access to outside of the school district, which may lead to implementing choice options within the school district.

School Leaders and Decision-Making

The process that a school leader embarks on to decide whether or not to implement school choice is important. Decision-making is not an event, but rather it is a process. Leaders who make good decisions and those who make bad ones differ greatly. The primary difference is whether the decision is viewed as a process or an event. Research regarding decision-making details two approaches, inquiry and advocacy (Garvin & Roberto, 2001). Inquiry is a process that involves generating multiple options, gathering ideas from others, and producing a sound solution. Advocacy is an approach that is competitive in nature. Advocates often campaign for a particular result or solution which leads to disagreements and makes objectivity impossible. Effective decisions are primarily inquiry based in nature. The decision-making inquiry approach includes three distinct factors: conflict, consideration, and closure. Conflict brings issues into focus, consideration allows potential solutions to be generated, and closure is the point where a solution is chosen. Moving through this process helps leaders to make sound, collaborative decisions (Garvin & Roberto, 2001).

School leaders spend a good amount of time making decisions (Lunenburg, 2010). In looking at the history and study of decision-making, it is highlighted that an effective decision does not guarantee a positive result which can cloud the process for school leaders. In addition, risk is part of every decision (Buchanan & O Connell, 2006). School leaders are faced with models of decision-making including the rational model and the bounded rationality model (Lunenburg, 2010). For administrators, the decisions are assumed to be rational. Through this model, the leader moves through six phases: (a)

identifying the problem, (b) generating alternatives, (c) evaluating alternatives, (d) choosing an alternative, (e) implementing the decision, and (f) evaluating decision effectiveness. This process is cyclical in nature as appropriate (Lunenburg, 2010). However, not all decisions school leaders have to make are rational in nature. Thus, bounded rationality is also part of the decision-making process for school leaders. Bounded rationality implies that decisions are based on incomplete comprehension of the problem, not all possible alternatives can be generated, alternatives are not always evaluated completely and consequences of each alternative cannot always be predicted, and the ultimate decision must be based on a criterion because it is impossible to choose which alternative is optimal (Lunenburg, 2010). Ultimately, the models provide frameworks for school leaders to use when decision-making because “the success of a school is critically linked to effective decisions” (Lunenburg, 2010, p. 11).

Statement of the Problem

School choice can be linked back to Friedman and his work regarding the responsibility of government in education (Friedman, 1955). Since that time, school choice has evolved. Approximately 20 years ago, superintendents were not as concerned with decreasing enrollment for public schools due to competition (Ladner & Brouillette, 2000). However, many superintendents were certain that the eventual effects of school choice would not be positive (Graham & Ruhl, 1990). Currently, school choice and competition are real dilemmas for public school superintendents. Texas state leaders have introduced legislation to allow vouchers for parents which could adversely affect public school funding (Swaby, 2017). As a result, many superintendents and school

leaders have considered and implemented school choice within school districts in order to stay competitive, meet the needs of all students, or respond to mandated reconstitution and reform efforts.

When districts implement school choice as part of reform efforts, the decision-making process can be tedious and politically charged (Bulkley, Henig, & Levin, 2010). Thus, superintendents must consider whether the benefits will outweigh the cost. The decision-making processes of superintendents and school leaders is critical. Previous research has indicated that superintendents who employ an inquiry based decision-making process tend to produce more sound solutions (Garvin & Roberto, 2001). However, research regarding how these decision-making processes are directly used when considering school choice implementation is lacking. Marsh, Strunk, and Bush (2012) state that further research is needed regarding the implementation of school choice within school districts.

In an era in public education where there are many challenges, including increased demands for accountability and education reform, it is of utmost importance that superintendents possess “highly effective decision-making skills and sound judgment” (Davis, 2005, p. 1). The demand on the number of decisions school leaders must make on a daily basis often skews the decision-making process. Thus, the need to study decision-making processes among school district leaders is important to assist in making purposeful decisions for the most important issues, such as the implementation of schools of choice (Davis, 2005).

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to determine the decision-making process employed to decide whether or not to implement schools of choice within one school district, what factors contributed to the exploration of school choice implementation, and how the process was influenced by the factors contributing to choice implementation.

This qualitative single case study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What factors contributed to the exploration of school choice implementation by the school district and its leaders?
2. What process for deciding whether to implement schools of choice did the superintendent and school district employ?
3. How did the factors related to the implementation of school choice influence the decision-making process?

Overview of Methodology

This study employed a constructionism epistemology. As noted by Crotty, “what constructionism claims is that meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting” (Crotty, 1998, p. 43). This qualitative study under the interpretivism paradigm took a single case study approach, which involves the study of a single case within a real-life contemporary context or setting. The researcher studied one school district who has implemented a school choice model (Yin, 2009). As Crotty stated, “only through dialogue can one become aware of the perceptions, feelings, and attitudes of others and interpret their feelings and intent” (Crotty, 1998, p. 75-76). Thus, the researcher conducted interviews of the superintendent, a school board trustee, and key

staff who were involved in the process as identified by snowball sampling to better understand the decision-making process regarding school choice. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant using an interview guide that allowed for further questions to be developed based on the responses from the interviewees (Seidman, 2013).

The Texas school district chosen for the single case study was one that has implemented school choice and has multiple schools of choice within the school district. Interview data were triangulated with field notes, archival documents, and a reflexive journal (Hays & Singh, 2012; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Choosing one school district allowed the researcher to conduct an in-depth study to fully understand the intricacies of the decision-making process regarding the implementation of school choice in the district and the factors that influenced the process.

Definition of Terms

School Choice - School choice is the economic theory that seeks to create a perfect competition within the education system (supplier) in order to improve the quality of all schools for students and parents (buyers) (Betts, 2005).

Decision-Making - Decision-making is a process where one makes a choice from a number of options to reach a target goal (Lunenburg, 2010).

Process - A series of actions or operations that lead to an end (Merriam-Webster's dictionary, n.d.).

Superintendent - The superintendent serves as the chief executive officer of a school district (Villerot, 2014).

Limitations

This study was conducted using qualitative research and single case study approach. It examined one school district only at one moment in time. Thus, the results could not transfer to other districts that are not of similar size or demographics. Per the selection criteria, the district that was chosen has implemented multiple schools of choice. Thus, the decision-making process used by the superintendent and district leaders only refer to the process that led to implementation of school choice. The results, therefore, may not be transferable to other school districts' decision-making for actual implementation of school choice.

Furthermore, the researcher employed snowball sampling and asked the superintendent to reference other essential staff members for additional interviews (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014). Snowball sampling is a limitation in that the researcher was dependent on the superintendent to identify school district staff that were involved in the decision-making process. This method of sampling may have led to unintentional exclusion of key staff members. Thus, the researcher may have unintentionally omitted essential input from others during the data collection. While an interview guide was used to gather data aligned to the research questions, the researcher further probed the interviewees based on their answers. Thus, interviewees were not all asked the same exact questions (Johnson & Christensen, 2017; Seidman, 2013).

Delimitations

Many school districts across the state establish schools of choice systems in order to provide students and parents options and often to compete with other charter and

private institutions within the community. However, the main focus of this study was solely on the exploration and decision-making process prior to implementation of school choice. Therefore, the study did not include an in-depth analysis of the implementation process and actions taken thereafter. Further, the study did not address the actual results of implementation at the time of the study or the evaluation phases. Since the participants were mostly those in the central office leadership, the study did not examine the perceptions of campus level personnel such as principals and teachers.

Assumptions

The researcher assumed that a thorough decision-making process was instituted prior to implementing school choice options within the district. In addition, the researcher assumed that all individuals who were interviewed were open and honest regarding the aspects of consideration within the decision-making process. The researcher also assumed that the superintendent believed that the academic benefits for students outweighed the cost and potential obstacles when school choice was implemented.

Significance of the Study

This study came at a time when public schools were under attack by the looming threat to expand schools of choice and implement a voucher system that could impact enrollment in public schools (Swaby, 2017). As a result, many traditional public school superintendents and school leaders have considered and implemented school choice within school districts due to various factors: to stay competitive with other schools of choice outside of the district, to meet the needs of all students, or to respond to mandated

reconstitution and reform efforts. In addition, as an answer to the need to reform low-performing schools, public school districts have decided to implement schools of choice (Marsh, Strunk, and Bush, 2012). There is a wealth of research surrounding school choice and a growing amount of research regarding reform efforts related to school choice, as presented in chapter two. In addition, general research exists regarding the decision-making processes school leaders employ. However, there is little research focused on the decision-making process of school leaders directly aimed at school choice implementation. In fact, Marsh, Strunk, and Bush (2012) state that further research is needed regarding the implementation of school choice within school districts. Thus, this study provided an understanding of the decision-making process one superintendent and district leaders employed when deciding whether or not to implement schools of choice.

Summary

Chapter one introduced the study. Background knowledge was established, and the chapter then moved to the problem statement, purpose of the study, and research questions. An overview of the methodology was established followed by definition of terms, limitations, delimitations, and assumptions. Chapter one concluded with developing the significance of the study.

Chapter two reviews the literature. The researcher presents the background literature related to school choice. Then themes are established to make sense of the literature and highlight the gap in the literature which warranted the study.

Chapter three establishes the research methods. This study employed a single case study approach. This chapter outlines this process and discusses methods of data collection and procedures. Positionality is also addressed in this chapter.

Chapter four presents the findings from the study. The findings illustrate themes that emerged from the data analysis as they relate to each research question. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the data through two conceptual frameworks.

Chapter five provides a brief background of the study, a summary of the findings within the context of prior research, and implications for application to current practices. The chapter concludes with recommendations for further research.

Chapter II: Review of Literature

This chapter provides a review of the literature regarding school choice implementation, superintendents' and other school leaders' perspectives regarding school choice, and superintendents' general decision-making processes. The chapter is divided into 10 sections. The first section provides a general overview and introduction into school choice. The second section reviews the economic theory of competition within education. The third section reviews Texas state policies regarding school choice. The fourth section examines the effects of school choice on student outcomes. The fifth section examines barriers to accessing schools of choice by all students. The sixth section reviews school choice as a mechanism for school reform. The seventh section reviews perspectives of superintendents regarding school choice. The eighth section provides an overview of general decision-making processes within the superintendency. The ninth section is a discussion of the findings and further research that is needed regarding superintendents' decision-making process regarding school choice implementation. The last section is a summary of the chapter.

General Overview and Introduction

School choice is the idea that parents and students, buyers, are provided with numerous school options, suppliers, so that they have the autonomy to choose the best option to meet their perceived needs (Betts, 2005). In the current political climate, school choice has become a recurring topic in conversations relating to education (Danilova, 2017). However, there is also research that supports the idea that competition via school choice often leads to a greater degree of segregation among populations of differing

socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds (Schneider & Buckley, 2002). Losing students to schools of choice creates an atmosphere where public schools are expected to do more with less. Ni and Arsen (2010) explore ideas further of whether school choice is helping all schools improve or if it is causing harm to districts by taking students and further contributing to racial and economic stratification. There is also much debate over access to schools of choice by all students (Levin, 2012). Ultimately, competition in education has become a complex and highly political issue that plagues our current education system at the district, state, and national levels. Under the current presidential and gubernatorial administrations, expansion of school choice could garner more publicity and potentially gain more traction.

Economic Theory: Competition in Education

In theory, creating a competitive market with schools of choice is great for consumers. It is thought that introducing competition into the education system provides motivation for all schools, private, charter, and traditional public schools, to improve teaching and learning in order to compete for student enrollment. Injecting competition leads to a healthy variety of schools and introduces flexibility into the school system. In addition, the development and improvement of all schools is stimulated (Friedman, 1955). Economic theory suggests that new schools or choice schools will emerge in areas where families are demanding alternative schooling options. This idea further supports the economic theory of competition through school choice by illustrating supply and demand (Saults & Yaluma, 2017).

Perfect competition emerges when the market for a good or service has a very large number of buyers and sellers. Within the schools of choice, creating perfect competition would be ideal because no buyer or seller could be better off without making at least one other worse off (Betts, 2005). Seven assumptions are needed for perfect competition; however, within education, there are likely deviations from these assumptions. The assumptions include (1) “both firms and consumers are sufficiently numerous that none can affect the product’s price,” (2) “the market is for a homogenous commodity or service,” (3) “firms are willing to sell to all consumers equally,” (4) “there is perfect information on price,” (5) “firms maximize profits, consumers maximize ‘utility,’ that is, their private interests,” (6) “there is free entry and exit for both firms and consumers,” and (7) “there are no externalities in production or consumption” (Betts, 2005, p. 16).

While school choice is an effort to create an atmosphere of perfect competition by creating numerous suppliers, many districts that lack choice operate in more of a monopolistic or imperfect competition. Monopolistic competition is a type of imperfect competition that gives power back to the seller because buyers are not all equally willing to buy from all sellers. For instance, in terms of school choice competition, parents might be more likely to choose one school over another because of proximity to their home. Therefore, the outcome is similar to a monopoly where schools do not feel the urgency to improve quality because there is no fear of losing students (Betts, 2005).

Another assumption states that schools accept all students; however, this may not always be the case, especially for students with discrete learning disabilities due to lack

of resources. This assumption connects back to the lack of economies of scale, where some smaller schools may not be able to serve all students because the personnel allocations may not be available to appropriately staff students that require one-on-one support (Betts, 2005). Therefore, the overall budget of the campus or district is limited, thus excluding a particular population of students (Levin, 2012).

The next assumption supports the idea of perfect information and that all buyers and sellers must have the same information. Not all families in districts have access to all of the information about schools, creating an issue of equity. It also assumes that consumers must maximize their utility while firms must maximize profits. In terms of schools, it is assumed that parents have students' best interest in mind, thus they will maximize their utility by seeking the best product. In addition, it is assumed that schools would maximize their profits. Though only a small number of schools are for profit, if parents maximize their utility and fully exercise their ability to choose, then all schools, whether for profit or non-profit, would have to compete for students to avoid losing enrollment and facing potential closure. However, choice patterns show that demographics and location are considered more often by parents than quality education, thus negating this assumption (Betts, 2005).

Free entry and exit with schools is also an assumption. While in the public school and private school system, many barriers are placed upon free entry such as attendance boundaries and financial means. Therefore, this assumption is not being met because certain populations of students are faced with barriers to access for some schools. There is not free entry and exit in all schools (Betts, 2005).

The last assumption takes externalities into consideration. This will not be removed from the education setting because a student's rate of learning can depend on the other students in the classroom. Due to these deviations, perfect competition in school choice is not likely to be reached (Betts, 2005).

There is much to be said about whether or not creating a competitive market is helpful or harmful to traditional public schools. As stated by Ni and Arsen (2010), public schools are viewed as inefficient in many cases. Therefore, it is assumed that creating incentives to be more efficient and improve quality could be reached through offering consumers more choices in a competitive market. However, it is also noted that schools of choice could harm traditional public schools (Ni & Arsen, 2010). First, consumers would have to choose alternate schools in order to create competition. Upon choosing, schools of choice could cause a re-sorting of students creating greater stratification in student groups and could lead to further inefficiencies for traditional public schools. Ultimately, the financial burden could be such that staff and resources would have to be reduced in traditional public schools (Ni & Arsen, 2010).

In addition, Jabbar's (2015) study regarding school choice, found that more than 84% of students in New Orleans attended a school of choice. Despite efforts to mitigate competition, inequities in student enrollment continued to occur (Jabbar, 2015). As part of introducing the economic theory of competition into the education system, legislators have introduced legal policies within state school systems to provide structures for school choice.

Texas State Policy Regarding Choice

School choice policy has received mixed reviews. Proponents feel that policies will empower families to choose from a portfolio of schools that would benefit all students (Phillippo & Griffin, 2016). In the 85th Texas Legislative Sessions, Senate Bill 3 from the regular session and Senate Bill 2 from the special session attempted to create an educational savings account program and a tax credit scholarship program to subsidize private school tuition. As shared in two Texas Tribune articles regarding the regular and special sessions, both bills were passed in the Senate, but died in the House. Despite these efforts being a priority of Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick, the bills failed to pass (Swaby, 2017). One reason for the bills not moving forward to the governor's desk included the push from rural lawmakers to not divert any funding away from public schools to subsidize tuition for private schools. Lawmakers argued that rural districts do not have choices that are geographically close for students. In addition, these lawmakers stated that funds should not be redirected from already underfunded public schools (Chang & Hill, 2017). While the Senate bills did not make it into law, policies regarding school choice already exist in Texas.

School choice policy is all encompassing. It not only includes traditional public schools, charter schools, and private schools, but it also includes choices within public school districts. Chapter 12 of the Texas Education Code specifically outlines the following in relation to charters: general provisions, home-rule school district charters, campus or campus program charters, open-enrollment charter schools, and college or university or junior college charters (Texas Education Code, n.d.).

In 1995, the Texas Legislature introduced legislation surrounding home rule district charter, campus charters, and open-enrollment charters (Dunn, 1995). Through this legislation, policy EL (Legal) was developed that outlined a way for teachers and parents to petition a campus charter to the school board. EL (Legal) further delineates that a district shall adopt a campus charter program policy that will specify the process for approval, statutory requirements with which a charter campus must comply, and items that must be included in the charter application (Texas Association of School Boards, 2015). As a result, school districts developed an EL (Local) policy that outlines the process for developing a campus charter program within the school district. This policy opened the door for districts to not only consider charters, but more simply provide choice options to meet student needs.

Evaluation of open enrollment charters was added into Texas Education Code in 1995. This legislation gave authority to the commissioner to designate an organization with experience in evaluating schools of choice to conduct the annual charter school evaluation (Texas Education Code, n.d.). The evaluation must include students' assessment scores, student attendance, students' grades, student discipline, economic status of families attending the school, and parent satisfaction with the school. The evaluation must also include the cost of instruction, administration, and transportation; the effect of the charter on school districts and the teachers, students, and parents within the district; and other issues that the commissioner deems important. As a result of the implementation of charter schools and the creation of the evaluation for charter schools, other legislation that applies to traditional public schools in Texas has also been applied

to open enrollment charter schools (Texas Education Code, n.d.). Though legislators have supported school choice by introducing legal policies to provide structures, there are effects on the overall educational system when choice is implemented.

School Choice Effects on Student Outcomes

Introducing competition into education could improve student outcomes for all students, choosers and non-choosers. This goal would be accomplished by forcing traditional public schools to improve performance or they will lose students, thus resources. However, this idea is based on the assumption of how traditional public schools will react (Ni & Arsen, 2010). Often times traditional public schools respond to the introduction of school choice in other ways including changing leadership, opening magnet choice schools, creating new programs based on parent preferences, launching add on programs, and vilifying charter school competition (Ni & Arsen, 2010). However, there is little evidence that charter competition actually improves traditional public schools. In Texas, over half of the charters were authorized as at-risk charters and drew away more economically disadvantaged students from traditional public schools. Therefore, the argument that traditional public schools in Texas have not improved due to the introduction of schools of choice into the education system is questioned. This could contribute to a slightly greater positive effect for non-choosers in traditional public schools (Ni & Arsen, 2010).

In a study conducted in California, Zimmer and Buddin (2009) contend that there is little evidence of the competitive effects of charter schools. Charter schools are only showing positive effects on those that attend the school. While achievement is higher in

those schools, they only account for 2% of the population, thus lessening the influence on the improvement of all schools (Zimmer & Buddin, 2009). A similar finding was illustrated in a study on the effects of charter schools on charter students and public schools. This study compared satisfactory rates of charter schools and traditional public schools by beginning with pre-charter test scores as a baseline. It found that charter schools do not improve satisfactory rates as rapidly as traditional public schools that had similar pre-charter test scores (Bettinger, 1999). In addition to school choice and competition not showing evidence of improving student achievement, Davis (2013) found that it does provide viable options for students and parents to meet perceived needs.

Charter schools are often vilified by claims that they are performing better because they are pushing out low-performing students. A study conducted by Zimmer and Guarino (2013) discovered that students who are transferring out of charter schools do have a slightly lower achievement level than their peers. However, this same trend holds true for traditional public schools. Therefore, there is no evidence to support the claim that charters are pushing out low-performing students in order to create a false impression of success (Zimmer & Guarino, 2013).

As seen in the literature, evidence that supports the claim that competition will improve student outcomes for all, choosers and non-choosers, is limited. The reason for the lack of evidence could be attributed to the variety of responses to competition by traditional public schools. In addition, perfect competition assumes that there are numerous suppliers and buyers of a homogeneous product. Since schools can vary in

program types and instructional methods, the assumption of numerous suppliers and buyers is negated leading to the difficulty in gathering data that supports increased outcomes for all students through competition within the education system (Betts, 2005).

Instructional Innovation and Quality Teaching and Learning. One of the goals of charter schools and competition is to foster educational innovations to produce quality teaching and learning. The idea is to challenge standard practices associated with traditional public schools. According to Lubienski (2003), there is no direct connection between market competition and classroom innovation. Instead, schools are more likely to innovate in the organization of the school rather than in classroom practices (Lubienski, 2003).

The desire for innovation in schools of choice and traditional public schools operates under the assumption that parents want innovation for their children. Lubienski (2003) contends that parents do not necessarily choose based on the desire for innovation, thus parent preferences can constrain innovation in schools. In addition, contributing to the lack of evidence that competition drives innovation, administration often does not respond to competition by innovating, but rather by focusing on marketing to higher socioeconomic students (Lubienski, 2003).

Bagley (2006) supports the claim that innovation is more prevalent in organizational changes rather than instructional changes. In a school choice system in the United Kingdom, schools that were on a lower level of the hierarchy rebranded and relocated in order to attract more students. While the instruction may have not been overly innovative, logistics in regard to school location, safety, and transportation

allowed the school to recruit students who would have never chosen that school before. In addition, the system branded one of its schools as a technology school. Again, innovation was implemented in the organization of the school rather than directly in classroom instruction (Bagley, 2006). The same theme of innovation within school structure and branding rather than classroom instruction is evident in New Orleans. The schools' academic responses to competition came in the form of academic niches. Schools created fine arts or language programs to attract students as well as same sex education (Jabbar, 2015). The niches were organizational innovation efforts that do not necessarily support competition leading to instructional innovation.

Ni and Arsen (2010) claim that there is little evidence that competition promotes significant change or innovation in traditional public-school instructional practices. However, Kasman and Loeb (2013) recognize that some innovation exists. They found that schools are more likely to respond to competition with more marketing and outreach rather than improving instructional practices; however, some schools did respond with innovation. Low performing and high performing schools tend to respond to competition with changes to curriculum and instruction than do middle performing schools (Kasman & Loeb, 2013). Ladd and Fiske (2003) also contend that competition does not improve the quality of teaching and learning. Instead, they found that competition lowered morale among teachers and led to decreased teacher job satisfaction (Ladd & Fiske, 2003).

Under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), students were able to transfer away from low performing schools to those that are performing at higher levels. The idea behind this choice process was to create a driving force for low performing schools to innovate

for the better in order to keep students (Lee, 2016). However, the transfer process tended to financially impact low performing schools, or, in districts with few options for transfers, students tended to not take advantage of the opportunity to transfer, thus remaining in low performing schools. The choice provision under NCLB failed to allow families access to higher performing schools (Lee, 2016).

The lack of evidence around competition leading to instructional innovation ties back to the assumption of perfect competition in that there are numerous suppliers and buyers of a homogeneous good. However, school innovation takes on a different role depending on the school. Since innovation looks different for each school, the schools are no longer homogenous in nature, and perfect competition is not present. Thus, the assumption that schools are homogenous is negated due to the variability in instructional models (Betts, 2005).

Vouchers

Vouchers surfaced as a prominent theme in school choice systems. As early as 1955, Milton Friedman (1955) discussed a market system for education that includes the idea of introducing vouchers. An evaluation of New York City's School Choice Scholarships Foundation found that the mothers of voucher applicants were more likely to have a bachelor's degree or attended some post-secondary institution than those that did not apply to the voucher system. In an evaluation of San Antonio's voucher plan, parents also had higher levels of education and tended to be more involved in their child's education than non-applicants (Fleming, Cowen, Witte, & Wolf, 2015). In addition, voucher students were found to have higher test scores in reviews of voucher

programs in Dayton, Washington, D.C., San Antonio, and New York. However, in Washington, D.C., students who applied for a voucher tended to be black or economically disadvantaged. Voucher programs can lead to greater stratification since voucher participants tend to be more advantaged, except in the case of Washington, D.C. (Fleming, Cowen, Witte, & Wolf, 2015).

Vouchers have tended to segregate schools further. In reviewing state policies regarding vouchers, it was found that state laws that provide explicit protections for marginalized population do not exist (Eckes, Mead, & Ulm, 2016). Some voucher programs have been permitted to use religious criteria in the admissions process. Not all states have protections in the voucher program for students with disabilities. No state specifically has legislation that protect lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered (LGBT) students. Thus, without protections for all marginalized groups, vouchers will further stratify the school choice system (Eckes, Mead, & Ulm, 2016).

School Choice Barriers to Access

Advocates of school choice argue that schools should have more autonomy and less bureaucracy, leading to students and parents having more freedom to choose (Chubb & Moe, 1991). Therefore, schools should be accountable to parents rather than superiors. Scholarships should be available for the most disadvantaged students to ensure access and negate the idea that choice leads to further segregation (Chubb & Moe, 1991). In addition, “empowering parents to choose children’s schools with their own hands had the potential to improve overall access to education by weakening geographical advantages or disadvantages and opening up invisible boundaries between communities” (Lee,

2016). Although these claims should all be true when schools are competing, there is also research that maintains quite the opposite of these claims.

Location and Transportation. Location is a large part of why parents choose, and location without transportation provides a barrier for many families. Lack of access due to transportation will reduce equity (Bukley, Henig, & Levin, 2010). This was highlighted in a study of Detroit public schools. The school districts within the Detroit area created attendance boundaries that excluded primarily African American students. This inequity in boundary setting and lack of transportation perpetuated segregation in student populations among schools (Lubienski, 2005).

As a method of rebranding to increase student recruitment, some schools have changed locations (Bagley, 2006). In Bagley's (2006) study of schools in the United Kingdom, the lower performing school often times was not chosen by the community not due to academics, but the barrier of location. Once the school changed locations and rebranded, more students from the surrounding community chose to attend (Bagley, 2006).

Schools will often times arrange themselves in ways that limit access to the most disadvantaged students (Lubienski, Gulosino, & Weitzel, 2009). In New Orleans, principals perceive private schools as competition if they are closer in location (Jabbar & Li, 2016). More affluent families often make residential decisions in order to have access to higher quality schools. However, financial constraints, housing policies, and relocation due to eviction or safety concerns keep economically disadvantaged families from being able to make the same residential decisions as more affluent families (Sattin-

Bajaj, Jennings, Corcoran, Baker-Smith, & Hailey, 2018). Therefore, location can provide a barrier of accessibility to certain student groups. Without transportation, the student groups that are excluded are often the most disadvantaged. This barrier negates the assumption of perfect competition that there is free entry and exit (Betts, 2005).

Perfect Information. The idea of perfect information is an assumption of perfect competition (Betts, 2005). However, can perfect information really be achieved? Research around competition contends that providing information to families via marketing tends to be skewed at times. Lack of access to useful information will reduce equity (Bukley, Henig, & Levin, 2010). Social networks influence why and how parents choose schools for their children. If the social network does not have access to the information, then a group of students will experience a barrier to choice (Bell, 2009). Social networks also influence marketing. This was found in New Orleans to be the most common strategy for responding to competition (Jabbar, 2015). Similarly, in a study of schools of choice in Chile, the voucher system led to middle-class flight to private schools. The system also incentivized schools to choose better students, thus marketing to only a certain population of students (Hsieh & Urquiola, 2003). Lubienski (2007) also found that marketing is selective in what is marketed and who it is marketed to. This inequity in marketing can create a further divide in racial and economic groups (Lubienski, 2007).

Fleming, et al. (2015) highlights that parents will make decisions based on the availability of information. Social networks are a way that parents get information regarding school choice. Disadvantaged parents often have “less stable and smaller

social networks” thus creating a struggle to accessing information (Fleming, Cowen, Witte, & Wolf, 2015, p. 790). In addition, Latino parents were less likely to hear about school choices from their social networks which creates a further racial divide between those choosing and those who are not choosing (Fleming, Cowen, Witte, & Wolf, 2015). In reviewing school choice decision-making processes of more affluent families, parents highlight the importance of social networks in receiving information about charter schools. Social networks often outweigh the importance of other factors including academic quality, school safety, and curriculum (Altenhofen, Berends, & White, 2016).

Social networks frequently differ not only by socioeconomics, but also among ethnicities. Language plays a part in the access to information through social networks. In a study over how Latino parents choose among magnet schools, social networks arose as a major theme (Haynes, Phillips, & Goldring, 2010). Methods of getting Latino families the information differed from other ethnic groups. More specifically, recently immigrated Latino families have an even more limited social network (Haynes, Phillips, & Goldring, 2010). Even more so, the social networks of more educated Latino parents did not include individuals that had information regarding magnet schools (Haynes, Phillips, & Goldring, 2010). These examples highlight the absence of perfect information in school choice settings which affects accessibility (Betts, 2005).

Lay (2016) cautions that families can be overloaded with information which affects their choices. Too many choices or an overwhelming amount of information could delay families from choosing or prevent them from choosing at all. An overload of information can lead to dissatisfaction with the choice that is ultimately made and

frustration with the choice process (Lay, 2016). While trying to navigate information, low income families and racial minority families tend to rely on social networks and marketing to make choices. The results of this study indicated that school marketing led to more satisfaction with choice, rather than information received from parent guides or social networks (Lay, 2016).

Complex Systems. Often, bureaucratic structures within school choice systems can further stratify schools through the assignment of schools to different families. In a study of Boston Public Schools, timing of registration proved to be an obstacle for many parents leading to further stratification of schools (Fong & Faude, 2018). Late registration was experienced more often by black and Hispanic families as well as families who were economically disadvantaged. The obstacle of late registration disempowered families and put the idea of school choice out of reach for many of them. Late registration often happened for these families due to instability in housing, exploration of other options outside of Boston Public Schools, or the inability of the families to navigate the complex choice system. Thus, many families were given unwanted school assignments leading to further stratification in the district (Fong & Faude, 2018).

In a study looking at the ethics of pandering in the Boston Public Schools choice system, another complex system is highlighted that has led to inequities in access to higher tiered schools (Levinson, 2015). Students, when entering kindergarten, are given a “basket” of schools based on their home address (Levinson, 2015, p. 40). The set of 10 to 18 schools are determined by including two schools in the Tier I category, at least two

more schools in Tier I or Tier II, and an additional two schools in Tiers I, Tier II, or Tier III. In addition, all schools close in location are included as well as schools for English Language Learners or Special Education as appropriate (Levinson, 2015). However, “the assignment algorithm does not take into account demographic features of the children” (Levinson, 2015, p. 41). Thus, schools remain segregated by race and socioeconomic status. The Boston Public School system purposefully gave greater choice preference to middle-class families in order to attract them and use their social capital to better the entire district (Levinson, 2015).

A study regarding the counselors’ position in assisting students through the complex choice process in New York City was conducted and found that New York City has the most complicated high school choice policies in the nation (Sattin-Bajaj et al., 2018). In this system, all eighth-grade students must submit a single application with up to 12 high schools out of 750 they would like to attend in order of preference. Administrators expected parents to be the final decision maker regarding what is the right choice for their children. However, many school counselors had to assume this role when parents were unable to support due to the complexity of the system. Counselors often blamed parents for not living up to their responsibilities (Sattin-Bajaj et al., 2018). School choice could reduce inequality by providing access to higher quality schools for all students. However, “choice policies privilege parent autonomy and require parents to navigate complex administrative processes. These features may limit the extent to which choice levels the playing field” (Sattin-Baja et al., 2018, p. 47).

Economies of Scale. Other barriers to accessibility can be seen in the lack of economies of scale. Often, schools of choice are smaller with less staff to support students. Thus, students with discrete learning disabilities that require specialized staff are often excluded from the school of choice (Levin, 2012). This is simply based on the fact that the school does not have the appropriate human resources to support the student's need. Therefore, the student does not have access to the school of choice. However, it is possible to set guidelines that support effective choice systems through the use of economies of scale, transaction costs, externalities, along with freedom of choice, productive efficiency, equity, and social cohesion (Levin, 2012). Overall, the fact that location, perfect information, and economies of scale can act as barriers to access for all, the perfect competition assumption that schools accept all students is negated (Betts, 2005).

Families of students with disabilities and the factors they consider when choosing were explored, and it was found that the most common factor that is considered by parents is the availability of Special Education programs to meet the needs of disabled children. These programs are not always available due to size and personnel capacities. Other factors that are considered by the parents of students with a disability included class size, school-parent communication and engagement, teachers' attitudes about the disability of the student, children's well-being, distance from home to school, and parents' beliefs about the disability (Mawene & Bal, 2018).

Opportunity Hoarding. Opportunity hoarding can be seen in many aspects of a school choice system. As defined by Reeves (2017), opportunity hoarding occurs when

middle-class families access “valuable, finite opportunities by unfair means” (p. 18). Opportunity hoarding helps the children of those middle-class families while significantly reducing the opportunity for others (Reeves, 2017). Ways to create equity in choice for all students was explored in Boston Public Schools. Some of the suggestions include limiting the number of quality schools in each student’s “basket,” using quality seats for schools instead of quality schools to build a student’s “basket,” giving priority in the lottery system to students from low-income neighborhoods, or adjusting assignments after the lottery for better equity (Levinson, 2015, p. 46). However, to families that would lose opportunity while trying to create equitable access, these suggestions have been starkly opposed (Levinson, 2015). This is only one example of opportunity hoarding by those who have a better chance for access, which is normally more affluent families who are not from minority backgrounds.

Four qualitative data sets that focused on middle-class families’ engagement in the school choice process in Boston, Chicago, and Philadelphia were examined, and the idea of opportunity hoarding once again resurfaced. Middle-class parents sought out the highest quality schools and work to secure access to them. These families chose to live in areas where they will have access to quality schools. In addition, the parents “monitor the work of teachers and intervene when deemed necessary” (Posey-Maddox, Kimelberg, & Cucchiara, 2016, p. 907). Parents also pursued agendas that conflicted with what was best for the economically disadvantaged families. In one instance, a principal refused to bring a program to the school that would jeopardize the diversity of the school. Many of the middle-class families were unhappy with the decision and chose to remove their

children from the school. These instances continued to perpetuate the social exclusion that many economically disadvantaged families experience (Posey-Maddox, Kimelberg, & Cucchiara, 2016). Understanding the barriers of access for students is essential for school leaders when deciding how to respond to school choice implementation.

School Choice and School Reform

Large urban districts have recently adopted the portfolio management model as one way of implementing school choice. According to Bulkley, Henig, and Levin (2010), the cause for the implementation of the model is unclear and lacks evidence-based arguments. Nonetheless, this model has been instituted in districts such as Chicago Public Schools, New Orleans Public Schools, New York City Public Schools, and Philadelphia Public Schools. These school districts instituted a model of schools that include traditional direct operation schools, semi-autonomous schools, and charter schools or those contracted to independent parties (Bulkley, Henig, and Levin, 2010). The core elements of portfolio management models are autonomy of schools that are high performing, accountability for all schools, school closures when schools are failing, and central office roles that support low-performing schools and give autonomy to high performing schools. In addition, political influences can be seen throughout this model whether through the reason for implementation or the responsibility of the state and local government in selecting school leaders (Bulkley, Henig, and Levin, 2010).

Marsh, Strunk, and Bush (2012) discuss the implementation of school choice as school reform and the need to address low-performing schools. In an era where schools are facing rigorous accountability measures, there exists a vast amount of pressure to

improve low-performing schools. Many policymakers suggest turnaround models to address persistently underperforming schools (Marsh, Strunk, & Bush, 2012). Marsh, Strunk, and Bush (2012) in one study of Los Angeles Public School Choice Initiative, found that the implementation of the school choice had many challenges and some successes. Leaders attracted diverse stakeholder participation, developed an implementation plan with support from multiple organizations, and ensured transparency at each point in the process. However, leaders found challenges in gaining buy-in, communicating and engaging with parents and the community, attracting an adequate number of applicants for all schools, and ensuring competition did not detract from characteristics that would ensure a successful implementation process. The researchers also indicated that more research is needed regarding the implementation of schools of choice as a response to needed school reform (Marsh, Strunk, & Bush, 2012). Regardless of why, many school districts are turning to school choice implementation as a model of school reform.

School Choice, the Superintendency, and School Leadership

In an era of widespread choice options, superintendents and other school leaders are often left with a decision on how to respond to competition. According to Jabbar (2016), “school leaders are positioned as economic actors that are inherently agentic; that is, they have the agency to pursue their interests without structural constraints” (p. 400). In the early implementation of choice options, a study of superintendents revealed that they did not view choice as impactful on student enrollment (Graham & Ruhl, 1990). There was no substantial evidence or drastic decreases in student enrollment that

superintendents found alarming. Superintendents rejected all of the reasons that proponents of school choice considered valuable such as choice will lead to improved parental involvement, choice will improve the quality of all schools, choice will lead to greater educational opportunities for economically disadvantaged families, and choice will help identify districts that need special services (Graham & Ruhl, 1990). Instead, the superintendents believed that choice was just another name for school vouchers, choice will lead to racial segregation, choice encourages athletic recruitment, and choice will lead to district consolidations (Graham & Ruhl, 1990).

In a study focused on California's districts of choice, superintendents showed their dissatisfaction with the choice process (Kronholz, 2014). Within California's districts of choice policies, students were able transfer freely in and out of districts. However, superintendents collectively were reluctant to take students from other districts. Advocates of choice criticized superintendents claiming that they have a desire to keep a monopoly on the education system (Kronholz, 2014).

Proponents of choice argue the introduction of competition within the education system would lead to improvements at all schools (Friedman, 1955; Betts, 2005). However, this belief is based on the assumption that superintendents or other school leaders will respond to school choice by improving teaching and learning. However, in a study of school leaders in New Orleans, it was found that school leaders were not responding to choice with improvements in teaching and learning. Instead, school leaders responded by increasing marketing efforts for their schools (Jabbar, 2015, 2016).

Regardless of the schools' status, all school leaders reported that they marketed their schools among an atmosphere of high competition (Jabbar, 2016).

According to Teske, Schneider, Buckley, and Clark (2000), leadership is critical to reform. If schools are to improve as a result of choice implementation, then school leaders must focus on a set of reforms and nurture the process in order to see true change (Teske, Schneider, Buckley, & Clark, 2000). Thus, superintendents' views on choice are not always favorable and response efforts to choice are inconsistent.

Decision-Making and the Superintendency

Several studies have been conducted around superintendents and their decision-making processes with respect to various contexts. In a study by Hart (2018), it is stated that "superintendents face complex dilemmas, including increased accountability, diverse demands from students and staff, the explosion of technology, and conflicting views from governing boards and communities" (p. 21). There are trends among the studies regarding superintendents decision-making processes. The first trend that emerges is the focus on doing what is best for students. Superintendents and those making decisions with them often place the final decision on meeting student needs. The students' well-being is placed over concerns for adults. Thus, keeping students' best interest served as a moral compass for superintendents in regard to decision-making (McClellan, Hyle, & Ivory, 2010; Hart, 2018).

The next trend that emerged from the research studies regarding decision-making is that the process for most superintendents is collaborative. Many superintendents noted creating committees to be part of the decision-making process. Superintendents found

value in the collaborative decision-making process and shared that they worked well with committees to make strategic decisions for students. The committees were generally made up of a variety of stakeholders within the school district. The committee members have a vested interest because they believed they were part of a meaningful process that persuaded the superintendent's decision (Brazer, Rich, & Ross, 2010).

The superintendent and other political influences also played a part in the decision-making process. Though the process was often collaborative, the decision of the committee too often was in line with the thoughts of the superintendent (Brazer, Rich, & Ross, 2010). Within the collaborative decision-making process, consulting counts. Committee decisions were often influenced by district leaders and fellow superintendents after they consulted with them (Hart, 2018). In addition, committees were influenced by the public context. As discussed by Hart (2018), "participants were influenced by how they thought stakeholders would respond to their decisions" (p. 19). This influence took place when committees sought input from those that would be affected by the decision in an effort to avoid creating mistrust (Hart, 2018). Ultimately, despite a collaborative process, committees were often influenced by superintendents, district leaders, or other stakeholders (Brazer, Rich, & Ross, 2010; Hart, 2018).

Superintendents also note that district context of the decision matters. Each district has its own set of circumstances that will influence the decision. For instance, district size can greatly influence the decision. With varying size of districts, multiple roles and responsibilities of district leaders have to be considered. Funding and resource allocations are different among districts of various sizes. In addition, districts are

accountable to various degrees and in different ways to their community and school boards. Given all of the differences among school districts, a decision made for one, may not be the best for another; therefore, context matters greatly when making decisions (McClellan, Hyle, & Ivory, 2010; Hart, 2018). Though there are common trends in the general decision-making processes of superintendents, a process distinct to the implementation of school choice is not evident.

Discussion

The literature highlighted aspects that negate the idea that competition is good for all, choosers and non-choosers. Evidence does not support the thought that competition leads to improved student achievement and increased instructional innovation and quality teaching and learning. In addition, the literature highlighted the exclusion of students due to location, marketing, and lack of resources to support all students. Therefore, in order to achieve the true intent of competition, reform in school choice organizations is needed to inch closer to perfect competition. While perfect competition may not be realistically attainable, using the seven assumptions of perfect competition to guide reform will help create more accessibility for all students (Betts, 2005). The idea of school choice is to ensure that all students have access to the best competition to meet their needs. This can only be achieved if barriers to accessibility, such as location and transportation, perfect information, and economies of scale, are removed, along with a true increase in instructional innovation and quality teaching and learning takes place in schools of choice and traditional public schools. Through these practices, student outcomes will improve for all. Despite the evidence surrounding schools of choice and whether or not they

contribute to success for all in schools, many school districts are implementing school choice as a way to address the need for school reform. School leaders must make decisions about how to reform or reconstitute low-performing schools.

In traditional public-school districts, school choice can be implemented in various fashions. Choice options within traditional public-school districts often include choice or magnet programs, stand-alone schools of choice with a specific specialization, or open enrollment. Choice or magnet programs are specialty programs that are placed at campuses within a school district. As defined by Berends and Waddington (2018), “magnet schools have a specific focus, mission, and instructional design” (p. 2). With magnet schools, students within the school district have the option of transferring to the school with the specialized program. Examples of choice or magnet programs include integrating a liberal arts academy within an already existing campus and implementing a two-way dual language program on specific campuses where students can then transfer in order to gain access to the specialty program. Magnets or choice programs are implemented on already existing campuses and not all students on the campus necessarily have access to the specialty program.

Open enrollment is another way for students and parents to choose within a public-school district. Babington and Welsch (2017) define open enrollment as “open enrollment programs allow students to attend schools outside the school district in which they reside” (p. 414). This choice option allows parents to have access to other districts while allowing the receiving district to benefit from increased enrollment. Many districts employ an open enrollment system in order to increase enrollment.

Stand-alone schools of choice are also implemented in some public-school districts. When referring to a stand-alone school of choice, the researcher is referring to any whole school that was developed or repurposed and is now open to all students within the district to choose from. A stand-alone school of choice often times has a curriculum and instruction focus such as a school that implements project-based learning as its school-wide instructional method or an early college high school where students are able to graduate high school while having simultaneously earned an associate's degree. No matter the form, traditional public-school districts are implementing a variety of school choice options.

When deciding to implement school choice and the specific model to employ, districts are left with many options to consider. While research exists on the various school choice models and school choice itself, only general decision-making research related to the superintendency is readily available. As indicated in the literature, the process that superintendents often follow to make decisions is one that is collaborative, that is focused on doing what is best for students, and that is often influenced by the context of the district and politics that surround the district (Brazer, Rich, & Ross, 2010; McClellan, Hyle, & Ivory, 2010; Hart, 2018). However, there is a gap in specifically identifying a process that districts employ to make decisions about implementing school choice. Do the general processes for decision-making found in the literature also pertain to decisions regarding school choice implementation?

There is a substantial amount of research surrounding school choice and a growing amount of research regarding reform efforts related to school choice. In

addition, general research exists regarding the decision-making processes school leaders employ. However, there is little research focused on the decision-making process of school leaders directly aimed at school choice implementation. Marsh, Strunk, and Bush (2012) indicate that further research is needed regarding the implementation of school choice within school district. Thus, this study was warranted to identify the decision-making process superintendents and school leaders employ when deciding whether to implement schools of choice. The study focused on two school choice models, stand-alone and choice programs, as part of the research. This adds to the body of research by connecting school choice and superintendent decision-making. The study is also helpful to future superintendents that are considering the implementation of school choice.

Conceptual Framework. The researcher sought to identify the decision-making process employed by a school district and how the leadership dimensions and the framework of district functions of the superintendency are addressed in the decision-making process. Olivarez (2013) indicates that preparing superintendents for executive leadership requires combining administrative, instructional, and political leadership theory with real world situations. Thus, the position of the superintendent and executive leaders can be viewed through these lenses. These dimensions compare to the three types of leadership shared by Johnson (1996) regarding the changing role of the superintendent. In this work, Johnson (1996) indicates that the superintendent must embrace the educational, political, and managerial leadership types in order to be influential. Educational leadership entails creating a vision for the school district and becoming a transformational leader by getting teachers to see the superintendent beyond the

classroom, helping teachers and principals invest wisely in the most impactful resources, and empowering staff to be collaborative risk takers (Johnson, 1996). Political leadership involves the superintendent understanding the context of the district and its constituents in order to ensure alignment of visions and lead purposefully. In addition, political leadership requires the superintendent to lead from the lens of equity and excellence for all students in the school district (Johnson, 1996). Managerial leadership requires the superintendent to use authority and structure in a way that ensures best practices and develops leadership within the schools. Influential superintendents use managerial levers such as collaborative round table meetings, proactive planning, and holding values at the core, in order to create change and improve the school district as a whole (Johnson, 1996).

Olivarez (2013) and Johnson (1996) are similar in their frameworks regarding leadership dimensions. Olivarez's (2013) instructional dimension aligns to Johnson's (1996) educational leadership type. Both authors directly addressed the political dimension that is so important for the superintendent to employ. Olivarez's (2013) administrative dimension aligns with Johnson's (1996) managerial leadership style. Given these dimensions, one conceptual framework employed in this study was to analyze the data through the administrative, instructional, and political leadership dimensions.

The superintendent dimensions provide an overview for the framework of district functions of the superintendency, another conceptual framework that the researcher employed (Olivárez, 2010). The process of deciding to implement school choice can be

influenced by the context of the district and by the various functions of a school district. School districts are organized to carry out specific functions that together encompass the district day to day operations.

Ten distinct functions within the school district define the leadership responsibilities of the superintendent. Though the functions are distinct, they often overlap. The framework of district functions include (a) governance operations; (b) curriculum and instruction; (c) elementary and secondary campus operations; (d) instructional support services; (e) human resources; (f) administrative, finance, and business operations; (g) facilities planning and plant services; (h) accountability, information management, and technology services; (i) external and internal communications; and (j) operational support systems: safety and security, food services, and transportation (Olivárez, 2010). Governance operations encompasses the implementation of the duties and responsibilities of school boards and superintendents as outlined within Texas Education Code, which includes structure and organization of the school board and formal processes for management oversight and policy development. Curriculum and instruction ensures that the state curriculum is organized and provided to campuses efficiently, including any local customizations of the curriculum. Elementary and secondary campus operations involves short and long-term planning to monitor excellence in learning for all campuses including specialized campuses. Instructional support services includes the instructional related support services provided within a district such as counseling, library services, health services, community and parent outreach, and wrap around services for families. Human Resources handles all aspects of

employee relations. Administration, finance, and business operations includes oversight of all district finances of which the superintendent must take an active role. Facilities planning and plant management includes the operation and evaluation of existing facilities and the planning new construction with the other functions in mind. Accountability, information management, and technology services includes the processes and procedures that integrate communication, data collection and analysis, and monitoring of accountability for academic standards and federal and state compliance. External and internal communications strive to establish and maintain a positive image of the district while minimizing any negative press. Operational support systems includes safety and security, food services, and transportation as essential components to address the basic needs of students and staff (Olivárez, 2010). Ultimately, the framework of district functions work together to provide a quality education for all students and can have an effect on the decision-making process of whether to implement school choice.

Using the framework of district functions as a conceptual framework highlighted the interaction between functions when making crucial district decisions and how each function is impacted, whether positively or negatively, contributing to the overall decision. Thus, the two conceptual frameworks allowed the researcher to analyze data given the leadership dimensions and the framework of district functions.

Summary

This chapter provided a review of the literature regarding school choice implementation, superintendents' perspectives regarding school choice, and superintendents' general decision-making processes. The chapter was divided into 10

sections. The first section provided a general overview and introduction into school choice. The second section reviewed the economic theory of competition within education. The third section reviewed Texas state policies regarding school choice. The fourth section examined the effects of school choice on student outcomes. The fifth section examined barriers to accessing schools of choice by all students. The sixth section reviewed school choice as a means for school reform. The seventh section reviewed perspectives of superintendents regarding school choice. The eighth section provided an overview of general decision-making processes within the superintendency. The ninth section discussed the findings and further research that is needed regarding superintendents' decision-making process regarding school choice implementation. The last section was a summary of the chapter. Chapter three presents the research design of the study.

Chapter III: Methodology and Procedures

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the methodology and procedures of this research study. The chapter readdresses the purpose of the study and research questions. The chapter also includes the research method and design, the population and sample, the data collection protocols, the data collection procedures, the data analysis procedures, and a summary of the chapter.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to determine the decision-making process employed to decide whether or not to implement schools of choice within one school district, what factors contributed to the exploration of school choice implementation, and how the process was influenced by the factors contributing to choice implementation.

This qualitative single case study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What factors contributed to the exploration of school choice implementation by the school district and its leaders?
2. What process for deciding whether to implement schools of choice did the superintendent and school district employ?
3. How did the factors related to the implementation of school choice influence the decision-making process?

Research Method and Design

Epistemology and Theoretical Perspective. The epistemology is the theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and methodology. The epistemology

that informs the theoretical perspective of this study was constructionism.

Constructionism is

the view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of integration between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context. (Crotty, 1998, p. 42)

This study focused on constructing meaning of the actions of the superintendent and district leaders to identify a decision-making process for school choice implementation. Therefore, constructionism is the appropriate epistemology that informed the theoretical perspective. The theoretical perspective that informed the methodology was interpretivism. An interpretivist theoretical perspective “looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world” (Crotty, 1998, p. 67). Therefore, as part of this study, the researcher sought to make interpretations of the decision-making processes of a superintendent, thus, of the social world. Therefore, the interpretivist theoretical perspective was appropriate for the study (Crotty, 1998).

Methodology. This study employed a qualitative research methodology. A constructionism epistemology and an interpretivism paradigm are what qualitative researchers often invoke (Crotty, 1998). As defined by Creswell (2013), “qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2013, p. 44). Characteristics of qualitative research include the use of a natural setting, the researcher as a key

instrument, the use of multiple methods, the use of inductive and deductive complex reasoning, the use of participant meanings, the emergent nature of the research design, the ability of the researcher to convey their background and how it impacts the study, and the researcher's development of a complex picture of the problem. In addition, qualitative research is employed when a problem or issue needs to be explored because there is a need to study a group or population, identify variables that are not easy to measure, or hear silenced voices (Creswell, 2013). This study took place in the school district that was studied, thus in a natural setting. The researcher played a key role in conducting the data collection and studied a group of decision-makers within the school district. Therefore, the aforementioned aspects of qualitative research were employed proving that the methodology was the most appropriate for this study.

Qualitative research focuses on process theory, which allows the researcher to “see the world in terms of people, situations, events, and the processes that connect these” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 29). The explanation of the research involves analyzing how some situations and events influence others. The strengths of qualitative research lie in the intellectual and practical goals. The intellectual goals include (1) understanding the events, situations, experiences, and actions of the participants in the study; (2) understanding the context of the situation for participants and how the context influences actions; (3) understanding the process for which events and actions occur; (4) understanding new phenomena and generating new theories; and (5) developing explanations or conclusions for why situations occurred. The practical goals include (1) generating results and theories that are credible to those that are participants and others;

(2) conducting research that is intending to improve practices, bodies of research, and policies; and (3) engaging, with the participants of the study, in action, participatory, collaborative, or community-based research (Maxwell, 2013). The researcher sought to identify the decision-making process within a school district, thus the process for which events and actions occur, and the goal of the study was to understand a decision-making process that could inform other school district superintendents. Qualitative research as a methodology was most appropriate for this study.

Given the definition and goals of qualitative research, it was most appropriate to be employed in this study. The goal of the study was to identify the decision-making process of a superintendent and school leaders regarding the implementation of school choice. Since the researcher studied a phenomenon and sought to understand the thoughts and decisions of individuals, it was most appropriate to use qualitative research so that the researcher could engage with the participants in the study. However, there were limitations to employing qualitative research methodology. A main disadvantage was that the findings from the qualitative research study may not be transferable to other situations with as much certainty as a quantitative approach because it was not based on statistical analysis that can be generalized. In addition, since the researcher interacted with the participants, a level of interpretation was left to the researcher. Therefore, through the constructionist epistemology, the researcher sought to make meaning through the interactions of human beings and data gathered throughout the collection process. The participants may have used a word or phrase to mean something different than how the researcher interpreted the information; therefore, quality measures to ensure

trustworthiness were used by the researcher. In the analysis of data, each finding was determined to be equally as important, which is different than determining frequencies in a statistical analysis (Atieno, 2009). Throughout the research process, the researcher considered these limitations and implemented trustworthy measures to overcome the limitations as appropriate.

Research Design. The research design of this study was a single case study. According to Schramm (as cited in Yin, 2014)

the essence of a case study, the central tendency among all types of case study, is that it ties to illuminate a decision or set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what result. (p. 15)

Since the definition of case study is so focused on decision-making and given the purpose of this study, a case study was most appropriate. In addition, a case study should be used when research questions involve asking how and why questions, the control of behavioral events is not required, and the focus is on contemporary events. One of the rationales for a single case study was the common case. This involved capturing the circumstances and conditions of an everyday situation because it could contribute to lessons learned regarding the processes such as decision-making (Yin, 2014). Thus, a case study research design was most appropriate for this study. A holistic single case study was employed, where “the global nature of an organization or of a program” was examined (Yin, 2014, p. 55).

Population and sample. Purposeful sampling was employed to select the school district. Purposeful sampling is a method of sampling that is more strategic and

purposive. In order to choose the single district to study, the researcher employed a one-phase approach to screening candidates. A one-phase approach is used when there are fewer than 12 cases being considered (Yin, 2014). Through this process, the researcher created a small pool of districts who had implemented multiple schools of choice and had met standard based on Texas Education Agency accountability reports. The researcher then inquired about the districts from people who are knowledgeable about each (Yin, 2014). Once the limited qualitative data was collected, the researcher ranked the districts in order of preference, focusing on districts that had implemented schools of choice within the last 10 years, and completed the district request for research from the top choice school district (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014). The Texas school district chosen for the single case study was one that implemented more than one school of choice within the past 10 years in order to remain competitive with the surrounding schools of choice near the district and meet the unique needs of all students within the district. In addition, the district met standard according to Texas Education Agency accountability reports, thus demonstrating a level of student success. This study focused only on independent school district implementation and not a partnership or collaboration with charter or private schools.

Once the school district was chosen, the first participants were the superintendent and a school board member. Then, snowball sampling was employed to determine other district staff that would add to the findings of the study. Snowball sampling is a method of sampling that allows current participants in the study to identify for the researcher other potential participants to be included in the study (Miles, Huberman & Saldana,

2014). Participants that were considered as part of the sample were those who played a key part in the decision-making process for implementing schools of choice as evidenced through interviews with the superintendent and school board member. The researcher interviewed six members of the decision-making process.

Data Collection Protocols

This study rested heavily on semi-structured interviews to gather data. An interview guide was developed. Semi-structured interviews allowed for an interview guide to be used while leaving room for flexibility within the interview process so that the researcher could ask follow-up or clarifying questions (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). The interview guide consisted of an introduction to the interview protocol that is unrecorded, an introduction to the study and questions that would be asked, and, lastly, the interview questions. Questions included in the interview guide aligned with the research questions to allow the researcher to draw conclusions based on the data. In order to ensure technical adequacy of the interview guide, three pilot were conducted using the instrument with people in like positions to those who would be actual participants such as district leaders. Feedback was gathered from the pilot interviews and revisions to the protocol were made as a result of the feedback in order to ensure that the interview guide would assist the researcher in soliciting useful data targeted at the research questions (Johnson & Christensen, 2017).

The researcher also conducted document reviews to gather data pertinent to the decision-making process. Documents were used to triangulate data that was collected through interviews (Hays & Singh, 2011). Documents reviewed included Texas

Academic Performance Reports, Texas Education Agency School Report Cards, local innovation plan, five-year strategic plan, and district website (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). The researcher first reviewed school district documents that were public prior to conducting the interviews. The researcher then requested additional information from the superintendent and other participants during the interview process regarding which documents were most informative for the school choice decision-making process. The researcher used reflexive journals and field notes as the data was collected from interviews and document reviews. A reflexive journal allowed the researcher to reflect on biases throughout the data disaggregation process, while field notes were observational notes that the researcher took during the interview process, document review, and general observations (Johnson & Christensen, 2017).

Data Collection Procedures

In order to minimize the risk to human subjects, ensure all subjects consent and are fully informed about the research and any risks, and promote equity in human subjects research, the researcher applied for review and approval of the study from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to beginning the data collection process. The researcher relied on prior knowledge of school choice districts and recommendations from those in the field to narrow the focus to one school district.

Once the district was chosen, the researcher completed the request for research application dictated by district policy within the school district and provided evidence of IRB approval as required. Prior to each interview an introduction was read and a consent form, if the participant agreed to the interview, was signed. In the introduction, the

participant was reminded of the purpose of the study and that all identifying information, including name and district, would be masked and pseudonyms would be used.

Interviews were conducted within the school district by the researcher. A recording device was used for the interview and the researcher took field notes during the interview. The researcher secured times and locations as deemed appropriate by the participant. In addition, documents that were reviewed were obtained by the researcher through the school district and Texas Education Agency websites. Document reviews were conducted by the researcher offsite.

Data Analysis Procedures

In order to thoroughly analyze the data that was collected, the researcher employed the data analysis spiral (Creswell, 2013). The data analysis spiral consists of six steps: (1) data organization, (2) reading and memoing, (3) describing the data into codes and themes, (4) classifying the data into codes and themes, (5) interpreting the data, and (6) representing and visualizing the data (Creswell, 2013). Through the use of this process, the researcher was able to thoroughly analyze the data to draw conclusions and answer the research questions.

Data Organization. In this phase, the researcher organized the data collected from interviews, the document review, field notes, and the reflexive journaling into files. Interviews were transcribed verbatim. The researcher then uploaded the transcribed interviews, field notes, and documents into Dedoose to prepare for the further data analysis.

Reading and Memoing. During this phase, the researcher began by reading each interview transcript multiple times before beginning to break it into themes or codes. The idea was to get a sense of the interview as a whole and be immersed in the details (Creswell, 2013). In addition, the field notes and documents were read thoroughly multiple times. Throughout the reading process, the researcher made notes in the margin and began to form initial codes (Creswell, 2013).

Describing and Classifying the Data into Codes and Themes. In this phase, the researcher began by describing the district to provide context for the case (Creswell, 2013, p. 199). First and second cycle coding methods were employed deductively to analyze the data. The researcher moved through the codes starting with more general codes to make sense of the overall content as it related to each research question, to more specific codes to make meaning of the data within each research question (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). As described by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), first cycle coding methods are assigned to chunks of data as a way to initially summarize the data segments. The first cycle codes are further analyzed using a second cycle coding method which “is a way of grouping those summaries into a smaller number of categories, themes, or constructs” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014, p. 86). For the first cycle coding, holistic coding was used. Holistic coding applies a single code to a large group of data in order to see the overall contents and potential categories that are developing. Holistic coding is an exploratory method of coding based on deduction and what the researcher assumes could be present in the data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Holistic codes were derived from the research questions. Next, the researcher

used second cycle coding. Second cycle coding is a way of grouping larger chunks of data from first cycle coding into smaller chunks of data identifying emergent themes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The researcher first employed pattern codes. Pattern codes help to pull large amounts of data into smaller and more meaningful chunks. Pattern codes were used to identify themes under each research question (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The researcher further analyzed the data looking for evidence of the two conceptual frameworks. One framework was the leadership dimensions stated in chapter two (Johnson, 1996; Olivarez, 2013). The other framework was the framework of district functions (Olivarez, 2010). Pattern codes were again employed to identify how the frameworks surfaced in the data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). These coding methods were also be applied to the document review and field notes as a way of triangulating data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014).

Interpreting the Data. During this phase, direct interpretation was used. Direct interpretation is when the researcher looks at a single instance and attempts to draw meaning from it without other instances, thus interpreting what was occurring in the single case of a superintendent and school district. The researcher then looked for connections and patterns across codes and organized the codes into larger themes. This interpretation was completed after the first cycle and second cycle coding. Finally, the researcher made naturalist generalizations about what was learned from the data potentially to apply the knowledge to similar cases (Creswell, 2013).

Representing and Visualizing the Data. Lastly, the researcher represented the data and created visuals to illustrate the findings. The representations of the data help to

illustrate a clearer picture of the findings. The findings are presented through narrative, tables, and figures as appropriate (Creswell, 2013).

Technology Use. The researcher used Dedoose to upload transcripts, the document review, and field notes. The coding processes were applied to each piece of data collected. The researcher used Dedoose to organize the data by codes. In addition, Dedoose assisted the researcher in identifying quotes that contributed to the findings of the study. The researcher used the codes to organize the data that were collected through interviews, the document review, and field notes. This organization helped the researcher identify the factors that contributed to the exploration of school choice, the decision-making process employed by the school district leaders, and how the factors influenced the decision-making process.

Reflexive journals were used throughout the process as a way for the researcher to consider the data that is being gathered in light of researcher bias. For instance, based on the researcher's positionality, bias exists. A reflexive journal was a way for the researcher to think through the data that was collected keeping in mind the researcher bias. It was a tool for the researcher to self-reflect on the bias in an effort to overcome it during the data disaggregation process (Johnson & Christensen, 2017).

Trustworthiness

Researcher's Role and Positionality. The researcher served as an observer and interviewer within the research process. The researcher had a prior connection to the school district being studied. In addition, the researcher is a current public educator in a campus leadership role. The researcher has worked in school districts that have

implemented schools of choice models. However, the researcher's experience as a campus administrator skewed their view of schools of choice as inequities were experienced. Reflexivity is the process by which the researcher "actively engages in critical self-reflection about his or her potential biases and predispositions" (Johnson & Christensen, 2017, p. 300). Thus, the researcher used reflexive journals to document reactions and self-reflections based on the researcher's biases and how the biases may influence the data analysis process.

Quality Measures. In order to ensure trustworthiness, several quality measures were used by the researcher. All quality measures were used as a way to ensure that researcher bias or error did not influence the data collection or analysis process, thus skewing the findings (Hays & Singh, 2011). Member-checking was employed to promote authenticity and sample adequacy. Hays and Singh (2011) offer various ways of member-checking to ensure that the data collected through interviews accurately represents the thoughts of the participants. Member-checking was used by seeking clarification of the participant by the researcher throughout the interview process. Answers were restated for accuracy and additional input was asked for in order to ensure that the participants felt the interview process reflected the actual intent of the answers. In addition, transcripts of the interviews were provided to the participants in order to ensure accuracy (Hays & Singh, 2011).

Triangulation of data sources was also implemented to ensure data trustworthiness and address data saturation. This form of data triangulation "refers to using multiple methods to illustrate themes" (Hays & Singh, 2011, p. 2011). The data collected from

the interviews were coded to identify commonalities within and among the interviews. This data was then triangulated with coded data from the document review, field notes, and reflexive journals (Hays & Singh, 2011). The multiple data sets were used to illustrate phases in the decision-making process of the school district that emerged throughout the data analysis.

Summary

This chapter outlined the methodology and procedures of this research study. The chapter began by restating the purpose of the study and research questions. The chapter then defined the research method and design, the population and sample, the data collection protocols, the data collection procedures, and the data analysis procedures. Chapter four presents the findings of the study.

Chapter IV: Findings

The purpose of this study was to determine the decision-making process employed to decide whether or not to implement schools of choice within one school district, what factors contributed to the exploration of school choice implementation, and how the process was influenced by the factors contributing to choice implementation. This chapter presents the qualitative single case study data addressing the following questions:

1. What factors contributed to the exploration of school choice implementation by the school district and its leaders?
2. What process for deciding whether to implement schools of choice did the superintendent and school district employ?
3. How did the factors related to the implementation of school choice influence the decision-making process?

This chapter includes a description of the selected site for the single case study, represented by the pseudonym Central ISD. The chapter also offers a profile of the participants in the study. Pseudonyms were used to protect the anonymity of the school district and participants. Following the description of the participants, the chapter provides the results of the study and an analysis of the emerging themes using two conceptual frameworks. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Description of the Selected Site

Central ISD is a small suburban school district located in Central, Texas. It serves students that live in Central as well as a neighboring large urban community. The school

district serves a student population of about 9,500 students according to the 2018 – 2019 Texas Academic Performance Report from the Texas Education Agency. The ethnic distribution of the students in Central ISD includes 20.1% African American, 65.6% Hispanic, 7.3% White, 0.2% American Indian, 3.8% Asian, 0.2% Pacific Islander, and 2.9% Two or More Races. Approximately 72.4% of the students are economically disadvantaged and 73.3% of the students are considered At-Risk. Students served in specialized programs include 5.2% Section 504, 40.2% English Learners, and 9% students with disabilities.

Central ISD is home to approximately 1,400 staff and serves students in prekindergarten through twelfth grade. The district is comprised of 17 schools, with one school being a school within a school. Table 1 represents the breakdown of the schools within the district.

Number of Schools	Description of Schools	Grade Levels Served
1	Early Learning Center	Prekindergarten 3 and 4
8	Elementary Campuses	Kindergarten – 5 th Grade
3	Middle School Campuses	6 th Grade – 8 th Grade
1	Small High School Campus	9 th Grade – 12 th Grade
1	High School Campus	9 th Grade – 10 th Grade
1	Senior High School Campus	11 th Grade – 12 th Grade
1	Early College High School (school within a school)	9 th Grade – 12 th Grade
1	Alternative High School Campus	9 th Grade – 12 th Grade

Table 1. A description of the Central ISD schools.

Central ISD is home to several schools of choice programs. District leaders pride their innovation in serving students through three strands: fine arts, project-based learning, and International Baccalaureate. Each of the schools within the district are a part of one of the strands. Schools within the strands are open for intra-district transfers unless the school has an application process. There are also stand-alone schools of choice including a middle school focused on project-based learning, a small high school focused on project-based learning, a Texas Education Agency designated early college high school, and an alternative high school campus focused on accelerated learning. Each of these schools follow an application process to determine student enrollment. The project-based learning schools implement a lottery system from the application in order to form the student enrollment. In fall 2007, Central ISD leaders opened a small high school campus that focused on project-based learning as its primary instructional model in an effort to improve student academic achievement data at the high school level. The district partnered with a national organization that specializes in project-based learning through a specific instructional model. The campus very quickly began to experience success. The district expanded schools of choice and added the innovative strands in 2017. Table 2 lists the schools in Central ISD, the associated pathway(s), whether there is an application requirement, and the grade levels served at the school.

Description of Schools	Innovative Pathway	Application Required	Grade Levels Served
Early Learning Center	Multiple	No	Prekindergarten 3 and 4
Elementary School 1	Fine Arts	No	Kindergarten – 5 th Grade
Elementary School 2	Fine Arts	No	Kindergarten – 5 th Grade
Elementary School 3	IB	No	Kindergarten – 5 th Grade
Elementary School 4	IB	No	Kindergarten – 5 th Grade
Elementary School 5	PBL	No	Kindergarten – 5 th Grade
Elementary School 6	PBL	No	Kindergarten – 5 th Grade
Elementary School 7	PBL	No	Kindergarten – 5 th Grade
Elementary School 8	PBL	No	Kindergarten – 5 th Grade
Middle School 1	IB	No	6 th Grade – 8 th Grade
Middle School 2	Fine Arts	No	6 th Grade – 8 th Grade
Middle School 3	PBL	Yes	6 th Grade – 8 th Grade
PBL High School	PBL	Yes	9 th Grade – 12 th Grade
High School	Multiple	No	9 th Grade – 10 th Grade
Senior High School	Multiple	No	11 th Grade – 12 th Grade
Early College High School (school within a school)	Multiple	Yes	9 th Grade – 12 th Grade
Alternative High School	Multiple	Yes	9 th Grade – 12 th Grade

Table 2. A list of Central ISD schools detailing innovative pathways and school of choice application requirements.

In August 2016, the Central ISD District Advisory Team approved the Local District Innovation Plan. This plan outlines areas of innovation for the district including an innovative curriculum, instructional methods, governance of campuses, parental involvement, and community participation. The plan then outlines the exemptions sought from the Texas Education Code to support the implementation of the outlined areas of

innovation. In addition to the Local District Innovation Plan, Central ISD leaders partnered with an outside agency to create a five-year strategic plan. The strategic plan was approved by the Central ISD Board of Trustees in June 2017. The goals under the strategic plan were developed in five categories: Student Success, People, Service, Innovation, and Resources. The Local District Innovation Plan and five-year strategic plan guide the work around student achievement through innovation for the district.

The 2018 – 2019 Texas Academic Performance Report indicates that Central ISD earned a B accountability rating with Needs Intervention for the 2019 Special Education Determination Status. This was an improvement in rating over the year before. According to the 2017 – 2018 Texas Academic Performance Report, Central ISD earned a D accountability rating with Needs Intervention for the 2018 Special Education Determination Status.

According to the Central ISD website, there are many areas the district prides itself in. The district has earned 42 Texas Education Agency distinctions within the last five years. The district earned an A rating for the Financial Rating Integrity System of Texas. Central ISD is the only school district to offer a K-12 project-based learning curriculum. They save \$290,000 per year through energy efficiency programs. They have implemented the Reading on the Go mobile library. Central ISD offers free and tuition-based prekindergarten for three and four-year-old students. They offer 22 agriculture program courses and 12 Career and Technical Education program certifications. Central ISD has a 91% graduation rate.

Description of Participants

Six participants were purposefully selected using snowball sampling and included in the study. The superintendent of schools and school board trustee were the initial participants. The subsequent participants were selected based on the interview with the superintendent. The following is a brief description of each participant.

Superintendent of Central ISD. The Superintendent of Central ISD is an African American man with over 28 years of experience in education. He has been in this position since June of 2016. Prior to joining Central ISD, he was an area superintendent in a west Texas school district serving approximately 23,000 students. Other experience for the superintendent includes superintendent of a small rural school district in Texas, Executive Director of Secondary Education and Student Services, middle school and high school principal, special education teacher, and athletic coach.

The Superintendent of Central ISD has served as an adjunct professor for two institutions of higher education in Texas. He holds a Bachelor of Arts, a Master of Education, and a Doctor of Education degrees. In addition, he has a superintendent, principal, and special education teacher certifications.

School Board Trustee. The school board trustee that participated in this study is a Hispanic man that has served on the school board since May 2014. At the time of the study, he served as school board secretary. The school board trustee is a long-time resident of Central, Texas and is a graduate of Central ISD.

The school board trustee served for four years in the United States Marine Corps immediately after graduating from high school. During his time in the Marines, he

received a hazard material and biochemical certification. Once he left the Marines, he began working for a semiconductor company near Central, Texas. He has worked for that company for 24 years as a material analyst, department lead, and on the manufacturing floor. The school board trustee has one child that attends a school of choice within Central ISD.

District Level Administrator A. District Level Administrator A is an African American man with 30 years of experience in education. He has served in his position since July 2016. His responsibilities at the time of the study included overseeing academics and accountability for Central ISD. He is a member of the superintendent's cabinet and was an integral part in the expansion of school choice within Central ISD.

District Level Administrator A's previous experience includes Assistant Superintendent for Academics and Human Resources, middle school principal, elementary school principal, assistant principal, teacher, and athletic coach. In addition, he has served as professor, adjunct professor, and assistant director at two institutions of higher education. He holds a Bachelor of Science, a Master of Education, and a Doctor of Education degrees. He holds a superintendent, principal, and professional teacher certifications.

District Level Administrator B. District Level Administrator B is a Hispanic man with 29 years of experience in education. He has served in his role since April 2017. He joined the district just after the initial expansion of schools of choice within Central ISD. His job responsibilities at the time of the study included overseeing the operational

aspects of the district. He is a member of the superintendent's cabinet and became an integral part in the expansion of school choice once he joined the team.

Prior to joining Central ISD, District Level Administrator B has previous experience in neighboring school districts as an assistant superintendent, assistant director, high school principal, high school and middle school assistant principal, and teacher. He holds a Doctor of Education degree. In addition, he has a superintendent, principal, and professional teacher certifications.

Director A. Director A is a white man with 16 years of experience in education. Director A joined the district in 2015. He currently oversees student information services for Central ISD. When he started in 2015, he was an information systems and data coordinator. He was not part of the early discussions regarding school choice expansion; however, the superintendent began to depend on his expertise approximately six months into the decision-making process. He was then promoted to a director level position and played an integral role in the expansion of school choice, providing the various data sets needed to inform the decision-making process.

Prior to joining the Central ISD team, Director A served in a neighboring school district. There he gained experience as a site coordinator, applications technician, applications manager, and student information systems analyst. Director A has an associate's and bachelor's degree in information technology. In addition, he is a Certified Texas School Business Specialist in PEIMS, has an Advanced Business Analytics certification, and has a SAP Business Objects: Crystal Reports certification.

Director B. Director B is a white woman with over 30 years working with students in various capacities. She has been with Central ISD for 24 years. Throughout her career with the district, she has overseen the many aspects of parental and community outreach. Her duties at the time of the study included overseeing partnerships and wellness for the district which includes partnerships development and engagement, non-profit services oversight, mentoring, health services, behavioral and primary care services health center, foster care services, pregnancy-related services, and referral and resource support.

Director B’s previous experience includes Coordinator of Mentoring Programs, Federal Programs Consultant/TEXSHEP Grant Writer, Director of Student and Family Support Services, Social Worker, and Child Abuse Investigator. She holds a bachelor’s degree in Social Work. Director B was an integral part in school choice expansion by supporting parental outreach, communication, and community partnerships.

Table 3 provides a demographic description of each participant at a glance including ethnicity, gender, and years of service in Central ISD.

Participants	Ethnicity	Gender	Years in Central ISD
Superintendent	African American	Man	4
School Board Trustee	Hispanic	Man	6
District Level Administrator A	African American	Man	4
District Level Administrator B	Hispanic	Man	3
Director A	White	Man	5
Director B	White	Woman	24

Table 3. A demographic description of study participants.

Results

The findings of the single case study are presented within the context of each research question. Major themes emerged from the data, and each theme is supported with details from the interviews and document reviews. The themes were identified through the data analysis process of the participant interviews and supporting document reviews. In addition, the major themes were collectively explored through the lenses of two conceptual frameworks.

Question 1: What factors contributed to the exploration of school choice implementation by the school district and its leaders?

In fall 2007, Central ISD leaders opened a small high school campus that focused on project-based learning as its primary instructional model. The district partnered with a national organization that specializes in project-based learning. The campus very quickly began to experience success leading to an expansion of this instructional model. Under the current superintendent, school choice greatly expanded via innovative pathways and additional stand-alone schools of choice in 2017. Certain factors led to the exploration of expanding school choice prior to the 2017 implementation including competition with neighboring charter schools, student achievement and interests, and building on early successes.

Competition. When examining the data from interviews with Central ISD leaders and school board trustee, competition emerged as major factor that led to the

exploration of school choice expansion. For the purposes of this study, competition refers to public school districts vying for student enrollment with neighboring charter schools or private schools. An internet search revealed seven charter schools within 10 miles from Central ISD. Thus, district leaders shared that they were losing students to local charter schools. Central ISD's superintendent stated:

And the biggest part of that is I took the outside influence of choice because if you look at our district on the [street name] corridor, we have multi-charter schools, private schools, whatever you want to call them, sitting by, pulling our kids. We lose almost 2,000 students every year from [charter and private] schools of choice.

The superintendent went on to say that the district wanted to develop programs that were different from what the students were receiving in charter and private schools, thus enticing these students to return to Central ISD. In the exploration efforts employed by Central ISD leaders, it was important to not duplicate programs that were already being implemented by neighboring charter schools, but in order to be competitive, it was important to offer something different. As District Level Administrator A stated:

So, of course, one major hurdle[s] was, of course, winning back our students from charter schools. And so, as we looked at what we were trying to implement, of course, we didn't want duplication of efforts. So we look[ed] to ensure that they weren't doing this at the other schools, especially at the charter schools, and we wanted to make sure that our programs were done with high fidelity and ensuring that as students who were involved, that there was tremendous benefit, and keeping an eye on the motivation factor.

Thus, to remain competitive, Central ISD leaders sought to ensure that any choice expansion included programs of choice that were not available at surrounding charter and private schools.

By implementing school choice and providing different options for parents, Central ISD experienced an increase in student enrollment. District leaders believe that the implementation of choice strands enticed families to return to Central ISD. As District Level Administrator A indicated:

As a matter of fact, I think the first year that we did this, we brought back about 300 students that were going to other schools. And we were able to definitely see a very strong interest, especially from students who are in charter schools and did not have these opportunities definitely.

An example of students returning to the district was shared by District Level Administrator B. He shared a comment from one parent regarding the return of the family to the school district:

As a matter of fact, I can tell you a parent quote. She said, "We left the [Charter 1] program--", no, we left [Charter 2]. Either [Charter 2] or [Charter 1]. "We left the [Charter 1] program to come [to Central ISD] because we wanted our kids to be a part of the [Central ISD] school of choice. . ." And so, we had never really even thought of ourselves that way until it was kind of put to us that way. I mean, we knew we were creating, and we weren't really even calling ourselves schools of choice. We were creating schools that were options.

Central ISD leaders worked to market specifically to students who lived within the school district boundaries but were not enrolled in the school district and inform their parents of what Central ISD was offering unlike any charter or private school. Through his in-depth data analysis of students who lived within the district but were not enrolled in the district, Director A explained the following:

We[‘ve] got over 1,000 kids that are living within our district that are going to other schools. The charter schools are cannibalizing our enrollment. They're taking our kids away.

Competition was a driving factor for exploration. It was important to district leaders to negate preconceived notions about Central ISD and provide options for students and families. As Director B stated:

. . . knowing based on [Superintendent's] previous experiences considering various options for families. And we had to be more creative and innovative because we were competing among or between charter schools that are moving into the area, and thinking out of the box, and really making it more appealing for families to come to the [Central] Community. And because of the past ups and downs, I can say that, everybody knows, right? Some of the stories in the news and some of the negative coverage that [Central] was experiencing, I think it was [Superintendent's] desire to really dive deeply to provide options for our students and families.

Ultimately, the increase in student enrollment in Central ISD was evidenced in the Texas Academic Performance Report that listed an enrollment of 8,834 students in the 2016 – 2017 school year, just prior to the school choice expansion. The Texas Academic Performance Report for the 2018 – 2019 school year listed an enrollment of 9,445 students, an increase of about 600 students.

Student Achievement and Student Interests. Another factor that emerged as a need for exploring school choice implementation in Central ISD was student achievement and student interests. Student achievement is defined by academic performance measured through the accountability system under the Texas Education Agency. Student interests is defined by the interests students have in various innovative academic programs. A review of the 2016 – 2017 Texas Academic Performance Report revealed that Central ISD earned a Met Standard rating. A further analysis of the 2016 – 2017 Texas Education Agency School Report Cards for Central ISD revealed that 12 campuses earned a Met Standard rating while one campus earned an Improvement Required rating,

the lowest rating issued for Texas public schools. In addition, a review of the 2017 – 2018 Texas Academic Performance Report, the first year of school choice expansion in Central ISD, discovered that Central ISD earned a Met Standard rating and a D letter grade, the lowest Met Standard rating issued by the accountability system. The Central ISD School Report Cards for 2017 – 2018 indicated that 13 campuses earned a Met Standard rating and two campuses earned an Improvement Required rating, the lowest rating issued for Texas public schools. According to intervention requirements from the Texas Education Agency, a campus that earns an Improvement Required rating for two years must submit a turnaround plan to the Commissioner of Education for approval. If the campus receives a third year of an Improvement Required rating, the approved turnaround plan must be implemented. Despite the poor student academic achievement revealed by the accountability system, Central ISD’s established project-based learning high school that opened in 2007, earned a 92-overall score in the 2017 – 2018 which is equivalent to an A letter grade. In addition, the campus earned seven distinctions. In 2016 – 2017, according to the School Report Card, the Central ISD project-based learning high school earned a strong Met Standard rating with six distinctions thus, showing multiple years of success.

It appeared from the data that potentially expanding schools of choice and innovative pathways, students would be motivated by doing something they enjoy in school while increasing their academic achievement. As District Level Administrator A, who oversees academics and accountability stated:

[Positive] aspects were being able to expand students' horizons, being able to allow students to now have another venue and do things that they really like to do as sort of a drive or as a motivator for them to want to come to school, stay in school. So, as a student is performing in a choir or let's say they're doing a dance routine, they have an opportunity to actually go out and perform for other students. And that's the fact that they're now the star and instead of being a star in math or in reading, now to be a star in dance. That transferred to academic performance as well because they knew for them to get there, they had to actually do well in their academics. The same thing with International Baccalaureate, although we're at the preliminary stages, and there's one school that has applied for candidacy, but the process of training teachers and seeing the schools that were beginning to immerse in the IB program, seeing the academic performance. Now, even in the STAAR test, for example, I know [principal] across at [elementary school], they're an IB campus, and he swears by it now because he's seeing what it has done for teachers and how they educate their kids.

Student academic achievement data were one of the most valuable data points that guided the district to move forward as indicated by District Level Administrator A:

Looking at our performance with the grades, or letter grades, . . . we call it our assessment data that we continuously see and looking at the upward trends that we were seeing in the data. I think that was a very big payoff for us implementing those [strands]. Because, as you know, before we did this, we [were] an F district.

Academic achievement data were examined throughout the process. Director B indicated that demographic data were valuable, but the team also valued the academic data trends of the whole district. She stated:

So the two [district directors pulling data] would work together to, not only provide demographic information. But then, [District Director] would look at some of the academic deficiency or gains across because [we] had to make sure that that was being considered . . .

Thus, student academic achievement data were influential in considering the implementation of school choice and innovative pathways.

In addition to student academic achievement data, personalized learning was an instructional strategy district leaders explored as part of school choice implementation

and expansion. Personalized learning is an instructional strategy that is highly focused on student interests. Therefore, as they were exploring, student interests were taken into consideration, District Level Administrator A stated:

Because we were very much interested in personalized learning. This is where, of course, individual students have an opportunity to learn because of their interests, their different modes. And so as we looked at exploring what would best be suited to a more personalized learning, we came across different strands.

The implementation and expansion of school choice positively impacted student academic achievement in Central ISD. Central ISD's superintendent noted that the district had overcome many challenges in student academic achievement and credited it to the implementation and expansion of school choice. He explained:

. . . and we just kind of like, "Boom. Let's do it." And we did, and it worked out to our advantage. And, again, we were a D-rated [district] at that time, and in this past year, we became . . . a B-rated . . . district. And so, I mean, I contributed a lot of that to [implementation of school choice].

In addition, the superintendent acknowledges that being strategic about the pathways assigned to struggling campuses was important. He detailed this strategic decision by stating:

And yes, I put [International Baccalaureate] in my most struggling schools, so that's where IB went, [Improvement Required Elementary School] and [Improvement Required Middle School] were the two struggling schools at the time. [Improvement Required Elementary School] got out of IR-- I mean, [Improvement Required Middle School] is still in IR. So, I wanted a strong academic program to be able to build teachers' perspective and pedagogy in the training aspect of it to get them to a level that's going to get kids in a better spot before they get to the high school level. So again, it was those decisions that I felt needed to be part of the vision that I put forth, And I sold it. I sold it to the community, and I sold it to the board. And they supported it. And here we are now. Hopefully in this next school year, I have two IB elementary schools that will be certified in IB, and we're still struggling with [Improvement Required

Middle School] to get that endorsement, so we're going to keep pushing it down the road, and eventually they will end up having their certifications as well.

School choice and innovative pathways also resulted in an increased motivation for students. This led to an improvement in student academic achievement for all students. District Level Administrator A shared:

Because, as you know, before we did this, we're an F district. Today, we're sitting at a B district because students are now motivated, or more in-tuned, with what we're doing.

Data suggest that exploration and eventual implementation was the right decision as evidenced by the academic successes of the students. Director A indicated that academic achievement via accountability ratings benefited students greatly, he also noted other successes as documented by the data including attendance rates and discipline data as he explained:

I've been in public education for 16 years, and I have never worked harder these past 3 years. But it's been very rewarding because you see the benefits for the students. When you start seeing things like we've had our highest attendance rate in the past four years. We went from a D rating to a B rating. Our discipline was going down. Our students are starting to go state-level championships in all UIL athletics and fine arts. So, when you start seeing the fruits of your labor pay off like that through student work - not through adults, through student work - that's when you know you did the right thing.

The academic gains were notable as documented by the accountability ratings. The Texas Academic Performance Report for 2018 – 2019 indicates that Central ISD received a letter grade of B, which is a two-letter grade increase over the previous year. A further review of the School Report Cards for each campus indicates 14 campuses received a Met Standard rating, which are letter grades A, B, C, and D, and one campus received an Improvement Required rating or F letter grade. One of the previously rated

Improvement Required or F letter grade campuses in 2017 – 2018 received a C letter grade for the 2018 – 2019 school year. Table 4 illustrates the comparison of letter grade distribution for Central ISD campuses in the 2017 – 2018 and 2018 – 2019 school years. Letter grades were implemented in the 2017 – 2018 school year; therefore the 2016 – 2017 school year was not included in the table.

Letter Grade	Rating	Number of Campuses	
		2017 – 2018	2018 – 2019
A	Met Standard	1	2
B	Met Standard	3	4
C	Met Standard	7	7
D	Met Standard	2	1
F	Improvement Required	2	1

Table 4. A comparison of letter grade distribution for Central ISD campuses for the 2017 – 2018 and 2018 – 2019 school years.

As illustrated by the Texas Education Agency accountability data for Central ISD, the district experienced a positive impact on student achievement after implementing school choice and innovative pathways.

Building on Early Successes. Another major factor that prompted Central ISD leaders to consider the implementation of new schools of choice and expansion was the early successes of the district. For the purposes of this study, early successes were defined by state accountability data or were directly identified as a success by the participants of the study. Prior to the expansion of choice within the district in 2017, Central ISD leaders opened a stand-alone high school of choice with a focus on project-based learning in 2007. This campus experienced many academic successes as demonstrated through state accountability data. Such success was also shared by most

participants who gave credit to project-based learning. In addition to the project-based learning model of instruction, fine arts was noted by all participants as a point of pride for Central ISD. Thus, district leaders wanted to capitalize on the success of project-based learning and fine arts by creating a pathway for each from kindergarten through 12th grade.

Project-based learning. In fall 2007, Central ISD leaders opened a small high school campus that focused on project-based learning as its primary instructional model. The district partnered with a national organization that specializes in project-based learning. The campus very quickly began to experience success, and consistently is the highest performing school in Central ISD. According to the Texas Education Agency School Report Card for 2016 – 2017, this campus earned a Met Standard rating with six distinctions. In 2017 – 2018, the campus earned a Met Standard rating with 7 distinctions. The scale score received was a 92, which is equivalent to an A letter grade. In 2018 – 2019, the campus earned an A letter grade, a 91 scale score, a Met Standard rating, and 4 distinctions.

Given the noted successes, most participants in the study cited this model of learning as one that the district needed to build on through school choice expansion and innovative pathways. Considering what to focus on, Central ISD’s superintendent stated:

And really trying to focus . . . , we talked about [how project-based learning] schools were very instrumental in putting [Central] on the map. So, the [project-based learning] curriculum was a good focal point. There are also, in the district, building [project-based learning] schools to supplement the [project-based learning] high school perspective. . . What would be really good is [if] we focused in on [project-based learning] . . . And so why don't we just create additional

pathways or feeder pattern schools that will encapsulate a theme process of choice that families would be able to have and choose from.

The success of the project-based learning implemented in the single high school was an avenue to implement a strand of personalized learning. The need to explore a more personalized learning atmosphere for students was explained when Districted Level

Administrator A stated:

And so as we looked at exploring what would best be suited to a more personalized learning [experience], we came across different strands. And we obviously have seen the [project-based learning] strand very successfully at the high school. So we wanted to expand upon that, which we did, to the middle and the elementary schools.

Based on the successes at the project-based learning high school campus, a feeder middle school was planned for and implemented. Director B recognized this expansion, saying:

And then, with the two, with [project-based learning high school's] successes, that was paramount in adding and building [project-based learning middle school]. And that was already in the plans before [Central ISD's superintendent] even started. Because of the successes of [project-based learning high school, we wanted a feeder school and start these students earlier.

Therefore, since the project-based learning instructional model had shown great successes at the high school level for Central ISD, it was important for district leaders to create a feeder pattern of schools to build on those successes which would also include fine arts.

Fine arts. In addition to the successes of project-based learning within the district, fine arts was recognized as a point of pride for Central ISD. As a result, the district wanted to capitalize on the successes of the fine arts program as a motivator for success for students. All district leaders and the school board trustee recognized fine arts

as a success and desired innovation to expand opportunities for students by creating a strand. As Central ISD's superintendent explained:

We did a lot of fine arts across the district, and we did it really well in all schools. And so why don't we just create additional pathways or feeder pattern schools that will encapsulate a theme process of choice that families would be able to have and choose from.

The academic value of the fine arts program was echoed by other participants and was seen as a way to personalize learning for students. District Level Administrator A indicated that as they were considering choice, fine arts was a strength they wanted to build on when he recalled:

And then we looked around to see, "Okay. What are some big strands that students can tap into, and allow them to feel or be more connected with school?". . . And with the fine art[s] strength, the various activities or various programs that are involved with that, we have the dance, the tap, gymnastics and so on. So we are able to capture a vast majority of kids within those programs. Because one thing we didn't want to do was keep it to where students were basically-- there were small numbers and students were eliminated. And we also wanted to have something that would be of interest to kids. . . . But we wanted something else that would pique their interest as far as mobility, as far as something that all kids would relate to. So we went along with [fine arts].

The final decision to move forward with school choice implementation was heavily influenced by the successes of the fine arts programs. Therefore, the school board was invested in the idea of school choice because the fine arts strand would be a part of it. As Director B recollected:

And then there was [school] board buy in [with] some of the leaders who [were] working in the district at the time, like [director] over Fine Arts because of all these successes and all the awards that the district had received over gosh, the last five years. [It's] been pretty phenomenal that they thought if [director is] over it, a believer in it, they were a believer in it . . .

Successes of the fine arts program in Central ISD yielded growth in student interest in this pathway. Therefore, facilities were needed to support the growth. As a result, the recently passed 2019 Central ISD Bond included a new fine arts facility.

Referring to fine arts, the school board trustee shared:

Some of the obstacle was, of course, the growth and the facilities that we were request[ed], for example, fine arts facility. Everyone uses the one at the current or older high school, the 9th – 10th grade campus. And . . . in the bond, we just approved . . . a 2200-seat facility, which probably would be one of the largest in the area.

Given the success of fine arts in secondary campuses, Central ISD leaders determined they should expand upon this strength by creating a pathway of opportunities for students to be involved in fine arts from elementary through high school. As a result, elementary students are now able to participate in programs such as mariachi and dance.

The previous examples illustrate the factors that led to the exploration of school choice expansion within Central ISD. These factors included competition with neighboring charter schools, student academic achievement and student interests, and building on early successes. As a result, school choice was greatly expanded via innovative pathways and additional stand-alone schools of choice in 2017.

Question 2. What process for deciding whether to implement schools of choice did the superintendent and school district employ?

Since its initial implementation of project-based learning school choice in 2007, the district decided to expand schools of choice and innovative pathways of choice under

the current superintendent's leadership. The process that emerged included several phases: setting a vision, gathering data, soliciting community input, researching programs based on data, and creating tightly aligned implementation plans.

Setting a Vision. Throughout the data gathering process, the participants indicated that the decision-making process for deciding whether or not to implement school choice started with Central ISD's superintendent setting a vision for academics and potential school choice expansion within the district. For the purposes of this study, setting a vision refers to establishing a well-developed idea for how the district will respond to student needs. Central ISD's superintendent established a vision very early on. However, while he created a vision, he recognized that his team needed to be part of the process:

I think it's important as your team-- I can be the one with the vision, but your team have to solidify all that. Being able to kind of flush things out about what the needs are, and how do we do that. What do we need to do? What's the steps we need to take? And we mobilized.

So, in the visioning process, several members of the superintendent's cabinet were involved in the initial conversations. District Level Administrator A, District Level Administrator B, Director B, the Communications Department, the Curriculum and Instruction Department, the Career and Technical Education Team, the Director of Transportation, the Director of Fine Arts, and the Advanced Academics Team were some of the individuals listed by the participants as part of the initial discussions. This team became instrumental to then begin the process of moving the superintendent's vision

forward in gathering more data and eventually creating implementation plans to present to the school board.

Having a visionary leader was essential to this decision-making process as indicated by District Level Administrator B:

So one of the things you're probably going to notice is that implementation of Schools of Choice, or any administrative effort, is often times interrupted by change in leadership. Many of the decisions about creating school choice at [Central ISD] took place prior to me being here. The superintendent of schools . . . started about four years ago, and it is the main driving force for the schools of choice here at [Central ISD]. I started approximately six months after he did, and so many of those things were already underway by the time I joined the cabinet. But you have to, in my opinion, have to have a leader who is visionary, who sees the need and who knows what he wants to implement and how he wants to implement it. And then you have to have a Board that allows them to do that. So, I was just able to join in on the logistical pieces of it, to try to help make it happen.

Director A, while not involved in the initial discussion, soon became an integral part of the process. According to Director A, the superintendent having a vision and communicating it while developing leaders was crucial to the process. Director A stated:

I think one of things that worked well was making sure that [superintendent] had a team, and he took the time to tell everybody what that vision was and it was basically like branding . . . I mean, you did not hear him talk without saying, "We want to be a destination district," and so having that vision and getting that leadership and-- I've been in public education for 16 years and while I haven't always been a leader, one thing that I think has gone very well is that this district takes the time to develop leaders. They put the right professional learning and development in place to develop leaders, and they bring everybody to the table, campus principals, assistant principals, associate principals, they bring in counselors, they bring in people who you wouldn't think that have an impact . . . So valuing people's input and, also, encouraging them to come to the table and provide that. And I think as a district we have done really well on that planning part and bringing the right people to the table.

When asked about the timeline for Central ISD to begin heavily considering moving toward school choice expansion, Director B stated:

I would say within that first-- gosh. Time flies by, but it was within that first year he was here. I mean he was getting on it quickly. I mean he was moving and launching that fast. So, I think prior to his entering the district. And he hasn't answered this for me, but I'm just assuming he did his own research and came up with some ideas that he thought would be effective.

According to participants, it became apparent that the superintendent set a vision for the school district regarding expansion of school choice. Then, he created a team to help determine a process for making the vision come to fruition based on data, community input, research-based programs and tightly aligned plans for innovation.

Gathering Data. Once the vision was established and communicated to stakeholders, the next phase in the decision-making process for Central ISD was to collect data that would help them make the best decision for the school district. Several types of data were considered as noted by the participants. For instance, a demographer was enlisted to understand demographic and student enrollment data since the district was losing a significant number of students to nearby charter schools. According to the superintendent, the data collected by the demographer provided a clear picture of students' anticipated needs:

Well, I think looking at enrollment, we have a demographer that comes in and gives us the demographic data three times out of the year. And so that was very instrumental in projections of how and when was the fast growth going to hit the district. And so, looking at timing of all of that, looking at timing of when buildings are going to be completed, all those factors, what type of kids come into the district. Oh, you have more special [education] kids. . . . we're like 78% Hispanic and 21% African American and then other. And then you're right here at central Texas, so you can get an influx of any [demographic] at any time, and so you have to be ready for that. But, again, it's just the data part of it is huge . . . I'd contribute that whole data analysis part of it as a key factor of success that we make in the district.

District leaders also relied heavily on internal data reports created to inform the decision-making process. Although Direct A was not initially part of the conversations surrounding school choice implementation and expansion, once the superintendent realized his abilities to provide data in a manner that was informative for the process, he then became an essential part of the process:

I was initially not involved in those conversations. I was not in a leadership role at the time. I was the data coordinator, and I was asked by [superintendent] probably six, seven months in. We were having a lot of issues with our PEIMS data. . . . And I had experience in my previous district transitioning to TEA's new system, the Texas Student Data System. And he asked me and I, again, because working in PEIMS and working with data and working with accountability, you're kind of just in it. And so, you start presenting information, especially with a new superintendent. I think it's important that central office staff provides as much as information as possible for those leaders who are making those executive decisions. So historically, what does our district look like for enrollment? Where are students coming from? Where are those density pockets? I'm really big on-- my background is business analytics and data. So, using data visualization, geospatial data, and really kind of showcasing. . . . So really kind of using data and leveraging data to make those decisions. And that's kind of how I was brought into it was leveraging data.

Student enrollment data, student transfer data, climate survey data, and student application data were all included in this phase of the process as indicated by Direct A:

Student enrollment, transfer information, like I said, we had over 1,000 students between intra and inter-district transfers so really collecting that information. I know our communications department started working with [outside agency] on climate surveys like student engagement, family engagement, and really trying to pinpoint why parents were choosing [Central ISD]. And then we had a very rudimentary process with [project-based learning middle school] in terms of their lottery application for their choice. So, we moved to a digital platform and with that digital platform we were able to collect additional data metrics where we could see where these students were coming from, what grade levels and ask those specific questions. And then that was able to allow us to have additional communication tools and respond immediately to student [populations] and asking questions and collecting that feedback.

In addition to gathering demographic and student enrollment data, Central ISD leaders also considered accountability data a primary piece of information. Director B discussed that data regarding academic deficiency and gains was essential in the decision-making process. At the time of exploration, according to the 2016 – 2017 Texas Academic Performance Report, Central ISD earned a Met Standard rating. A further analysis of the 2016 – 2017 Texas Education Agency School Report Cards for Central ISD revealed that 12 campuses earned a Met Standard rating while one campus earned an Improvement Required rating. In addition, a review of the 2017 – 2018 Texas Academic Performance Report, the first year of school choice expansion in Central ISD, discovered that Central ISD earned a Met Standard rating and a D letter grade. The Central ISD School Report Cards for 2017 – 2018 indicated that 13 campuses earned a Met Standard rating and two campuses earned an Improvement Required rating, the lowest rating issued for Texas public schools.

Gathering data was critical to the decision-making process for implementing and expanding school choice in Central ISD. While the vision had already been established by the superintendent, district leaders relied on data sets to guide the way for establishing solid implementation plans. Therefore, student demographic data, student enrollment data, and student academic achievement data were heavily considered throughout the process.

Soliciting Community Input. After Central ISD district leaders gathered data, they moved to soliciting more input from the community stakeholders, including parents and community partners. Soliciting community input was an essential phase of the

decision-making process. Input was primarily solicited through several town hall meetings that were purposefully planned by the superintendent and other district leaders to ensure the voice of stakeholders was being heard. Central ISD's superintendent recalled that town hall meetings were used to solicit feedback from parents, teachers, and students:

. . . we mobilized. And we have about . . . 35 to 40 town hall meetings, meeting with groups of teachers and parents. I had a group of elementary, middle and high school students that we met all year long, periodically throughout the year, just to . . . get their feedback on it as well. But that was very important for me, to be able to pull students, and say, "Hey, what do you want? What do you think you need?" . . . those are really key connections, where you got kids involved with decision-making, and it works really well.

Stakeholder input provided important information during the decision-making process as evidenced by the superintendent:

I think, again, it's all about being very transparent in the decision-making process. Giving people a voice to give you feedback, listen, understand what's good, bad, and ugly. And then decide on what's going to work best. And when you decide that get feedback on how that's going for you and how that's going for the people that have to distribute those decisions . . . And so, student feedback is a huge part of that process, and it shouldn't be missed. I think it's very, very important.

According District Level Administrator A, face to face community input sessions were the most beneficial. This method of data gathering was an essential part of the decision-making process. District Level Administrator A stated:

Town hall meetings, face to face discussions. It was basically giving teachers, giving parents a voice to come hear actual presentations of what we're all going to try to do. What we found is putting it on a piece of paper and sending it out would not send the right context for what we were trying to do. So, we decided to do more face to face meetings, more town hall meetings. And those are very well attended and very successful. We held it at different schools . . . throughout the community. And face to face worked very well. And I remember there was one person that had some opposition, I believe, to us changing . . . fine arts. But they

were misinformed about what we were trying to do and [town hall meetings] helped.

In person meetings and open door policies also helped to ease the anxiety or fears that some parents had as the district considered such a large shift in the way they provided opportunities for students. Director B acknowledged these efforts:

I think that [families] were excited about options. They were concerned about how it would all pan out. And so, some of the questions that [superintendent] was presented with is how is [the] fine arts program in the elementary strand [was] different from any other elementary school, and what's that going to look like, and what are going to be the offerings. And so, I don't think initially we had all those answers. But [superintendent] always had an open-door policy for families to come in and have that conversation. And because of that, I think people were more at ease. And then beyond that, [district leaders] provided a lot of forums for families to come and listen and hear about the various options.

Accessibility of feedback sessions was an essential part of this phase of the decision-making process. The superintendent worked to ensure that stakeholders were able to attend meetings that met their individual scheduling needs. These efforts were evidenced by Director A:

Often times when you see school districts makes decisions without talking to their constituents and talking to parents, it's a really hard pill for people to swallow . . . So, if anything, making sure that you're being transparent, that you are making sure that they are a part of that process the entire way, and that you're being equitable in providing opportunities across the board. . . . one thing that [superintendent has] done very well is making sure that he has put himself and placed himself throughout all parts of this community and district throughout all times of the day. I mean, when we were doing the town halls we were at a Mexican restaurant at 8 o'clock in the evening . . ., or he was at Starbucks at 6 o'clock in the morning, or he was going to events on the weekend and that's a superintendent's job, but you have to be able to get yourself out there and provide people [an opportunity] to provide that feedback to you. You [have] got to tell your story, but you also have to allow your parents and your community to get that input back to you.

While the town hall and face to face meetings were a large part of the data gathered throughout the decision-making process, these meetings were just as essential during the implementation phase. One barrier that families face regarding schools of choice is the application phase. District leaders made effort to mitigate these barriers as District Level Administrator B stated:

So we had the parent nights, we had the Facebook surveys, we had multiple meetings to discuss, we had the application phase, we had an explanation of the application phase, we had guidance for parents who needed assistance with the application phase, we reached out with our counselor teams to the middle schools to help students understand what they were applying for, parents understand. So, there was a lot of guiding your community through it to help them understand and know how to apply.

In addition to face to face meetings and town hall meetings, surveys were also implemented to solicit community input. The survey data pointed to school choice programs that were of high interest and some that were in need of growth as indicated by the school board trustee:

Some of the data we were seeing was from surveys that the interest that's been gained with those programs was-- I want to say exploding but almost overflowing with the interest. Now, . . . some programs have diminished a little bit. . . we use some of that [data] to tell us that, "Okay. Where is it most needed? Or where is it not?" Or, "What can we put on the back-burner right now . . . ?"

Thus, seeking community input was an essential part of the decision-making process for school choice implementation and expansion in Central ISD.

Researching Programs Based on Data. The next phase of the decision-making process in Central ISD was ensuring schools of choice implementation and expansion in the district was based on the data collected. Therefore, district leaders sought to ensure that the innovative pathways they would propose were based on student data, community

feedback, and had a research-based background of success. Through gathering data, the superintendent shared that he wanted to implement programs that not only would support student achievement in Central ISD but would also entice students to return from the neighboring charter schools to the district. He recalled:

So, what I did, I'm like, "Why not flip that motion . . . things that [charter schools] don't have, we can offer." They don't have [International Baccalaureate]. They can't afford that. They don't have a fine arts academy, where they have dance studios and things that we have set up in those fine art academy schools. . . . and they don't do [project-based learning]. And so, we had a whole lot to push out there to the community and say, "Hey. We have these things that you don't know about. They can't offer them."

In addition to attracting students back to the district, district leaders wanted to capitalize on pathways that had a strong research base for positively impacting student achievement as the superintendent explained:

So, we had to finalize. We had the [project-based learning high school]. And then, one of the things I've had experience with as well, was International Baccalaureate. Very expensive program, but works really well in schools that are trying to transform themselves when it comes to [professional development] for teachers, support for families to really engage in the academic process of what the school's doing, and the learner profile . . . [International Baccalaureate] lends itself for parental involvement and high rigor in academic performance. So, all those things, really, was the ground force for the three different pathways in the district. So [project-based learning] being already there; fine arts, we've done it really well, but how do we transform that? And then [International Baccalaureate] was something really, really new. And we can start from the ground, from the elementary level, then move it up the system. And grow it in years to come. and . . . I posed three different things to the [school] board and they ran with it.

Thus, Central ISD leaders decided at this point in the process to propose a plan that included a project-based learning pathway, an International Baccalaureate pathway, and a fine arts pathway for all campuses.

Since, Central ISD leaders partnered with a national organization when opening the project-based learning high school in 2007, they continued this partnership when considering the expansion to the feeder campuses. The partner organization's website lists several research findings regarding the impact on several of their partner campuses. Findings include students outperform their peers on state exams, students outperform their peers on SAT and ACT, campuses under this organization's model have a higher four year graduation rate and higher college and career readiness success in high-poverty communities, graduates demonstrate workforce skills, schools are a pathway for developing problem solving, critical thinking, grit, and equity pedagogies, schools enable access and opportunity for underrepresented STEM students, and students report stronger instructional methods than their peers who do not attend a project-based learning school. Thus, Central ISD leaders wanted to continue to capitalize on the successes they were already seeing in the school district by considering project-based learning as a pathway during this stage of the decision-making process.

Central ISD's superintendent had prior experience with International Baccalaureate from his previous school district. He explored this option at this phase in order to boost achievement at the most struggling campuses. A review of the International Baccalaureate website yielded the benefits of becoming an International Baccalaureate school as developing high quality programs that support development of knowledgeable and inquiring students, implementing high quality professional development that supports effective teaching and collaborative professional learning communities, and provides a worldwide network of highly respected schools sharing best

practices. Research listed on the website also included that students in the elementary and middle school International Baccalaureate programs out-performed their peers in a global International Schools' Assessment from 2009 – 2011. In addition, graduates from an International Baccalaureate high school tend to complete college faster, feel better prepared for college-level coursework, and can navigate effectively through heavy workloads and challenging deadlines. Thus, Central ISD leaders considered an International Baccalaureate pathway at this stage in the decision-making process.

While the district did not partner with a national organization for the fine arts pathway, this was a point of pride for Central ISD for several years. Central ISD students received many accolades for fine arts prior to the decision to implement and expand school choice. Fine arts were seen as a motivator for students and a way to provide a more personalized learning pathway. Thus, district leaders considered fine arts as a pathway for students due to student successes and interest at this time in the decision-making process.

Creating Tightly Aligned Implementation Plans. Creating tightly aligned plans for implementation and expansion of school choice in Central ISD was an essential phase of the decision-making process. Aligned implementation plans include any supporting plans that the district used as a framework to implement school choice for the purposes of this study. Only with the presentation of a tightly aligned plan did the school board agree to approve moving forward with school choice implementation as explained by Central ISD's superintendent:

I laid out the plan. . . . And I sold it. I sold it to the community, and I sold it to the [school] board. And they supported it. And here we are now. Hopefully in this next school year, I have two IB elementary schools that will be certified in IB, and we're still struggling with [Improvement Required Middle School] to get that endorsement, so we're going to keep pushing it down the road, and eventually they will end up having their certifications as well.

Director B also spoke to the well thought out plans that district leaders presented to the school board:

Well, the board bought into it. Right. So [superintendent], and his team presented strong plans. And then there was [school] board buy in . . . some of the leaders who [were] working in the district at the time, like [director] over Fine Arts because of all these successes and all the awards that the district had received over gosh, the last five years [have] been pretty phenomenal that they thought if [Director of Fine Arts is] over it, a believer in it, they were a believer in it. And then seeing the [Career and Technical Education] program grow some over the years and then the [Early College High School] program. And the excitement to give parents the options and families [the] option for the Early College High School program has been one that I think has been . . . [Central ISD is] more appealing because we have an Early College High School program. Because the families think that their kids, they can't afford to send their kids to college, and now knowing that they can get all those credits in that short period of time, . . . eases their anxiety and excites the kids about what their options are.

Throughout the planning process, many district leaders were involved to ensure the best plans were in place. In addition to cabinet members, leaders over Fine Arts, Career and Technical Education, Curriculum and Instruction, Advanced Academics, Communications, and Transportation were all involved. All of the leaders had to be involved in the process to ensure that all departments work together towards an effective implementation. In creating the pathways of schools for families to choose from, transportation was essential. Students would be able to choose schools based on interest, and Central ISD would provide transportation. Regarding transportation as part of the plans, Director B also shared:

The transportation department-- I can't believe that I've left that out. But the transportation director was key in the planning of all of this.

Transportation was an obstacle that the district leaders would have to overcome as referenced by Director B:

But the other primary obstacle was determining the transportation. . . . Not enough funding. Not enough busses, not enough bus drivers. It's an ongoing struggle and the positive in that, the district pays bus drivers a lot, like \$25 an hour.

Local innovation plan. In August 2016, just two months after Central ISD's superintendent joined the district, the Central ISD District Advisory Team approved the Local District Innovation Plan. This plan outlined areas of innovation for the district including an innovative curriculum, instructional methods, governance of campuses, parental involvement, and community participation. The plan then outlined the exemptions sought from the Texas Education Code to support the implementation of the outlined areas of innovation. The exemptions requested included school uniforms, teacher certifications, professional development, minimum attendance for class credit of final grade, student/teacher ratios and class size, and behavior management. This plan served as a foundation for the exploration of school choice expansion by exploring an innovative calendar and school day schedule to provide the specialized professional development needed for teachers to carry out the curriculum unique to their school's pathway. In regard to the impact of the Local District Innovation Plan on the decision to implement and expand school choice, the superintendent recalled:

I mean, that just gave us a steppingstone to being innovative. I mean, we became a District of Innovation probably three or four months [after] I took the job. We were working on that when I was in [my previous district]. I wanted to take full

advantage of it here, when I got here. I got a group of people together, got the [District Advisory Team] together and we brought it to the [school board], and we had it approved. And so, I just used that for . . . making sure that our innovative calendar—if you’ve seen our calendar we have a fall and a spring week-off break compared to some of the other school districts around us. And we still get out the same time that they get out. So, utilizing those minutes instead of days and being innovative in that way, it’s been huge. And so just taking those little bitty things to be able to innovate ourselves.

Thus, the Local District Innovation Plan set the foundation for Central ISD’s plans to implement and expand school choice.

Five-year strategic plan. In addition to the Local District Innovation Plan, Central ISD leaders partnered with an outside organization to develop a five-year strategic plan that would guide the implementation work around school choice. The strategic plan was approved by the Central ISD Board of Trustees in June 2017. The plan introduced a new motto, mission, and core values for the district. The motto is Diverse Paths to Success, and is supported by the mission

[Central ISD] will ensure the social, emotional, and academic development of every student through innovative opportunities.

The core values included respect, student success, integrity, responsibility, accountability, and support. The goals under the strategic plan were organized into five pillars: Student Success, People, Service, Innovation, and Resources. Central ISD’s superintendent viewed this plan as the integral piece of moving school choice forward in the district. He shared:

I think one of the things that was initially . . . as a new superintendent of schools, we were able to go through a five-year strategic plan process. And so, within that five-year strategic plan process, we polled a variety of different stakeholders regarding what they wanted in their school district. I mean some of the things that they liked, some of the things they disliked, just a smorgasbord of all different

types of questions that led to deeper conversations around academics, extracurricular activities, programs that we already had in the district, all those dislikes and likes. And then, we kind of just went through the process from there.

Thus, the five-year strategic plan served as the anchor and blueprint for school choice implementation and expansion.

The previous illustrations serve as evidence demonstrating the decision-making process that was employed for school choice implementation and expansion within Central ISD. The phases of the decision-making process included setting a vision, gathering data, soliciting community input, researching programs based on data, and creating tightly aligned implementation plans. Through employing this decision-making process, Central ISD leaders ultimately decided to implement and expand schools of choice in 2017.

Question 3: How did the factors related to the implementation of school choice influence the decision-making process?

In examining how the emerging factors influenced the decision-making process, the intent was to determine the effect of such factors. The data revealed that the decision-making process became student-centered, highly data-driven and research-based, and collaborative. These themes surfaced throughout the data analysis process.

Student-Centered Decision-Making. The decision-making process, as illustrated in the data, was highly focused on students, thus becoming student-centered. For the purposes of this study, student-centered refers to keeping students and their needs

as the foundation for decision-making. Throughout the study, participants indicated that decisions were highly driven by the need to motivate students to return and leave neighboring charter schools, make instructional changes to improve student achievement, create options for students that served their interests, and tailor the logistics of choice so that students had access to attend the school they chose.

Motivating students to return. When considering how to get students back, the decision-making process and plans for implementation focused heavily on creating instructional options that were innovative and not the same as those from other schools to ensure that students and families could not find these options in the neighboring charter school, thus enticing students to return to the school district. Not only would these options draw students back, but they would serve the interest needs of the students. As District Level Administrator A explained:

Okay. So, of course, one major hurdle was, of course, winning back our students from charter schools. And so, as we looked at what we were trying to implement, of course, we didn't want duplication of efforts. So we look to ensure that they weren't doing this at the other schools, especially at the charter schools, and we wanted to make sure that our programs were done with high fidelity and ensuring that as students who were involved, that there was tremendous benefit, and keeping an eye on the motivation factor. So yes, as we looked at the programs, we wanted to make sure that we were capturing the needs of students, along with the ability to motivate students in ways that we had not done before, and that helped us to formulate the directions we are going as well as looking at have these programs been successful elsewhere? And looking at, why were they successful? And lo and behold, that's allowed us to feel more confident because we had a pretty good research base to say, "Okay, these are things that students really, really love and enjoy."

Discovering the number of students living within Central ISD boundaries but actually attending other schools greatly impacted the decision-making process as referenced by Director A:

Well, one of the things, with [Central ISD's superintendent], that we kind of hit hard early on was the amount of students that were leaving our district. After I came on board as the director . . . and started providing that channel of data and looking stuff like the TEA transfers report and showing him that we have 1,800 to 2,000 students leaving our district every year-- that's hard for somebody to hear. When you hear demographers say, "Oh, you're going to be 10,000 students," and it's like, "Okay, well, we just hit 9,000. If I had 2,000 students, I'd be over that." So, what can we do to market ourselves competitively against these charters, and then for those students that are leaving, where are they going? So we tightened up our data processes in terms of making sure that we were really accurately narrowing down our leavers and our movers from the district and trying to get that information on where they were going. . . . We would take that information, and then our Director of Communications at the time would send out targeted social media campaigns and letters, and they even did door-to-door flyers. Really targeting those families in those areas and doing surveys about why they were leaving and what we could [do] to [get them to] come back. And I don't have access to a lot of that information, but that was kind of the catalyst for us to make those [decisions]. . . . Let's just not accept the fact that these students are leaving, and what can we do more to try to get them back? What are we not offering that we could be offering?

Throughout the decision-making process, the aim of motivating students, attending neighboring charter schools, to return was at the forefront, thus making the decision-making process student-centered.

Making instructional changes to improve student achievement. Throughout the interview process, participants highlighted that the decision-making process was heavily focused on making instructional changes as a way to improve low-performing schools. Two campuses received the lowest accountability rating from the Texas Education Agency, with one campus receiving the lowest rating for multiple years. Thus, changes,

especially for these campuses needed to be made. As referenced by the superintendent, once these instructional changes were implemented, student achievement was positively impacted:

And we did, and it worked out to our advantage. And, again, we were a D-rated [district] at that time, and in this past year, we became a D-rated-- I mean a B-rated ... district. And so, I mean, I contributed a lot of that to it.

According to the superintendent, instructional changes required specific pathways to be purposefully placed in order to address schools that were failing:

And yes, I put [International Baccalaureate] in my most struggling schools, so that's where IB went, [Improvement Required Elementary School] and [Improvement Required Middle School] were the two struggling schools at the time. [Improvement Required Elementary School] got out of IR-- I mean, [Improvement Required Middle School] is still in IR.

Students interests also remained as a focal point, ensuring the decision-making process stayed student-centered. As the superintendent indicated, in the process of gathering input from the community, information about student interests were collected:

... we polled a variety of different stakeholders regarding what they wanted in their school district. I mean some of the things that they liked, some of the things they disliked, just a smorgasbord of all different types of questions that led to deeper conversations around academics, extracurricular activities, programs that we already had in the district, all those dislikes and likes. And then, we kind of just went through the process from there.

Data collected regarding interests to make decisions to offer school choice options served as a motivator for students. District Level Administrator A stated:

Potential aspects were being able to expand students' horizons, being able to allow students to now have another venue and do things that they really like to do as sort of a drive or as a motivator for them to want to come to school, stay in school. ... That transferred to academic performance as well because they knew for them to get there, they had to actually do well in their academics.

Through the decision-making process, programs were decided upon and established in order to meet the diverse needs of all learners. District Level Administrator B commented:

We created programs to reach a variety of student learners, and they turned into these massive schools of choice that people are leaving those rote scripted [charter schools] for and coming back [to Central ISD] by the droves.

As a result, the decision-making process became student-centered by consistently considering the achievement and students interests to drive the process and ultimate decision.

Tailoring the logistics of school choice for students' access. According to the data, the student-centered decision-making process required creating logistical plans to remove barriers to access for students such as transportation. As indicated by district leaders, the transportation department was an integral part of the decision-making process to guarantee students could attend the school they desired. As referenced by Director B:

But the other primary obstacle was determining the transportation. Yeah. But another gain was giving families options. Some families returned to [Central ISD] knowing that there are options.

By providing transportation for students, the district enhanced opportunities for more students to attend the district. However, a strain was put on the system as a result of providing transportation. As Director A reflected,

We have a two-tier transportation system, so when you start implementing choice and you start implementing programs of choice like [project-based learning middle school] and [project-based learning high school], and you have to bus kids across all the district, it puts a strain on your transportation.

Ultimately, district leaders committed to providing transportation despite the logistical strain, in order to ensure access for all students.

It appears from the data that decisions were highly driven by the need to inspire students to return, make instructional changes to improve student achievement, create options for students that met their interests, and tailor the logistics of choice so that students had access to attend the school they chose. Thus, the emerging factors influenced the decision-making process to be student-centered.

Highly Data-Driven and Research-Based Decision-Making. The emergent factors also affected the decision-making process, making it highly data-driven and research-based. For the purposes of this study, data-driven refers to the use of various data sets to inform the decision-making process and research-based refers to programs that have national recognition as evidenced by data and presence in many different schools across the country. According to the participants decisions they made were frequently based on data in various forms and data collection was a primary responsibility for some central office leaders. For instance, Director A was expected to collect the data necessary in order to help district leaders make data informed decisions. Director A indicated:

I think it's important that central office staff provides as much as information as possible for those leaders who are making those executive decisions. So historically, what does our district look like for enrollment? Where are students coming from? Where are those density pockets? I'm really big on-- my background is business analytics and data. So, using data visualization, geospatial data, and really kind of showcasing. ... So really kind of using data and leveraging data to make those decisions. And that's kind of how I was brought into it was leveraging data.

Throughout the decision-making process several types of data sets were provided to district leaders in order to inform the final decision. As Director A shared,

Student enrollment, transfer information, like I said, we had over 1,000 students between intra and inter-district transfers so really collecting that information. I know our communications department started working with [outside agency] on climate surveys like student engagement, family engagement, and really trying to pinpoint why parents were choosing [Central ISD].

In addition, to collecting various types of data, district leaders also engaged in analyzing research-based programs in order to include them as part of the implementation of school choice. The superintendent indicated:

So what I did is I, and when I was a principal, the things schools were a very big part of...[were] math and science academies and those types of things. And so I just took that piece of it, "You know what? What would be really good is [if] we focused in on--" [project-based learning] was one. We did a lot of fine arts across the district, and we did it really well in all schools. And so why don't we just create additional pathways or feeder pattern schools that will encapsulate a theme process of choice that families would be able to have and choose from. ... And then, one of the things I've had experience with as well, was International Baccalaureate. Very expensive program, but works really well in schools that are trying to transform themselves when it comes to PD for teachers, support for families to really engage in the academic process of what the school's doing and the learner profile, all those aspects...

Thus, by relying on a decision-making process that is highly data-driven and research-based, the school district leaders were able to select and implement the most promising and successful instructional programs.

Collaborative Decision-Making. According to the data, the emergent factors affected the decision-making process to be collaborative. For the purposes of this study, collaborative refers to involving internal and external stakeholders when considering the possibility of moving forward with school choice. The superintendent highlighted that

being transparent and listening to stakeholder feedback was essential to the process. He stated:

I think again it's all about being very transparent in the decision-making process. Giving people a voice to give you feedback, listen, understand what's good, bad, and ugly. And then decide on what's going to work best. And when you decide that get feedback on how that's going for you and how that's going for the people that have to distribute those decisions and articulate them in a way that's going to be meaningful, good or bad, to the individual that's going to affect students. And so, student feedback is a huge part of that process and it shouldn't be missed. I think it's very, very important.

Taking into account both internal and external stakeholders, the district leaders gained meaningful information. Such information became an essential part of the decision-making process in Central ISD.

Internal stakeholders. Many internal stakeholders were included as part of the decision-making process in Central ISD. For instance, according to the superintendent having a team to help work out details throughout the decision-making process was crucial. Further, students at all grade levels were also involved in providing important feedback about their instructional needs. As he shared:

I think it's important as your team-- I can be the one with the vision, but your team have to solidify all that. Being able to kind of flush things out about what the needs are, and how do we do that. What do we need to do? What's the steps we need to take? And we mobilized. And we have about 40-- 35 to 40 town hall meetings, meeting with groups of teachers and parents. I had a group of elementary, middle and high school students that we met all year long, periodically throughout the year, just to kind of get their feedback on it as well. But that was very important for me, to be able to pull students, and say, "Hey, what do you want? What do you think you need?" ... those are really key connections, where you got kids involved with decision making and it works really well.

Others within the school district were also involved in the process, including directors of specific department and programs, cabinet members, and principals. As

Director B recalled:

So the Fine Arts Director... at the time. [The superintendent] hired new leadership when he came in. So [district level administrators] over curriculum and instruction. And then just general leadership from technology... And the key cabinet members, especially the executive cabinet. But then he met with all the principals and had routine meetings with them leading up to launching all of this, and then would have consistent meetings with the-- it's called the principal meetings. And they continued to hash out and talk about some of the areas of weakness and where we needed to go next.

In addition to including internal stakeholders' contributions and feedback, the decision-making process for school choice implementation also took into account external stakeholders in order to gain relevant information about the community needs and expectations.

External stakeholders. Central ISD leaders also valued the voices from the community to inform the decision-making process. As previously indicated by the superintendent, various town hall meetings took place with parents and the community in order to seek input and gather feedback throughout the decision-making process. The superintendent enlisted the support of the other district leaders to help launch the town hall meetings. He indicated:

...we did divide and conquered, and part of the strategic plan, process that we went through, the board members also had to get out and have community meetings and talk about the strategic plan and what it is and what do we do just so that they have ownership as well. So, everybody mobilized. My group, the administrators, the board, the videos, the PTA meetings at the campus level, we did all those things at the same time ...

According to the participants the generated feedback was not always positive. Therefore, it was important for the team to pause, reflect and be respectful of individuals opinions and pull back when needed. However, it was also necessary to keep ongoing communication to inform the community. As District Level Administrator B stated:

... we communicated, communicated, communicated and thought we were going to be able to do it. And then we had this rush of an obstacle, so we pulled back again and communicated and communicated again, and then presented it again and then got it passed, but it was a matter of just not rushing in and running over people. I know we could have, we had the community support, and we could have run over those 18 people and just made it happen. And there would have been resentment and bitterness. But we pulled back, communicated again, trying to bring them along, be courteous to them, respectful. And then we brought it back again and then overwhelmingly it happened, so. So, there's a tendency when you're visionary to make these things happen. And you just you go, okay, you weigh the numbers and you go, "Okay, majority's with me, let's do it." You would be wise to pull back and try to get as many people as you can on board before and don't ever think it's acceptable just to run over people because it's not-- even if it's a small number. You have to continue to try to win them.

District leaders also recognized that in addition to informing families, communication with community partners was also important and designated an administrator to connect with parents, the community, and the business partners.

Director B indicated:

I was one just trying to provide some input of how we're going to roll out some the communications to the families and to the business partners. So, [the superintendent] also had stakeholder meetings that he held at least three times a year. And during those stakeholder meetings ... we invited all stakeholders and our business and nonprofit providers to come in and learn more about it, and to ask key questions.

It appears from the data that in an effort to collaborate, district leaders used multiple avenues to engage external stakeholder input and secure feedback which in turn influenced the decision-making process. As Director B recognized:

You [have] to tell your story, but you also have to allow your parents and your community to get that input back to you.

By intentionally including internal and external stakeholder input, they made the decision-making process collaborative and include divergent ideas and different views.

District Level Administrator A indicated:

...we wanted to make this as broad-based as possible to be all-inclusive of different ideas and different views, and that's why we expanded it, so it wasn't as a specific group that had the decision making. We just put it out there. And we relied upon input from other stakeholders to finally say, "Okay, this is the way we're going to go."

The previous illustrations serve as evidence of how the emerging factors, related to school choice implementation, affected the decision-making process to implement school choice in Central ISD. As a result, the process became student-centered, highly data-driven and research-based, and collaborative.

Conceptual Framework Analysis

While analyzing the data from the study, the researcher employed two conceptual frameworks to determine how the three leadership dimensions and the district functions were reflected through the decision-making process (Johnson, 1996; Olivarez, 2010; Olivarez, 2013). The following are results of such an analysis of the data.

Administrative Leadership Dimension. The administrative leadership dimension is likened to managerial leadership. In order to be an effective leader, one must “lead by managing and manage by leading” (Johnson, 1996, p. 220). Leading through managing entails “deliberate in their use of authority, calculating in their delivery and receipt of information, and purposeful in their demands for accountability” (Johnson,

1996, p. 239). Superintendents engage in long range planning, promote coordinated practices across the organization, value collaboration and participation rather than compliance, and embraced variations between schools rather than requiring all schools to conform. All of these managerial strategies led to an effective administrative superintendent (Johnson, 1996).

In analyzing the data collected from this study, the administrative leadership dimension was reflected in four of the themes: building on early successes, gathering data, creating tightly aligned implementation plans, and influencing the process to be data-driven and research-based. Building on early successes was a factor that led to school choice exploration and implementation in Central ISD, while gathering data and creating tightly aligned implementation plans were two phases within the decision-making process that emerged in the study. Building on early successes is an example of administrative leadership because, as referenced by Johnson (1996), leading through managing involves using authority and structure strategically to support best practices. In the case of Central ISD, a proven best practice for the school district was the implementation of project-based learning at one school of choice that opened in 2007. Thus, as a result of the early successes of this school, school district leaders sought to build on these accomplishments which ties directly to using authority and structure strategically to support best practices, a part of the administrative leadership dimension.

Gathering data and creating tightly aligned implementation plans were two phases of the decision-making process that emerged in the case of Central ISD. The emergent factors leading to exploration of choice ultimately influenced the decision-making

process to be data-driven and research-based. As discussed by Johnson (1996), effective superintendents engaged in long range planning. Part of planning includes collecting data to inform the plan. In Central ISD, the superintendent and district leaders sought to create tightly aligned implementation plans based on the data they gathered from stakeholders within the district. These plans were well thought out and required collaboration from many internal and external stakeholders. The data gathering and implementation planning phases of the decision-making process and the fact that the process was data-driven and research-based in Central ISD were examples of administrative leadership because they reflected long range planning, promoted coordinated practices across the organization, valued collaboration and participation, and embraced variations between schools which are all managerial strategies identified by Johnson (1996).

Instructional Leadership Dimension. The findings that closely mirrored the instructional leadership dimension included student achievement and student interests, setting a vision, researching programs based on data, and influencing the process to be student-centered. Student achievement and student interests was a factor that led to school choice exploration and implementation in Central ISD. Setting a vision and researching programs based on data were phases identified within the decision-making process employed by Central ISD. The emergent factors that led to school choice exploration influenced the decision-making process to be student-centered.

Instructional leadership begins with a vision that is set by the leader of the organization. In general, superintendents have personal education visions; however,

“local visions must be tailored to the specific context, defining change for a particular place” (Johnson, 1996, p. 62). Superintendents, in creating a vision, must express their personal values for education, understand the context of the district, offer timely knowledge regarding research and practice, and be the sense makers of current programs and goals for all stakeholders (Johnson, 1996). In the case of Central ISD, the decision-making process employed by the district began with a developed vision from the superintendent. In addition, as evidenced in the data that was collected, the superintendent took past experiences from other districts that were effective and applied these practices to the current district after understanding the context of the district. Throughout the decision-making process that began with the vision, the superintendent in Central ISD worked to ensure what was proposed was anchored in research and served as a sense maker for internal and external stakeholders as questions arose. To ensure there was a research base to the vision, the superintendent moved to partner with two national organizations. Thus, the setting a vision and researching programs based on data phases of the decision-making process are examples of the instructional leadership dimension.

Within the instructional leadership dimension, leading to change is an essential step to transforming organizations. Leading to change requires that stakeholders believe the change is “educationally worthwhile and locally warranted” (Johnson, 1996, p. 93). In addition, stakeholders must believe that the change provides “promising answers to important problems” and “the reform must be viable” (Johnson, 1996, p. 93). In the case of Central ISD, one of the factors that led to exploration and implementation of school choice options was student academic achievement and student interests. In addition, these

factors influenced the decision-making process to be student-centered. Regarding student academic achievement, the superintendent used these data to make a case for changing instructional approaches in schools in order to improve student performance. Therefore, stakeholders were convinced that after years of underperformance in some schools and higher performance in the project-based learning high school, exploring expansion of school choice was a viable, worthwhile solution to an ongoing local problem. Thus, student academic achievement and student interests was a theme that influenced the decision-making process to be student-centered and served as an example of the instructional leadership dimension.

Political Leadership Dimension. The political leadership dimension is one that is often controversial when it comes to educational leadership. However, as referenced by Johnson (1996), “politics is central to the work of today’s superintendents, who cannot succeed as educational leaders without also being active political leaders” (p. 153). Political leadership in regard to school district superintendents involves “building coalitions of strong public support for their districts’ school, staff, and programs;” ensuring “continuous, adequate funding for their schools;” and “allocating resources among programs and schools, teachers and administrators, and instructional and extracurricular activities” (Johnson, 1996, p. 155-156). In order to be an effective political school district leader, the superintendent must “interpret the local political context” of the district, “reconcile their own leadership style with their district’s political realities,” and “establish their own base of power by building alliances, developing

influence, and contending with challengers who may be bent on making them look insignificant, ignorant, or ineffective” (Johnson, 1996, p. 157-158).

In the case of Central ISD, three themes emerged from the data reflected the political leadership dimension: competition for student enrollment, soliciting community input, and influencing the process to be collaborative. Competition for student enrollment served as a factor to begin exploring the implementation and expansion of school choice. Soliciting community input was a phase in the decision-making process employed in Central ISD. The emergent factors leading to school choice exploration influenced the decision-making process to be collaborative. Central ISD leaders gathered data that pointed to students who were living within the district attendance boundaries but were enrolled in nearby charter schools. District leaders saw this as a necessity to entice these students back to the district. Increasing enrollment directly impacts funding formulas for schools. If students attending charter school returned to Central ISD, the district would see an increase in enrollment and funding. Based on this notion, competition most closely align with political leadership which involves advocating for school funding.

Soliciting community input was an essential part of the decision-making process in Central ISD. During this phase, district leaders sought to understand the perceived needs of the community. Gathering this data gave the superintendent and district leaders a better understanding of the competitive context of which the district operated which can be understood as a characteristic of an effective political superintendent. As district leaders were gathering community input, they were also engaging the input of internal

stakeholders. Thus, the entire decision-making process was collaborative and include internal and external stakeholders. This again is an example of the superintendent and school leaders understanding the context of the district and merging their leadership with the community’s political realities. Therefore, the themes of soliciting community input and influencing the process to be collaborative serve as clear examples of the political leadership dimension.

Figure 1 illustrates how the leadership dimensions arose through the themes identified in the study.

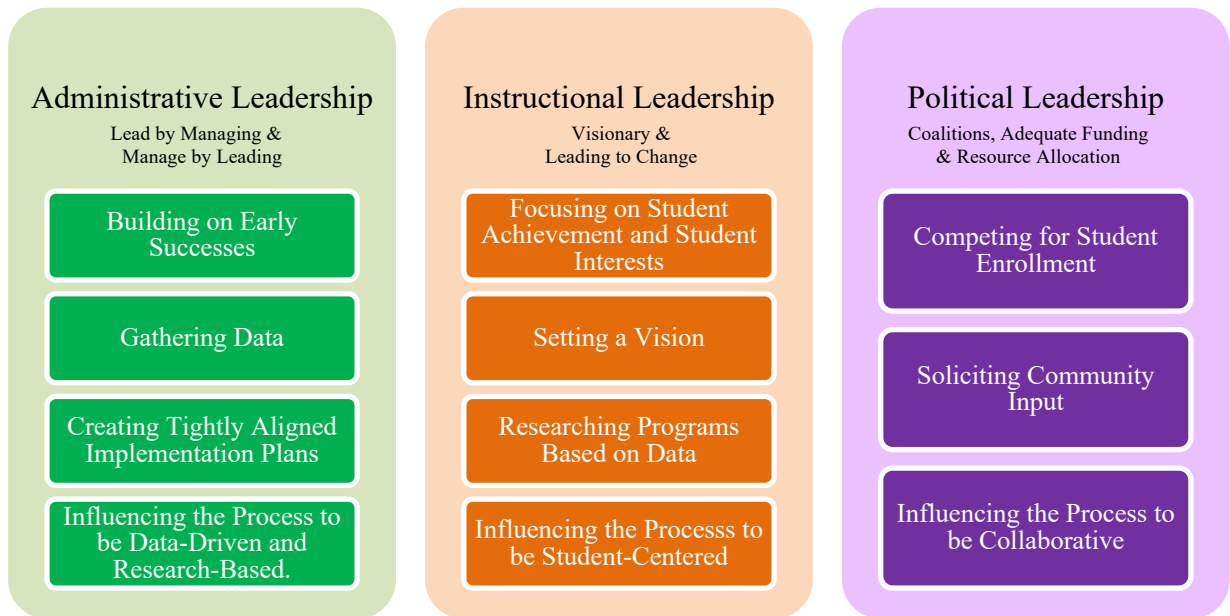


Figure 1. An illustration of the leadership dimensions as they relate to the findings of this study.

Framework of District Functions. The superintendent leadership dimensions provide an overview for the framework of district functions, the next conceptual framework that the researcher employed (Olivárez, 2010). Ten distinct functions within the school district define the leadership responsibilities of the superintendent. Though

the functions are distinct, they often overlap. The framework of district functions include (a) governance operations (GO); (b) curriculum and instruction (CI); (c) elementary and secondary campus operations (ESO); (d) instructional support services (ISS); (e) human resources (HR); (f) administrative, finance, and business operations (AFB); (g) facilities planning and plant services (FPP); (h) accountability, information management, and technology services (AIT); (i) external and internal communications (EIC); and (j) operational support systems: safety and security, food services, and transportation (OSS) (Olivárez, 2010). Using the framework of district functions as a conceptual framework highlighted the interaction between functions when making crucial district decisions.

Instructional support services and external and internal communications.

Instructional support services includes the instructional related support services provided within a district such as counseling, library services, health services, community and parent outreach, and wrap around services for families. External and internal communications strive to establish and maintain a positive image of the district while minimizing any negative press (Olivárez, 2010). These functions work closely together regarding the parent and community outreach and external communications aspects of each function.

Instructional support services and external and internal communications are two functions that were mirrored in three themes in case of Central ISD. The themes were competition for student enrollment, soliciting community input, and influencing the decision-making process to be collaborative. All three of these themes have a direct link to the community. Competition for student enrollment deals with gathering data

regarding students who live in the Central ISD attendance boundaries but do not attend Central ISD schools. District leaders sought to identify who those students and families were and understand why they were leaving the district, thus community outreach and communication. Soliciting community input was an essential part of the decision-making process employed in Central ISD. By soliciting community input regarding school choice, the district leaders exercised community outreach and external communication. Through this solicitation, data gathered informed the decision-making process making it collaborative. Thus, instructional support services and external and internal communication emerged as the prevalent functions within these three themes.

Curriculum and instruction and elementary and secondary operations. The curriculum and instruction function ensures that the state curriculum is organized and provided to campuses efficiently, including any local customizations of the curriculum. The elementary and secondary campus operations function involves short and long-term planning to monitor excellence in learning for all campuses including specialized campuses. These themes work together because curriculum and instruction creates the tools for instruction to be implemented in elementary and secondary campuses (Olivárez, 2010).

Curriculum and instruction and elementary and secondary operations are the two functions reflected in five of the themes from the case of Central ISD. Those themes included: student achievement and student interests, building on early successes, researching programs based on data, creating tightly aligned implementation plans, and influencing the decision-making process to be student-centered. Student achievement

and student interests and building on early successes were two factors that led to the exploration of school choice in Central ISD. Student achievement was directly related to the performance data of students. Two schools in Central ISD had received Improvement Required accountability ratings. In contrast, Central ISD's project-based learning high school had consistently earned favorable accountability ratings. In order to improve student achievement, district leaders sought to replicate early successes of the project-based learning high school at other campuses with the expansion of school choice options. This expansion caused the implementation plans to include changing the method of instructional delivery at campuses focused into three pathways while also establishing specialized campuses. Student interests also heavily informed plans by creating options within schools based on interests in order to motivate students academically. These factors then influenced the decision-making process employed to be student-centered in nature since it heavily focused on meeting the needs of students. Given that these themes impacted instructional delivery and resulted in specialized campuses, curriculum and instruction and elementary and secondary operations are the two functions that emerged from these themes.

Governance operations. Governance operations includes the implementation of the duties and responsibilities of school boards and superintendents as outlined within Texas Education Code, which includes structure and organization of the school board and formal processes for management oversight and policy development. This function directly relates to the school board and superintendent working together for management oversight within the district (Olivárez, 2010). While setting a vision is part of the

instructional leadership dimension, it also relates to the school board and superintendent overseeing the district as a whole. In the case of Central ISD, the superintendent created the vision and then took the vision to internal and external stakeholders. This vision also needed to be supported by the school board. Vision setting without support from the school board would have led to failed implementation plans. Therefore, governance operations was mirrored in the setting a vision theme.

Accountability, information management, and technology services.

Accountability, information management, and technology services includes the processes and procedures that integrate communication, data collection and analysis, and monitoring of accountability for academic standards and federal and state compliance (Olivárez, 2010). This function was clearly reflected in the themes of gathering data, which was found to be an essential phase in the decision-making process in Central ISD, and influencing the decision-making process to be data-driven and research-based. During this phase of the process, district leaders collected data regarding student enrollment, demographics, and academic achievement. The data that was gathered then informed district leaders on how to move forward with plans for school choice implementation and expansion, thus making the process data-driven and research-based. The student information services team was an essential part in gathering of this data. Therefore, accountability, information management, and technology services was the function that emerged from the gathering data and influencing the decision-making process to be data-driven and research-based themes.

Operational support systems. Operational support systems includes safety and security, food services, and transportation as essential components to address the basic needs of students and staff (Olivárez, 2010). While other functions emerged out of the creating tightly aligned implementation plan theme, operational support systems was also reflected within this theme. Throughout the process of creating implementation plans in Central ISD, the superintendent ensured that the process was collaborative among many departments. An essential part of the implementation in Central ISD was to provide transportation to students who wanted to attend a certain pathway of schools or school of choice. Therefore, the transportation team was a critical collaborator on implementation plans. They needed to ensure students could have access to choice options in the most effective and efficient way possible. Thus, operational support services also emerged from the creating tightly aligned implementation plans theme.

Table 5 illustrates how the framework of district functions were reflected through the themes identified in the study.

Research Study Themes	Framework of District Functions									
	ISS	EIC	CI	ESO	GO	AIT	OSS	HR	AFB	FPP
Competition for Student Enrollment	X	X								
Student Achievement and Student Interests			X	X						
Building on Early Successes				X						
Setting a Vision					X					
Gathering Data						X				
Soliciting Community Input	X	X								
Researching Programs Based on Data			X	X						
Creating Tightly Aligned Implementation Plans			X	X			X			
Influencing the Process to be Student-Centered			X	X						
Influencing the Process to be Data-Driven and Research-Based						X				
Influencing the Process to be Collaborative	X	X								

Table 5. An illustration of the framework of district functions as they relate to the themes of the research study.

While the findings did not directly reflect human resources (HR); administrative, finance, and business operations (AFB); and facilities planning and plant services, these functions did play a supporting part in the decision-making process and implementation plans (Olivárez, 2010).

When analyzing the data from the case of Central ISD, the researcher employed two conceptual frameworks to understand how the leadership dimensions and the framework of district functions of the superintendency surfaced through the decision-making process (Johnson, 1996; Olivarez, 2010; Olivarez, 2013). Each theme that emerged from the case study was directly linked to a leadership dimension and one or more functions. This analysis allowed the researcher to better understand how the

leadership roles of the superintendency were illustrated throughout the case of Central ISD.

Summary

Chapter four presented the results of a qualitative single case study which focused on the implementation of school choice for one suburban Texas public school district. The chapter also included a description of the selected site for the single case study, represented by the pseudonym Central ISD. To protect the anonymity of the school district, a pseudonym was used. The chapter then described the participants in the study. Pseudonyms were again used to protect the anonymity of the participants. Following the description of the participants, the chapter presented the results of the study and how the conceptual frameworks employed by the researcher surfaced through the data. Data analysis of the semi-structured interviews, document reviews, and field notes were used to support the emerging themes of the research as it related to 1) the factors that contributed to the exploration of school choice implementation, 2) the process for deciding whether to implement schools of choice, and 3) how the factors related to the implementation of school choice influenced the decision-making process.

The data revealed that competition with neighboring charter schools, student academic achievement and student interests, and building on early successes were all factors that contributed to the exploration of school choice and expansion within the school district. Further, the decision-making process that was employed by the school district involved the following phases: setting a vision, gathering data, soliciting community input, researching programs based on data, and creating tightly aligned

implementation plans. Lastly, the emergent factors that led to school choice exploration influenced the decision-making process to be student-centered, data-driven and research-based, and collaborative.

Chapter five provides a brief background of the study, a summary of the findings within the context of prior research, and implications for application to current practices. The chapter concludes with recommendations for further research.

Chapter V: Findings, Implications, and Recommendations

Meeting the needs of all students is a demand that public school leaders consistently face. In order to meet the needs of all students, many school leaders venture to research, design, and implement innovative instructional approaches that not only meet the academic needs of students, but also the socioemotional needs as well. School choice is one way to meet the needs of all learners in an innovative way and is a promising educational option that offers parents the opportunity to choose the best educational path for their children. Previous research indicates benefits from school choice implementation including that school choice provides viable options for students and parents to meet perceived needs and low and high performing schools often respond to competition with innovations in the curriculum and instructional approaches to learning (Davis, 2013; Kasman & Loeb, 2013). However, there was a need to further explore the implementation of school choice and the contextual considerations taken into account as part of the process (Marsh, Strunk, & Bush, 2012).

Chapter five presents a brief background of the study, methodology and procedures. An overview of the key findings is presented with connections to the extant literature. In addition, how the emergent factors reflected the two conceptual frameworks is presented. Finally, based on the nature of the study and findings, implications for current practice and recommendations for further research are provided.

Brief Background of the Study

School choice is the notion that parents and students, buyers, are provided with numerous school options, suppliers, so that they have the autonomy to choose the best

option to meet their perceived needs (Betts, 2005). Through introducing choice into the education system, a competitive market system is generated. Therefore, the assumption is that choosers in a market of supply and demand will benefit. This market creates competition among schools that has potential to lead to a higher education quality for all schools (Lubienski, 2005).

Early work by Friedman (1955) regarding the role of government in education explores the practice of passing on the cost of educating children to the parents. Furthermore, by injecting competition into the school system, a healthy variety of schools leads to more flexibility within the system. In addition, competition would stimulate the development and improvement of all schools (Friedman, 1955). Through the work of Friedman (1955), school choice is introduced as a way to establish a competitive market within the school system. While the economic theory of competition helps to provide a basis for why school choice has been introduced into the education system, it is important to consider how school leaders respond to the introduction of choice.

Since its initial introduction to education, traditional public-school districts have implemented school choice through various models. School choice can be implemented in response to growing competition outside of the district or in response to the need for school reform or reconstitution. Choice options within traditional public-school districts often include choice or magnet programs, stand-alone schools of choice with a specific specialization, or open enrollment. As defined by Berends and Waddington (2018), “magnet schools have a specific focus, mission, and instructional design” (p. 2). With magnet schools, students within the school district have the option of transferring to the

school with the specialized program. Magnets or choice programs typically are implemented on already existing campuses and not all students on the campus necessarily have access to the specialty program.

Stand-alone schools of choice are also implemented in some public-school districts. A stand-alone school of choice refers to any whole school that was developed or repurposed and is now open to all students within the district to choose from. A stand-alone school of choice often times has an innovative curriculum and instruction focus such as a project-based learning as its school-wide instructional model or an early college high school model where students are able to graduate from high school and simultaneously earn an associate's degree. No matter the form, traditional public-school districts are implementing a variety of school choice options in order to meet the academic needs of students, thus entering a competitive context.

In a competitive context there is a large number of suppliers and buyers, such as schools and parents or students, in order to influence market outcomes (Betts, 2005). However, there is not sufficient evidence that introducing competition results in improvements for schools (Ni & Arsen, 2010). Ultimately, competition in education is a complex and highly political issue that plagues our current education system at the district, state, and national levels.

Statement of the Problem. School choice can be traced back to Friedman and his work regarding the role of government in education (Friedman, 1955). Approximately 20 years ago, many superintendents were certain that the eventual effects of school choice would not be positive (Graham & Ruhl, 1990), and some

superintendents were not as concerned with decreasing enrollment for public schools due to competition (Ladner & Brouillette, 2000). Since then, school choice has evolved and competition has become a real dilemma for public school superintendents at national and state levels. For instance, Texas state leaders have introduced legislation to allow vouchers for parents which could adversely affect public school funding (Swaby, 2017). As a result, many superintendents and school leaders have considered and decided to implement school choice within school districts in order to stay competitive, meet the needs of all students, or respond to mandated reconstitution and reform efforts.

When districts implement school choice as part of reform efforts, the decision-making process can be tedious and politically charged (Bulkley, Henig, & Levin, 2010). Thus, superintendents must consider whether the benefits will outweigh the cost. The decision-making processes employed by superintendents and school leaders is critical. As previous research suggests, superintendents who employ an inquiry based decision-making process tend to produce more sound solutions (Garvin & Roberto, 2001). However, research regarding how a decision-making process is used to consider school choice implementation is limited. Marsh, Strunk, and Bush (2012) state that further research is needed regarding how school leaders decide to introduce school choice within school districts. Therefore, it is imperative to study decision-making processes and for leaders to be prepared to face the multitude of dilemmas they will encounter as part of the superintendency (Davis, 2005; Noppe, Yager, Webb, & Sheng, 2013).

Purpose and Research Questions. The purpose of this study was to determine the decision-making process employed to decide whether or not to implement schools of

choice within a single school district. This qualitative single case study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What factors contributed to the exploration of school choice implementation by the school district and its leaders?
2. What process for deciding whether to implement schools of choice did the superintendent and school district employ?
3. How did the factors related to the implementation of school choice influence the decision-making process?

Brief Overview of Methodology. This study employed a constructionism epistemology. As indicated by Crotty, “what constructionism claims is that meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting” (Crotty, 1998, p. 43). Under the interpretivism paradigm, this qualitative study followed a single case approach which required one school district, within a real-life contemporary context or setting, that implemented a school choice model (Yin, 2009). Further, as Crotty stated, “only through dialogue can one become aware of the perceptions, feelings, and attitudes of others and interpret their feelings and intent” (Crotty, 1998, p. 75-76). Thus, the researcher conducted interviews with the superintendent, a school board member, and key district leaders who were involved in the decision-making process regarding school choice. A total of six educators participated in the study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant using an interview guide which allowed further questions to be developed based on the responses from the interviewees (Seidman, 2013).

The purposefully selected Texas school district chosen for the single case study, Central ISD, was one that had implemented school choice and has multiple schools of choice within the school district. Focusing on one school district allowed the researcher to conduct an in-depth study to fully understand the intricacies of the decision-making process regarding the implementation of school choice in the district and the factors that influenced the process. Interview data was triangulated with field notes, archival documents, and a reflexive journal (Hays & Singh, 2012; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014).

The data were analyzed through a deductive process. The first cycle of analysis involved coding to identify emerging themes related to each research question. In addition, the emerging themes were analyzed twice, first through the conceptual framework of the leadership dimensions and second through the conceptual framework of the district functions of the superintendency (Johnson, 1996; Olivarez, 2010; Olivarez, 2013; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014).

Summary of Findings

Given the nature and scope of the study, findings are summarized according to the three main areas of focus. These include factors that were taken into consideration to in order to implement school choice in a single public-school district, the decision-making process employed by the school district leaders, and how the emergent factors influenced the decision-making process.

Factors Leading to School Choice. The findings of this study highlight several factors that led to school choice implementation and expansion within a single district.

According to the findings, these include competition with neighboring charter schools, student achievement and interests, and building on early successes. These factors appear to support prior research regarding competition and school reform.

Competition. Competition refers to public school districts vying for student enrollment with neighboring charter schools or private schools. Responding to a competitive market is essential, particularly when multiple charter schools open in the vicinity of the same school district. This illustrates the offer and demand regarding school options, and competition becomes an important reality as some districts tend to lose student enrollment to surrounding charter schools. Thus, it is imperative for school districts to attract students back from these charter schools. In a competitive context, the main purpose is to create various and different options that charter schools do not offer, making the district more competitive. When school districts are intentional about addressing competition, it appears that school districts move toward more innovative and improved teaching and learning in order to better attract students, address students' needs, and achieve academic success for all. This is congruent with previous research of economic theory.

Early notions of economic theory of competition suggest that by introducing competition into the education system, all schools, private, charter, and traditional public schools, will improve teaching and learning in order to compete for student enrollment (Friedman, 1955). Furthermore, by participating in a competitive market, traditional public schools would be incentivized to be more efficient and improve instructional quality (Ni & Arsen, 2010). Competition among schools leads to all schools becoming

more innovative and responsive to customer demands (Kotok, DiMartino, & DeMatthews, 2020). Economic theory also suggests that new or alternative schools will continue to emerge in areas where there is a demand for schooling options, thus creating supply and demand (Saults & Yaluma, 2017). As a result, school leaders respond to competition by creating a “curricular niche” and marketing themselves to prospective parents and students (Kotok, DiMartino, & DeMatthews, 2020, p. 5).

Student achievement and student interests. The findings suggest another factor leading to school choice implementation and expansion is student achievement and interests. According to the findings, addressing student needs involves the creation of innovative pathways that can provide alternative instructional practices for students. Adopting pathways of innovation is based on student achievement results and accountability ratings of campuses, especially those designated as low performing. A school district that embraces school choice, in light of academic achievement results, could implement specific pathways that provide students with options to choose based on their specific academic interests. Examples of these innovative pathways include project-based learning, International Baccalaureate, and fine arts as illustrated in the case of Central ISD. Pathways that are implemented should be based on campus specific instructional needs.

When responding to student achievement and interests, a school district that implements school choice changes curriculum offerings or instructional approaches as a way to reform schools, particularly schools that are low-performing. This method of school reform considers academic achievement and interest needs of all students which is

congruent with Marsh, Strunk, and Bush (2012). They indicated that there is a large amount of pressure for schools to perform well under rigorous accountability standards. Therefore, improving low-performing schools is essential. Further, according to research about public school initiatives, leaders saw some success with implementation of school choice in response to the need for school reform. Successes may include ensuring diverse stakeholder participation, developing an implementation plan with support from multiple organizations, and ensuring transparency at each point in the process (Marsh, Strunk, & Bush, 2012). Thus, considering student achievement and interests is a goal to improve academic success for all students.

Building on early successes. The findings suggest that another factor contributing to school choice implementation and expansion is building on early successes within the school district. According to the findings, when school district leaders recognize evidence of success with prior innovative approaches or programs, districts should capitalize on these successes by expanding them to impact more students. By identifying and expanding prior successes, districts have the opportunity to organize schools into pathways based on these successes, thus creating a vertical feeder pattern of schools in anticipation that the successes will persist on a larger scale, positively impacting more students.

Focusing on previous successes, thus a small set of reforms, is congruent to previous research regarding leadership and school choice. In the work of Teske, Schneider, Buckley, and Clark (2000) that focused on whether charter school competition improves traditional public schools, they found that school leadership is critical to school

reform. They also indicated that if schools are going to improve as a result of reform, leaders must focus on a set of reforms and nurture the process in order to see true change (Teske, Schneider, Buckley, & Clark, 2000). Focusing on previous successes helps district leaders to narrow the scope of work in order to invoke change.

Building on early successes enables district leaders to develop specializations for schools within a feeder pattern. This practice mirrors prior research conducted in New Orleans where the response to competition came in the form of creating academic niches. The schools created programs based on fine arts and languages. Other schools created schools for all boys or all girls (Jabbar, 2015). This research supports the findings of the study regarding building on early successes that created academic niches.

This study suggests that certain factors lead to school choice implementation. While these may differ depending on the context of the district, the school leaders may need to identify context specific factors before implementing school choice.

School Choice Decision-Making Process. Findings of the study suggest one decision-making process that districts considering school choice implementation could employ. The process included several phases: setting a vision, gathering data, soliciting community input, researching programs based on data, and creating tightly aligned implementation plans. According to the findings, setting a vision is an important initial phase of the decision-making process. Setting a vision helps direct the path for the process to ensure that all stakeholders involved in the decision are moving in the same direction. Gathering data is a critical phase of the decision-making process according to the findings of the study. This phase involves collecting demographic, student

achievement, and student interest data. Such data provide clearer direction to the already established vision. Soliciting community input is an essential phase of the decision-making process as findings suggest. This phase provides an avenue for district leaders to collect data regarding the perceived needs of the community while also gathering feedback on the initial vision that was established. Data collected during this phase further clarifies the established vision. Researching programs based on data is another relevant phase of the decision-making process. During this phase, district leaders research schools of choice programs based on the data collected internally and through community input in an attempt to ensure that the considered schools of choice will meet the needs of the students. Findings suggest the final phase of the decision-making process is creating tightly aligned implementation plans. Developing plans that are closely aligned to previous research may guarantee the success of school choice implementation. In addition, these plans appear to include input from many internal stakeholders so that the plans for school choice are feasible logistically as well as instructionally. Thus, developing tightly aligned plans might contribute to the success of implementation.

The findings mirror previous research regarding decision-making. The difference is that leaders who make good decisions view decision-making as a process and not an event (Garvin & Roberto, 2011). In the findings, a process was identified which led to a decision for implementation. The findings also indicated that the implementation of choice yielded positive student outcomes, thus a good decision. Thus, the findings are supported by the research regarding viewing decision-making as a process.

The findings also are congruent with a rational decision-making process or a classical model (Kowalski, Lasley, & Mahoney, 2008). The rational model assumes that the solutions are rational, thus the leader moves through six phases: (a) identifying and defining the problem, (b) generating alternatives, (c) evaluating alternatives, (d) choosing an alternative, (e) implementing the decision, and (f) evaluating decision effectiveness (Lunenburg, 2010). While the terminology between the rational model for decision-making and the process identified in the findings are different, the idea is still the same. Both follow a clear process with well-defined phases that are essential to reaching a sound decision. Identifying the problem is congruent with creating a vision in that district leaders, during this phase, are recognizing a problem and creating the foundation of a vision to begin problem-solving. Generating alternatives involves collecting data, thus it mirrors gathering data and soliciting community input. Evaluating alternatives includes looking critically at solutions to ensure they are data-informed; therefore, it aligns with researching programs based on data. Implementing the decision is reflected in creating tightly aligned implementation plans (Kowalski, Lasley, & Mahoney, 2008; Lunenburg, 2010). Thus, the findings related to the phases of the decision-making process are supported by previous research.

Effect of Factors on the Decision-Making Process. The findings of this study suggest that certain factors have a powerful effect on the decision-making process to implement school choice. These include a competitive context, student achievement and interests, and building on early successes. As school leaders take these into account, the decision-making process becomes student-centered, highly data-driven and research-

based, and collaborative. As summarized below, this study's findings support prior research to some extent.

Student-centered. The findings indicate that factors related to school choice exploration have a strong influence on the decision-making process, making it student-centered. Decisions being focused on students is congruent with previous research. For instance, McClellan, Hyle, and Ivory (2010) found that superintendents' decisions were based upon doing what is best for students. Superintendents consistently directed district leaders to meet the needs of the students. Thus, they kept students as the focus of all of the decisions made (McClellan, Hyle, & Ivory, 2010). Similarly, Hart (2018) suggests that most frequently, superintendents do what is best for students and put their well-being first over the concerns of adults.

Further, findings suggest that the need to attract students back to a school district heavily sways district leaders to make decisions in consideration of their needs. This is congruent with previous research regarding competition in schools, as one of the goals of competitive charter schools is to foster educational innovations to produce quality teaching and learning addressing the needs of students.

Findings also indicate the initial plan for school choice implementation and expansion can include organizing schools into pathways of innovations which mirrors prior research surrounding competition (Lubienski, 2003; Bagley, 2006). As others suggest, schools often rebrand by specializing in a particular program or approach such as a technology school to better meet the interests of students (Bagley, 2006).

The findings also suggest that a student-centered decision-making process aims at removing barriers for students to promote access to the school they choose to attend. In particular, providing transportation enhances access for all students. As previous research indicates, the location of a school creates an obstacle to access for families that cannot transport their children to and from school each day. Lack of access due to transportation reduces equity (Bukley, Henig, & Levin, 2010). Therefore, by providing transportation, district leaders offer greater access to students and their families.

Data-driven and research-based. The findings suggest that the factors that led to school choice exploration influenced the decision-making process to be data-driven and research-based. District leaders valued data throughout the decision-making process and sought to gather data in various forms including student achievement, accountability ratings, community surveys and the like. When collecting data, according to the findings, both internal and external data sources are essential to the decision-making process. This is congruent to prior research which indicates the process requires quantitative and qualitative data in order to inform options (Kowalski, Lasley, & Mahoney, 2008). School leaders who use data to make decisions understand that there are various types of data that can be “accessed, collected, and then used to better inform the practices that occur within a school” (Kowalski, Lasley, & Mahoney, 2008, p. 101). Data-driven decision-making is a process that entails collecting data, examining data, sharing data, and using data in order to improve schools and ultimately student achievement. Data allows decisions to be more precise and certain (Kowalski, Lasley, & Mahoney, 2008).

Collaborative. The findings suggest that the factors leading to school choice exploration influenced the decision-making process to be collaborative. Ensuring that internal and external stakeholders have an opportunity to give input and provide feedback makes the process collaborative. In addition, this input and feedback informs the decision-making process and ultimate decision. Collaborative decision-making mirrors previous research. For instance, in a study involving three schools districts, Brazer, Rich, and Ross (2010) found that all school districts employed committees consisting of various stakeholders to make strategic decisions for the district. These researchers also report that the sincerity of work within the committee arose out of the belief that the committee was engaged in a meaningful process and that the work of the committee would persuade the superintendent (Brazer, Rich, Ross, 2010). Thus, including external and internal stakeholders results in a collaborative decision-making process.

In summary, this study's findings suggest that the emergent factors that led to school choice exploration influence the decision-making process. As a result, the decision-making process was student-centered, data-driven and research-based, and collaborative. These themes regarding the decision-making process are congruent with prior research.

Conceptual Framework

As discussed in Chapter IV, the researcher employed two conceptual frameworks to further analyze the emerging themes. One conceptual framework was the leadership dimensions of administrative leadership, instructional leadership, and political leadership

(Johnson, 1996; Olivarez, 2013). The other framework used was the framework of district functions (Olivarez, 2010).

Leadership Dimensions. The findings of the study reflect all three leadership dimensions (administrative, instructional, and political) as essential to the decision-making process regarding school choice implementation. Administrative leadership refers to “leading by managing and managing by leading” (Johnson, 1996, p. 220). Leading by managing requires leaders to use their authority strategically, be purposeful in communicating and receiving information, and focused about accountability. In addition, administrative leadership values long range planning, coordinates efforts across districts, and respects differences among campuses (Johnson, 1996). According to the findings of the study, building on early successes, gathering data, and creating tightly aligned implementation plans were essential throughout the exploration and decision-making process of implementing school choice. In addition, by following a decision-making process that is data-driven and research-based is also critical for long range planning and creating structures to support best practices.

Instructional leadership, as noted by Johnson (1996), begins with a vision that is set by the superintendent. While superintendents may have their own personal visions, the visions that are developed for the district should include the context of the district. In addition, instructional leadership involves leading to change by ensuring that any reform effort is warranted based on the local context, seeks to solve important issues within the school district, and is viable (Johnson, 1996). The findings of the study suggest that the first phase in a decision-making process regarding school choice implementation is

setting a vision which is congruent with instructional leadership. Instructional leadership is concerned with teaching and learning and related pedagogical matters which must be an essential component of a school district vision. As this study's findings suggest, developing a vision must address context specific student needs and issues which might be addressed by school choice.

Political leadership entails understanding the local interests of the community around the school district, tailoring leadership styles to the political context of the district, and establishing command by building alliances, developing influence, and facing those that challenge the decisions made by the leader (Johnson, 1996). Overall, political leadership aims to collaborate with community stakeholders in a way that will benefit students. This leadership dimension was reflected in the study's findings related to competing for student enrollment, engaging external stakeholders through their input and feedback, and ensuring that the decision-making process is collaborative throughout school choice exploration and decision-making. By working together with community stakeholders within the local context of the district enabled the school district to address local needs and benefit students.

Framework of District Functions. The findings of the study suggest that most of the 10 school district function framework as delineated by Olivarez (2010) are reflected and essential during the exploration and implementation of school choice, and others support the decision-making process. Out of the 10 functions, the following appear to be critical. Instructional support services and external and internal communication are essential to the decision-making process to provide a collaborative

environment where external stakeholders are able to share feedback and input and district leaders are able to use that input as part of the decision-making process and creating plans for implementation of school choice. In a local context of competition between schools, these functions are also important to ensure school district leaders are able to entice students to return to the district by offering school choice options. Curriculum and instruction and elementary and secondary operations are two functions that are necessary in order to innovate the instructional approach and provide school choice options that are student-centered. These functions were a major aspect of the decision-making process when attempting to meet student academic and interest needs, researching programs based on data, and creating implementation plans, thus establishing specialized schools. Governance operations is essential as part of the visioning process because ultimately the school board must support the vision of the superintendent in order to move forward with the decision-making process. Findings also suggest that accountability, information, and technology services are important in the data gathering phase of the decision-making process. This function must provide all of the necessary data sets to illustrate students' needs and inform the decision-making process so that it is data-driven and research-based. Operational support services is evident in the logistical planning process for school choice implementation, according to findings, especially when transportation will be provided district wide. While the findings did not directly reflect human resources; administrative, finance, and business operations; and facilities planning and plant services, these functions do play a supporting part in the decision-making process and implementation plans for school choice.

Implications for Current Practice

The findings of this study contribute to the knowledge base about decision-making regarding school choice. Specifically, this study generated information that could be useful to superintendents and school district leaders exploring the potential for implementing school choice. In addition, the findings and prior research indicated that decision-making can be a political and tedious process for superintendents and district leaders. Therefore, the following recommendations for current practice are offered:

1. School district leaders who are experiencing similar factors such as competition with neighboring charter schools, declining student achievement, and early successes from innovation could consider school choice implementation as a solution.
2. School district leaders identify the local contextual factors and determine if school choice is a viable solution to address those factors.
3. School district leaders who are exploring the potential of implementing school choice could use the phases identified as part of the decision-making process in the case study as a guide to begin decision-making in their districts.
4. School district leaders making transformation changes within their district could use the collaborative nature of the decision-making process in the case study as one example of how to connect the school district and community when making such changes.
5. As illustrated by this study's findings, the decision-making process regarding school choice followed the early successes with one pathway. As a result, there

was a positive experience and contextual backing for this model, in addition to the superintendent building relationships with internal stakeholders and forming coalitions with external stakeholders. So, superintendents and school district leaders working in similar communities and political contexts, could use the surfaced decision-making process phases to introduce swift changes.

Recommendations for Further Research

The study was conducted as a single case study. Thus, it only examined one school district with a focus on the exploration and decision-making process prior to implementation, and before moving forward. Further, only six participants informed the study, five were men and one was a woman. All of the participants served in a district level capacity, and no campus leaders or teachers were involved. Five of the six participants served in the district six or fewer years. In addition, the study was conducted in a suburban school district in central Texas. Therefore, the findings are not representative of all districts or all stakeholders within the district focus of the study.

Given the nature and main focus of this study, additional research is needed to enhance our understanding of successes, issues, and challenges experienced by school districts that have contemplated or implemented school choice as a school reform endeavor to better serve all students. Therefore, future researchers could:

1. Conduct studies expanding the number of respondents to include campus leaders, teachers, parents, community members and students. In addition, include participants of varying demographics.

2. Employ snowball sampling of participants in order to include those who have a longer tenure than six years.
3. Use purposeful sampling to include internal stakeholders who have witnessed the initiation, implementation, and evaluation of the different pathways of school choice.
4. Study a district that initially considered school choice implementation, but ultimately decided not to move forward.
5. Examine districts of different sizes, student demographics and/or student achievement needs.
6. Focus on multiple successful school districts, through a comparative study, in order to identify similarities and differences in the decision-making processes for implementing school choice.
7. Identify the actual implementation of school choice actions, practices, and results.
8. Determine emergent school choice implementation challenges experienced by school districts using other quantitative or qualitative approaches and techniques not employed in the present study.

Conclusion

Introducing competition into a school system has yielded benefits for students. Implementing school choice as a way to reform schools has the potential for promising results. School choice has the ability to meet the academic and interest needs of all students. By meeting these needs, students are motivated to perform at their highest potential. In addition, providing choice gives parents options to make the best

educational decision for their children. Thus, by providing instructional options via school choice, district leaders strive to achieve academic excellence for all.

Appendices

Appendix A Interview Guide

Participant Job Title:

Participant's Department or Function:

Introduction to Protocol

Good evening, thank you for your participation in this interview process. You have been asked to be a part of this interview as the superintendent (or other district leader) that has been part of the decision-making process for implementing school choice. The interview will be recorded for the purposes of transcription and coding to identify themes. Your participation will remain anonymous. If you agree, I will begin the recording.

Introduction

Thank you again for agreeing to be part of this interview. The interview is part of a research study focused on a school district's decision-making process regarding the implementation of school choice. The interview today will be focusing on the process in your district that was used to determine whether to implement schools of choice. The interview process should take no longer than 1 hour. Do you have any questions about the interview?

Interview Questions

4. What factors led to the initial discussions regarding the implementation of school choice?
5. Who was involved in the initial discussions? Why were these individuals selected?
6. How and when was it determined that the district would move forward to more heavily considering the implementation of school choice?
7. Once the district moved into the exploratory phase, were there additional members who were added to the team? If so, who were they and why were they chosen?
8. Describe the process that the team employed to collect information/data to consider regarding school choice. What data was used as part of the decision-making process?
9. Based on the data, what were some of the positive aspects of potentially implementing school choice? What were some of the obstacles to potentially implementing school choice?
10. Based on the data collected, what were the most valuable pieces of information that most heavily influenced the team?
11. How did the factors that led to the initial discussions regarding school choice implementation influence the decision-making process?
12. How was the ultimate decision made to move forward with implementation? Why was this decision made?
13. What benefits have you seen thus far from the implementation? What have been the obstacles?

14. Considering the decision-making process, what do you think went well? What would you have changed? Who else might you have considered adding to the team?

Please add any additional information to that you would believe is valuable.

Appendix B

Sample Participant Request by Email

Good evening _____,

I am currently a doctoral candidate seeking my doctorate in Educational Leadership and Policy with The University of Texas at Austin's Cooperative Superintendency Program. I have reached the research phase of my treatise work. My treatise is a single case study focusing on the decision-making processes of a school district regarding school choice implementation. Central ISD has really paved the way in Central Texas regarding school choice options for students. Thus, I felt that studying Central ISD would provide the best research for my treatise. I have applied through [the research department] to study the district, and [the superintendent] has approved my study.

The research that I will be conducting involves interviewing the superintendent, school board members, and key staff that were involved in the decision-making process. In addition, I will conduct a document review of any policies, strategic plans, or other documents that played a role in the decision-making process to implement school choice. I have already interviewed [the superintendent], and he indicated that you were an integral part of the decision-making process in Central ISD.

I would like to invite you to be part of the study. This would entail a one-hour interview that will be recorded for accurate transcription. The final treatise will use pseudonyms for all interviewees as well as the district; therefore, all interviews, transcriptions, and data collected will remain confidential. If you are willing to participate in the study, please reply to this email and we can work to schedule our interview in the coming weeks at a date and time that is convenient for you. I appreciate your consideration and greatly admire the strides Central ISD has made to ensure each student receives the highest quality education!

Thank you,
Laura

Laura Carlin-Gonzalez
CSP Fellow
Doctoral Candidate - Educational Leadership and Policy
The University of Texas at Austin

Appendix C

Consent for Participation in Research

Title of the Project: A School District's Decision-Making Process Regarding Implementation of School Choice: The Case of One Texas Public School District
Principal Investigator: Laura Carlin-Gonzalez, Student, Cooperative Superintendency Program

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Ruben Olivarez, Committee Chair, Professor, Educational Leadership and Policy

Consent to Participate in Research

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to be part of a research study. This consent form will help you choose whether or not to participate in the study. Feel free to ask if anything is not clear in this consent form.

Important Information about this Research Study

Things you should know:

- The purpose of the study is to understand the decision-making process employed to decide whether to implement schools of choice within one school district, what factors contributed to the exploration of school choice implementation, and how the process is influenced by the factors contributing to choice implementation.
- In order to participate, you must have been involved in some capacity in the decision-making process regarding school choice for your school district.
- If you choose to participate, you will be asked to participate in an interview. This will take no more than 90 minutes of time.
- The possible benefits of this study include adding to the body of research regarding decision-making and implementing school choice.
- Taking part in this research study is voluntary. You do not have to participate, and you can stop at any time.

More detailed information may be described later in this form.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research study.

What is the study about and why are we doing it?

The purpose of the study is to understand the decision-making process employed to decide whether to implement schools of choice within one school district, what factors contributed to the exploration of school choice implementation, and how the process is influenced by the factors contributing to choice implementation. This study may provide

an understanding of the decision-making process superintendents and school leaders employ when deciding whether to implement schools of choice.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to participate in one interview that will last no more than 90 minutes.

How long will you be in this study and how many people will be in the study?

Participation in this study will last no more than 90 minutes and no more than 20 participants will be included. The researcher will follow up with a copy of the transcribed interview for you to review for accuracy.

What risks and discomforts might you experience from being in this study?

There are some risks you might experience from being in this study. They are informational risks specifically a potential loss of confidentiality. However, the researcher will take appropriate steps to secure audio recording of the interview and field notes to maintain confidentiality. In addition, the researcher will assign a pseudonym and the data collection point in order to maintain confidentiality.

The researcher will let you know about any significant new findings (such as additional risks or discomforts) that might make you change your mind about participating in this study.

How could you benefit from this study?

Although you will not directly benefit from being in this study, others might benefit because this study may provide an understanding of the decision-making process superintendents and school leaders employ when deciding whether to implement schools of choice.

What will happen to the samples and/or data we collect from you?

As part of this study the researcher will collect an audio recording of the interview. This audio recording will be transcribed and provided to the participant to check for accuracy. A pseudonym will be assigned at the data collection point to maintain confidentiality.

How will we protect your information?

We will protect your information by assigning a pseudonym. Identifiable data for the interview participant will be generalized in order maintain confidentiality. In addition, prior to each interview, these procedures will be discussed with each participant prior to consent to the interview and recording of the interview.

All interview recordings and field notes will be kept in the possession of the researcher in a secure place so that identifiable information is not readily accessible. In addition, pseudonyms

will be used in the data collection processes so that identifiable information is not accessible. Your name and any other information that can directly identify you will be stored separately from the data collected as part of the project.

What will happen to the information we collect about you after the study is over?

Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be deleted from the research data collected as part of the project.

How will we compensate you for being part of the study?

You will not receive any type of payment for your participation.

Your Participation in this Study is Voluntary

It is totally up to you to decide to be in this research study. Participating in this study is voluntary. Your decision to participate will not affect your relationship with The University of Texas at Austin and your school district. You will not lose any benefits or rights you already had if you decide not to participate. Even if you decide to be part of the study now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

If you decide to withdraw before this study is completed, the audio recording will be deleted and field notes will be destroyed.

Contact Information for the Study Team

If you have any questions about this research, you may contact:

Laura Carlin-Gonzalez
Phone: 512-644-6461
Email: ldcarlin@swbell.net

Or

Dr. Ruben Olivarez
Phone: 512-475-8576
Email: rolivarez@austin.utexas.edu

Contact Information for Questions about Your Rights as a Research Participant

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the following:

The University of Texas at Austin Institutional Review Board
Phone: 512-232-1543

Email: irb@austin.utexas.edu

Please reference study number 2019-05-0129.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. We will give you a copy of this document for your records. We will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I understand what the study is about and my questions so far have been answered. I agree to take part in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature

Date

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Vita

Laura D. Carlin-Gonzalez is a graduate of Bay City High School in Bay City, Texas. In 2000, she enrolled in Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas. She graduated in 2004 with a Bachelor of Science in Mathematics and a minor in Psychology. She began her career as a high school mathematics teacher in Round Rock ISD. In 2007, she joined Manor ISD as a K-12 Mathematics Instructional Specialist, concentrating on mathematics curriculum development, classroom teacher instructional support, and student intervention. In 2008, she began graduate school at Texas State University – San Marcos. In May 2011, she earned a Master of Education in Educational Leadership. In July 2011, she joined Manor High School as an assistant principal overseeing attendance and master scheduling. In January 2012, she was promoted to academic dean at Manor High School where she oversaw curriculum, instruction, and professional learning for the campus. During the summer of 2012, she served as the interim principal of Manor High School. In July 2014, she joined Pflugerville ISD where she served as the Director of College and Career Readiness for four school years overseeing advanced academics, college and career readiness, the AVID program, and the district counseling program. Two of those years, she also served as acting Director of Curriculum and Instruction. In June of 2017, she began her doctoral work at The University of Texas at Austin in Educational Leadership and Policy as a member of the Cooperative Superintendency Program, Cohort 28. Carlin-Gonzalez currently serves as the principal of Baty Elementary in Del Valle ISD since June 2018.

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This treatise was typed by the author.