

Copyright
by
Richard Anthony Cruz
2018

**The Treatise Committee for Richard Anthony Cruz
Certifies that this is the approved version of the following treatise:**

**Decentralization and Equity: A Phenomenological Study of How
District Leaders Experience Site-Based Management and Perceive It to
Impact Low-Income and Minority Youth**

Committee:

Norma V. Cantú, Supervisor

Rubén D. Olivárez

Pat Pringle

Edwin R. Sharpe, Jr.

**Decentralization and Equity: A Phenomenological Study of How
District Leaders Experience Site-Based Management and Perceive It to
Impact Low-Income and Minority Youth**

by

Richard Anthony Cruz

Treatise

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
The University of Texas at Austin
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2018

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge some individuals without whom I would not have made it to this important milestone in my academic and professional career.

Dr. Rubén Olivárez, thank you for being a great leader and for supporting my own growth and learning. I learned a tremendous deal about what it means to be an educational leader from you and appreciate the opportunity to be part of the CSP.

Dr. Pat Pringle, Dr. Edwin Sharpe, and Dr. Norma Cantú, thank you for your support throughout my time in the CSP and for helping me through the process of completing my treatise.

Dr. Terry Grier, thank you for serving as a great mentor, colleague, and friend, and for encouraging me to begin the doctoral program. I can't tell you how much your friendship and support mean to me.

Dr. Grenita Lathan, thank you for your leadership and for investing in my personal and professional growth by supporting my participation in the doctoral program.

Dr. Andrew Houlihan, thanks for your mentorship and for sharing some helpful advice that you drew from your own experiences in the CSP.

Finally, I would also like to acknowledge and thank my entire family, who has been supportive of me over the past three years and who constantly pushes me to better.

**Decentralization and Equity: A Phenomenological Study of How
District Leaders Experience Site-Based Management and Perceive It to
Impact Low-Income and Minority Youth**

Richard Anthony Cruz, Ed.D.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2018

Supervisor: Norma V. Cantú

Nearly three decades after it became a leading reform effort in education, decentralization – broadly defined as the transfer of decision-making from central administrations to campuses -is still a prominent practice in school districts across the country. Studies have been conducted on its impact, particularly in the areas of student achievement and principal and teacher morale. However, there is a limited understanding of how senior district administrators experience decentralization and perceive it to impact on equity. The latter of these is especially important given that some of the districts where decentralization is still a defining practice have sizeable populations of economically disadvantaged students. Through a phenomenological approach, this study examines the experiences of a group of senior leaders in a large urban school district in the southern United States and impact they perceive decentralization to have on low-income and minority students.

Table of Contents

List of Tables	ix
List of Figures.....	x
Chapter One Introduction to the Study	1
Background	1
Problem Statement	3
Purpose of the Study and Research Questions.....	4
Overview of Methodology.....	5
Definition of Terms	5
Delimitations and Limitations.....	7
Assumptions.....	8
Significance of the Study.....	8
Chapter One Summary	9
Chapter Two Literature Review.....	11
Historical Context.....	11
Rationale	18
Defining Characteristics	20
Impact of Decentralization.....	28
Central Office and Campus Staff	30
Equity.....	31
Conceptual Framework for Study	38
Chapter Three Methodology.....	40
Research Method and Design	40
Description of Population and Sample	42
Data Collection Protocols	44
Data Collection Procedures.....	46
Data Analysis Procedures	47
Chapter Three Summary	49

Chapter Four Findings.....	51
Summary of Participants.....	51
Emergent Themes.....	54
Theme One: Autonomy and Control.....	56
Budgetary Autonomy.....	56
Autonomy in Curriculum and Programming.....	59
Staffing Autonomy.....	62
Limited Central Direct Control.....	65
Tiered Autonomy.....	70
Influence vs. Control.....	71
Theme Two: Leadership.....	72
Principals.....	73
District Administration.....	82
Theme Three: Equity.....	93
Consistency and Variation.....	94
Funding and Resources.....	99
Human Capital.....	114
Chapter Four Summary.....	126
Chapter Five Discussion.....	133
Problem Statement.....	133
Purpose of the Study.....	134
Methodology Overview.....	135
Summary of Results of Research Questions.....	136
Connection to the Literature.....	139
Conceptual Framework.....	141
Implications for Research.....	143
Implications for Practice.....	144
Conclusion.....	146

Appendix A Interview Guide.....	147
Appendix B Recruitment Email.....	150
Appendix C Consent for Participation in Research	152
References	155
Vita.....	162

List of Tables

Table 1:	Participant Characteristics.....	54
----------	----------------------------------	----

List of Figures

Figure 1: Programming, Enrollment and Funding Loop.....	104
---	-----

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Background

School systems are complex and dynamic organizations comprising two primary, interdependent units: schools and central district administrations. During the late 20th century, as they sought ways to improve student achievement levels, education reformers began to focus on the functions of and relationships between each of these units (Murphy & Beck, 1995). The belief that school systems had become too top-heavy became widespread. Reformers argued that central administrations had become too prescriptive and controlling, and that because “local decision-makers have better understanding of the capacity of their schools and the demands that are placed on them by varying student populations,” schools rather than central administrations were best equipped to make decisions for their students (Hanushek, Link & Woessmann, 2012).

Consequently, a hypothesis took shape: If decision-making were shifted from central administrations to schools, student outcomes would be improved (David, 1995). Numerous terms became associated with this idea, chief among them school-based decision-making (SBDM), school-based management (SBM), and decentralization. (For the purposes of this study, these terms will be used interchangeably.) As a practice, decentralization is characterized by increased levels in campus/principal autonomy with respect to areas such as budgeting, staffing, and curriculum and instruction (Steinberg & Cox, 2017).

Decentralization gained popularity and rapidly expanded throughout the country. Districts and entire states began to adopt policies and actions to encourage, and in some cases even require, decision-making to be transferred from central administrations to campuses (David, 1995). Before long, over one-third of the districts in the nation operated under decentralization (Ogawa & White, 1994). While the terms decentralization and site-based management are not as popular in the education reform lexicon as they were a couple of decades ago, the underlying practices are still widely promoted and implemented across the United States and even in other countries (Fitzpatrick, 2012; Hanushek, Link & Woessmann, 2012). Over the past decade, school districts such as Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia and New York City have operated under tenets of decentralization (Steinberg & Cox, 2017). As such, this study focusing on decentralization is still highly relevant.

To set the stage for an examination of decentralization, this chapter will include a statement of the problem and the purpose of the proposed study. This will be followed by an overview of the guiding research questions. An overview of the methodology, definition of terms, and description of delimitations and limitations will also be provided. The major assumptions made in the study will be explored and the significance of the study will be described. The chapter will conclude with a summary and a connection to the existing literature on the topic that will be further explored in the second chapter of this study.

Problem Statement

Decentralization has received a considerable amount of attention from researchers seeking to understand its characteristics and impact. A majority of the research produced has focused on how decentralization has impacted student achievement, as this is widely considered to be its primary purpose (David, 1995). For the most part, these studies have not found evidence that decentralization has positively influenced student achievement in widespread ways (Hess, 1992; Leithwood & Menzies, 1998; Rodriguez, 2000; Gunnarsson, Orazem, Sánchez & Verdisco, 2009).

In addition to examining its impact on student achievement, some studies caution that decentralization may have led to increased levels of disparities for low-income and minority students (De Grauwe, 2005). While there has been some limited research on how decentralization impacts equity, most of it has been conceptual in nature and there is still a need to better understand the relationship. This is especially important given that throughout the past decade, decentralization has still been employed by large school systems that serve sizeable populations of low-income and minority youth (Fitzpatrick, 2012).

There has also been research into how decentralization has impacted campus staff, including principals and teachers (Rodriguez, 2000; Lagana, 1989; Gaziel, 1998; David, 1989; White, 1989). Several studies have been conducted to examine how principals and teachers experience and perceive working in decentralized settings. These studies have

pointed to evolving roles for campus staff and indicate an overall level of satisfaction with decentralization among teachers and principals (Rodriguez, 2000).

While extensive research has been done on the impact of decentralization on student achievement and campus staff, its broader impact on school systems still needs to be understood. A better understanding of the experiences and perceptions of individuals who have witnessed and experienced decentralization from a district-wide perspective is especially needed. Similarly, broader, district-level experiences and perspectives regarding the impact of decentralization on equity are needed.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of the study is to examine the experiences of senior leaders working in decentralized school districts and their perceptions of the impact of decentralization on equity. Specifically, this study seeks to answer two primary questions:

- (1) How do senior school district leaders experience working in a decentralized school system?
- (2) What impact do senior district leaders perceive decentralization to have on low-income and minority students?

In addition to these primary questions, the study addresses some of the broader characteristics, advantages, disadvantages, limitations and unintended consequences of decentralization. These areas have been examined in previous literature, which will be

explored in chapter two of this study, but they will benefit from additional examination.

Overview of Methodology

In order to address the research questions, a phenomenological approach was utilized. Phenomenology focuses on the meaning that individuals construct with a particular type of experience (Creswell & Poth, 2017). As such, a phenomenological approach was especially well suited for this type of study examining district leaders' experiences with decentralization and their perceptions about how decentralization impacts equity.

This study examined the experiences and perspectives of individuals with extensive leadership responsibilities in a decentralized school district serving over 20,000 students in the southern region of the United States. Through a combination of in-depth interviews and document collection, the researcher described the experiences and interpretations of the participants, drew themes from these experiences and interpretations, and situated them within their respective settings and contexts. The goal of this approach was to arrive at the core or essence of decentralization and the ways in which it impacts equity through the lived experiences of school district leaders.

Definition of Terms

Several key terms will be used throughout the study. To provide clarity, the following list of definitions is provided:

- **Decentralization** – Within the context of this study, decentralization broadly means the transferring of decision-making from central district administrations to schools. Special attention will be placed on the extent to which schools can make decisions regarding their budgets, staffing, and curriculum and instruction. Related terms include school-based decision-making (SBDM), site-based management (SBM), school-based management (SBM), and local control. For this study, the term decentralization will be primarily used, although it may also be substituted the other terms just mentioned.
- **Equity** – Defined by Merriam Webster’s Dictionary as “justice according to natural law or right; specifically: freedom from bias or favoritism” (Merriam Webster’s Online Dictionary, 2017). Within the context of this study, equity will be defined as ensuring that all students, particularly those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, have what they need to be successful. It should not be confused with equality, as equity does not always imply providing every student with the same thing.
- **Power** – Defined by Merriam Webster’s Dictionary as “ability to act or produce an effect” or “possession of control, authority or influence over others” (Merriam Webster’s Online Dictionary, 2017). Within the context of this study, power will refer to the extent to which entities (i.e. schools, central district administrators) can operate autonomously and can exert control over each other.

- **District leaders** – Refers to current or recent superintendents, cabinet members (directly reporting to superintendents), school supervisors, or heads of major district departments (whose titles can include director, assistant superintendent, officer and chief). More detailed information on the criteria used to define district leaders is available in chapter III of this study.

Delimitations and Limitations

When discussing decentralization, the study will refer exclusively to decentralization within school districts and between school district administrations and campuses. It will not focus on how decisions and authority are distributed within schools (i.e. between principals and teachers). It will also not examine the relationships between the federal and state education entities or between state education entities and school districts. The study will include participants from one school district and focus on their experiences over the past five years.

Because of these delimitations and the nature of the study, the findings might not be generalizable to all districts working under a decentralized approach. This is especially the case given that decentralization, as will be explored later in this study, can assume many different forms and can vary significantly between districts. In other words, it is very context specific. Because the study is based on the experiences of a limited number of participants from one school district within a relatively short time span, wide-scale generalizations are not possible, and it is up to the readers of this study to determine what

aspects can be transferred to other contexts.

Assumptions

The study relied on the assumption that the school district from which the participants were selected was indeed decentralized and that therefore the respondents had experienced decentralization. The school district involved in this study exhibited the characteristics and practices associated with decentralization. Furthermore, as confirmed through publicly available district documents, for more than two decades decentralization had been embedded within and supported through the district's policies and guiding vision statements, and the district was widely acknowledged both internally and externally to be highly decentralized. As such, while there may not be clearly established parameters that define whether a school district is centralized or decentralized, it can be assumed that the participants of this study have indeed experienced decentralization.

Significance of the Study

This study adds to the existing literature on school district decentralization. By focusing on the lived experiences and macro-level perspectives of senior leaders working in a school district that has operated under decentralization for nearly three decades, it provides a more global insight to the nature of decentralization and its relationship to equity. This is important given that most research on decentralization to date has largely omitted the experiences and perspectives of central district administrators. The study also identifies additional areas for research and exploration.

Additionally, the study's findings generated information useful for school district leaders, board of education trustees, and policy makers, all of whom are primarily responsible for determining the extent to which decisions are made at the campus and central office levels and the manners in which decentralization is implemented. Because of its focus on the ways that decentralization impacts equity, the study may also help school districts implement practices that are equitable and support all students, especially those from underserved populations.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a general overview of the study, including a brief outline of the historical context of decentralization. In addition, it stressed the need for a broader, district-level understanding of decentralization and the ways it impacts equity that incorporates the experiences and perspectives of district leaders. A phenomenological approach that focuses on the experiences of senior district leaders working in a decentralized system was proposed to better understand decentralization and its relationship to equity. A list of key terms associated with the study and their definitions was provided. Some of the study's delimitations and limitations, including the scope, timeframe, and generalizability were discussed, as was the underlying assumption that the proposed participants in this study have indeed experienced decentralization. The chapter ended with an exploration of the potential significance of the study for researchers and practitioners alike. Concepts introduced throughout this chapter will be further explored and elaborated on in the following chapter, which provides a

comprehensive review of literature related to decentralization.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

To understand school district decentralization, it is important to consider it within its historical context. As such, this chapter will begin with a historical account of school districts and decentralization in the United States. The chapter will then examine the underlying theoretical concepts and justifications behind site-based management. This will be followed by an overview of its defining characteristics, practices, and requirements. Existing literature on the impact of decentralization on student achievement, central office and campus staff, and equity will also be examined. After a summary of what research tells us about decentralization is provided, the chapter will finish by proposing a theoretical framework to be used in this study.

Historical Context

Origins of Centralized School Districts. Prior to the industrial revolution, public schools in the United States were scarce, voluntary, and limited mostly to more affluent males (Carl, 2009). These schools were also fairly independent and autonomous. However, the industrial revolution was accompanied by a significant demand for skilled labor, which gave formal schooling greater significance (Miller, 1942). This, along with the increase in the number of individuals living in urban settings, resulted in a rapid expansion of the number of students enrolled in public schools and in the number of schools in existence (Murphy & Beck, 1995). To increase efficiency, standardize

learning, and boost educational quality, schools became consolidated under larger centralized school systems or districts (Fuller, 1982; Murphy & Beck, 1995).

The application of concepts related to the scientific management of education also resulted in larger, centralized school districts. Prominent early 20th century industrialist Frederick Taylor, considered the father of scientific management, “viewed top-down management, division of labor, specialization, and a regulated work environment [...] as key strategies to increase the efficiency and productivity of industry” (Murphy & Beck, 1995). Education leaders and reformers believed that the underlying concepts behind scientific management could also enhance efficiency and outcomes within school systems. As such, they began to implement some of the practices espoused by Taylor. This significantly contributed to districts being more centralized and managed from the top down (Murphy & Beck, 1995).

Seeds of Decentralization. While the general direction following the industrial revolution was towards more centralized and top-down school systems, there were significant countering movements and philosophies that paved the way for site-based management (Murphy & Beck, 1995). In the early 1900s, for example, individuals such as education reformer John Dewey advocated for a more democratic approach to the way schools operated in which teachers wielded more autonomy and were more involved in decision-making (Murphy & Beck, 1995).

The notion that hierarchical and top-down organizations were most efficient and effective also began to be challenged in the 1920s. A number of management theorists and researchers such as Mary Parker Follett advocated for participatory leadership in which workers were more involved in the planning and decision-making processes (Murphy & Beck, 1995). Case studies from the private sector seemed to indicate that workers who were more involved in these processes had higher levels of morale and productivity (Murphy & Beck, 1995).

Around this same time, teacher councils – organizations comprising teachers who sought greater influence over the way education operated – rapidly expanded. The first teacher council was established in Dallas, Texas in 1909, and within 15 years almost every major metropolitan area in the United States had a teacher council (Murphy & Beck, 1995). These councils espoused a bottom-up approach that contrasted with the hierarchical, centralized structures that were becoming pervasive. During the 1930s-1950s, in response and opposition to the expansion of fascism in Europe and Asia, there was also a movement toward democratic administration in the United States (Murphy & Beck, 1995).

Decentralization Takes Hold. In the 1960s and 1970s, a new movement commonly referred to as community control began to gain momentum (Murphy & Beck, 1995). This movement was largely spurred by efforts at the local and federal levels to combat class and racial inequities by empowering underserved communities through greater agency and control. As part of this movement, parents and community members

from minority and low-income backgrounds became more involved with their schools and districts. These community members exerted a significant amount of pressure on schools, administrators and school boards. They demanded more rapid integration and more equitable distribution of resources. They also often pushed for more involvement with the staffing of principals and teachers at schools. As such, they openly challenged centralized district structures and sought to transfer power from the district to community level (Murphy & Beck, 1995).

Superintendents were highly opposed to the community control movement, as were teachers' unions, which felt that it threatened their then mostly white members (Murphy & Beck, 1995). However, because of the pressure applied by the community control movement, large school districts such as Chicago and New York began to decentralize. Hence, decentralization became a tool "to give political power to local communities" (David, 1989).

SBM is Born and Flourishes. The 1980s were a significant period for education reform. Unemployment rates were high at the beginning of the decade and there was a pervasive sense of anxiety around the economy (Murphy & Beck, 1995). Education became the culprit for the country's bleak economy. In fact, the 1983 report commissioned by U.S. President Ronald Reagan titled "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform" argued that the country's economic viability depended on reversing a downward trend in academic performance (Gardner, Larsen, Baker, Campbell & Crosby, 1983). The report faulted schools and teachers for academic shortcomings and

ignored the effects of poverty and discrimination on student outcomes. The report ushered in a set of top-down reform efforts that were ultimately gauged to be ineffective (Murphy & Beck, 1995). However, the sense of urgency to improve student performance remained and politicians and education reformers decided the most effective way to do so was to go in the opposite direction and provide more autonomy and control to campuses. In essence, this ushered in the wave of site-based management. As pointed out by one study, “[site]-based management [became] a reaction to the highly centralized role in reform efforts following *A Nation at Risk*” (Mojkowski & Fleming, 1988).

As was the case following the industrial revolution, management and organizational theories that originated in private industry would shape schools’ operations under SBM (Murphy & Beck, 1995). There was a trend within larger companies to decentralize their operations for reasons similar to those espoused by earlier theorists such as Follett. Companies such as General Motors (GM) had experienced success in increasing productivity through organizational decentralization (Campbell, 2011), and it was believed that increases in student performance could be achieved through similar efforts.

Consequently, beginning in the late 1980s, districts and states began to encourage, and in some cases require, site-based management through formal policies and legislation that delineated the expectations and guidelines related to the practice (David, 1995). It did not take long for SBM to spread. In 1988, Chicago became one of the first major cities where SBM was required by law, and it was shortly followed by the entire state of

Kentucky in 1990 and soon after other states including Texas, Kentucky, Maryland, North Carolina and Florida (David, 1995; Hancock, 1998). Overall, between 1986 and 1990, a third of all school districts in the country operated under SBM (Ogawa & White, 1994). SBM even began to expand to other countries such as Australia, Sri Lanka, South Korea, the UK, and New Zealand (De Grauwe, 2005). The World Bank promoted it as a way to increase student achievement in developing countries and even issued a guidebook for countries to do so (Patrinos & Fasih, 2009).

Recent Developments with Decentralization. While reviewing prior research on this topic, the researcher found a significant drop in the number of references to site-based management/decentralization in literature produced since the beginning of the millennium. Most literature that refers to decentralization in education since then addresses the distribution of power and decision-making between the federal government and states and finds that for the most part education has become more centralized at the federal level (De Boer, 2012). These studies highlight that “at the same time that many large school districts have attempted to decentralize, federal education policy has become more centralized” (Fitzpatrick, 2012). As mentioned in chapter one, however, this study is limited to examining the relationship between school district central administrations and schools, not between the federal government and states or between states and school districts.

The lack of recent scholarly attention to decentralization within school districts, however, does not indicate that the practices associated with site-based management are

no longer being utilized. School districts in places such as Chicago, New York City, Philadelphia, Seattle, Cincinnati, and Chicago have continued to espouse decentralization (Fitzpatrick, 2012; Steinberg & Cox, 2017). Additionally, some states still have policies that encourage or require it. It can therefore be asserted that while the area of decentralization within school districts has not received much attention recently, it is still an ongoing practice in various locations in the United States.

Summary of Historical Context An analysis of the historical context of decentralization underscores that the manners and extent to which power and decision-making are distributed between schools and school systems has been an ongoing topic highly relevant to educational reform. The general trends in the 19th and early 20th centuries were towards highly centralized structures that were claimed to be more efficient and effective. Centralization was challenged and limited, however, by educator councils, democratic and community-based movements, and new management theories that supported school-based control. Towards the end of the 20th century, there was a heightened national sense of urgency to increase student achievement. Unsuccessful top-down attempts to do so resulted in the genesis of SBM as a widespread reform effort to increase student achievement. While site-based management and associated terms are not employed as regularly as they were in the 1980s and 1990s, SBM continues to influence the ways schools and school districts operate in at least some locations throughout the United States. As such, it is still a highly relevant concept and practice that warrants further consideration and investigation.

Rationale Behind Decentralization

Decentralization is not considered a goal within itself; rather, it is seen as a way to increase student achievement (David, 1995). The main underlying concept behind site-based management is that transferring power from the central (district) level to the local level (campus) results in “conditions [...] that facilitate [student] improvement” (David, 1989). Statements such as the following illustrate this idea:

The move toward more local control is motivated by the belief that decentralized control will result in better school outcomes, holding constant the level of resources devoted to the school. Local decision makers should have more information on local needs and conditions and can adjust resource allocations accordingly. Central dictates that are aimed at maximizing welfare on average may oversupply service in some areas and undersupply it in others. Local officials should respond better to local needs because they are more exposed to pressure from constituents and because they may use quality public services to attract or retain residents (Gunnarsson, 2009; cited in Fitzpatrick, 2012).

A salient concept in the statement above that is used in almost all arguments for site-based management is increased autonomy and flexibility. Indeed, perhaps the strongest argument that SBM increases student achievement is that it provides schools the autonomy and flexibility needed for them to best adapt to their students’ needs. The premise is that there is not a one-size-fits-all approach that works in education and when

rigid and prescriptive systems are in place, schools cannot adapt to their local context and conditions. It is believed that the individuals who are best equipped to make decisions that impact students are those who are closest to them (Clune & White, 1998).

There is also a belief that transferring power and decision-making to campuses will increase ownership and make them more accountable for their results (David, 1989). The reasoning is that if schools are allowed to make decisions around how to best serve their students, they will be more invested in their students' education and outcomes. It is argued that when decisions are made solely at the district level, schools feel estranged from the work and disenfranchised. Conversely, when schools are involved in their own planning and decision-making, they feel empowered and invested.

Shifting power to schools is also expected to increase student achievement by improving staff morale. Research indicates that teachers' morale decreases as districts become more centralized and that this could have a detrimental effect on quality of instruction (David, 1989). An underlying notion behind SBM is that increasing staff morale indirectly influences student outcomes in a similar manner to studies in private industry showing that productivity increases as employee satisfaction does.

As explored earlier in this chapter, decentralization within education also had roots in notions centered on democracy and participatory leadership. However, while earlier movements focused on shifting more power to the local levels for the sake of democracy itself, SBM focuses on the impact that doing so could have on student

achievement (David, 1995). In other words, it is not so much preoccupied with democratic ideals as it is with the ways in which empowering schools can increase student achievement through the mechanisms described above.

Defining Characteristics, Practices, and Requirements of Decentralization

While SBM can be generally understood to be the transfer of power and decision-making from central administrations to campuses, there is a considerable amount of variation in what this translates to within different settings. Nonetheless, there are two general defining characteristics of site-based management: increased campus autonomy accompanied by heightened levels of accountability (David, 1989). What follows is an examination of the defining characteristics, practices and requirements of site-based management as described in previous research.

Providing campuses with the autonomy to make decisions best suited for their students is the heart of SBM. Under SBM, schools wield significant and varying levels of autonomy with respect to three main domains: budget, staffing and curriculum (Clune & White, 1988). Schools do not receive complete autonomy in each of these areas, as they must still abide by local, state and national guidelines. Furthermore, school district administrations still play important roles (even if different from a more centralized approach).

Under SBM, schools wield control in determining how to use their budgets. This means they can purchase services and products that they feel will best support their

students' needs. This does not, however, equate to being able to purchase anything. They must still comply with district and state guidelines as well as procurement and purchasing laws. Thus, the simple act of having access to a budget does not imply full autonomy, as there likely will still be restrictions. As pointed out, "whether or not school-site budgeting equals autonomy depends on how much freedom from restrictions is allowed [...] a school can receive a lump-sum budget for all expenditures including staff, yet have no decision-making authority because of rules governing class size, tenure, hiring, firing, assignment, curriculum objectives and textbooks" (David, 1989).

Overlapping with budgetary discretion, schools operating under SBM also typically experience flexibility in their staffing. Under SBM, schools also have varying levels of autonomy with respect to the types of positions that exist and the individuals who occupy those positions (David, 1989). Schools must, however, still comply with state or local policies or guidelines that involve staffing (i.e., student-to-teacher ratio). Often districts have policies in which schools may only hire individuals who have been screened centrally by human resources and are in an approved candidate pool. Beyond these requirements, however, schools operating under SBM usually exert considerable control in their staffing. As is the case with budgeting, the extent to which schools have autonomy in their staffing is along a spectrum and is determined by local and state policies.

Schools operating under SBM also experience varying levels of discretion with regards to their curriculum and instruction. Under SBM, schools have degrees of

autonomy in deciding what curriculum and instructional materials and strategies to use. They also wield autonomy in how classes are structured and how instruction is delivered (Rodriguez, 1990). Typically, they also get to select the professional development for their staff that they feel is most appropriate to increase the quality of instruction. While schools may exert significant levels of autonomy in these areas, it is also important to consider that curriculum and instruction must still take place “within a framework of goals or core curriculum established by the district or the state” (David, 1989). In other words, it is still bound by local and state policies.

One important aspect of SBM that is commonly noted in literature is its relationship to accountability. As one scholar points out, “under school-based management, professional responsibility replaces bureaucratic regulation: districts increase school autonomy in exchange for the staff’s assuming responsibility for results” (David, 1989). The trade-off between autonomy and accountability is often cited in literature on SBM. “SBM is not the same as giving schools a blank [check]: more autonomy equals more accountability” (De Grauwe, 2005). Accountability demands can come from many different sources, including the district, state and federal levels. It typically takes the shape of different concrete measures such as performance on standardized tests, attendance and graduation rates.

The notion that schools have more autonomy under SBM has been challenged because of the accompanying increase in accountability. Some contend that because of state and local guidelines and the increased importance of standardized exams tied to

accountability measures, schools are less autonomous than they were prior to the introduction of SBM. As previously noted, under SBM, “autonomy is counterbalanced as well as limited by the development of a strong accountability framework” (De Grauwe, 2005).

It is important to note that SBM does not mean that central office district administrators no longer have any authority or role. As pointed out, “site based management [does not] mean that all decisions are appropriately made at the school level. Schools belong to larger systems – districts and states – that must provide a strong center if decentralization is to create something other than anarchy” (David, 1995). School districts must define the parameters for SBM, set clear district goals and aligned accountability systems, and monitor campus progress (De Grauwe, 2005).

Equally important is the type and levels of support that districts must give campuses under SBM. This notion is reinforced by a scholar who asserts that under SBM “schools will need more support, which demands changes within the local offices [...] their role will be transformed: from control over the respect of official rules and regulation to supporter of innovation and initiative-taking – or in other words, from a supervisor to a colleague” (De Grauwe, 2005). Districts could provide this type of support in a number of ways. They should ensure that campuses receive information, training and guidance that will help them develop internal capacity. They should also ensure that schools receive access to timely and appropriate data related to their progress and performance (De Grauwe, 2005). Communication regarding significant changes in

local, state and federal policies and practices that impact schools should also be provided by districts (De Grauwe, 2005). There may also still be key operational functions that, given economies of scale, make sense for school districts to oversee.

Under decentralization, power and decision-making are not just transferred to schools, but also often to varying degrees within schools and their communities. Structures and policies are often put in place so that teachers, parents, students and community members are involved in the planning and decision-making processes (David, 1989). This may include the formation of shared decision-making committees with prescribed compositions (i.e., principal, three teachers, two parents, one student). The extent to which power is distributed equally among the individuals in these committees can vary significantly. In some instances, the final authority and decision-making will rest with the principal while other committee members serve in an advisory capacity, whereas in other cases the committee members share the authority (David, 1995). In addition to campus-level committees, there may also be district-level decision-making committees comprised of campus and district level stakeholders (Smylie, 1996).

In situations where decentralization has been found to have a positive influence on student achievement, there are several common practices and key elements in place. These include a focus on student achievement, strong and effective leadership, clear expectations and responsibilities, training and support, and adequate time for implementation. The absence of these is considered to present the greatest obstacles in the implementation of SBM.

It has been asserted that that SBM can only be effective in places where increasing student achievement is the primary goal (David, 1995). In other words, simply implementing SBM is not enough to raise student achievement if there is not a focus on doing so. “Without a school and community culture that supports ongoing learning, student achievement is unlikely to improve” (David, 1995). This raises the notion of values and beliefs, which is extremely relevant to SBM and underscores some of its limitations.

Strong leadership at the district and campus levels is also considered to be critical in successful implementation of decentralization (Steinberg & Cox, 2017). Under SBM, principals assume greater responsibilities and are faced with a wider set of decisions to make in the areas of budget, staffing and instruction. Consequently, the role of the principal under SBM is often compared to that of a CEO (Guthrie, 1986). Furthermore, since SBM is often accompanied by greater involvement and input from other stakeholders in the campus and community, principals must also be able to engage well with others and carefully balance their authority with the wishes and preferences of staff, parents and community members. For example, principals must know how to address situations in which he/she and the various stakeholders do not agree on issues involving budget, staffing or evaluation (De Grauwe, 2005). The various other stakeholders must also be prepared to engage in the local and shared decision-making processes. This means that teachers, parents and community members will need to be trained and prepared to do so.

Superintendents also play critical roles in the implementation of SBM. It is especially important for them to be able to recruit, retain and develop strong campus leaders. As stressed by one scholar “districts with a history of successfully decentralizing authority are characterized by strong superintendents who use training, hiring and evaluation criteria, and incentives to develop strong site managers” (David, 1989). Similarly, superintendents must be able to create and develop a district administration that focuses on supporting campuses and that helps them fully leverage the potential benefits of SBM. There is also a broader need for superintendents to believe in the central tenets of SBM and to trust their principals to make decisions (Rodriguez, 2000).

For decentralization to be effective, responsibilities and scope of authority with regard to decision-making must be clearly delineated. There must be an “integrated policy at central level [that] clarifies areas of autonomy and levels of accountability” (De Grauwe, 2005). In other words, schools need to understand what is expected of them (what they will be held accountable for) and what the parameters for their autonomy are. Similarly, there should also be clear policies and guidelines around the roles of the various stakeholders within campuses.

The skills and knowledge that campus and district staff must possess for SBM to be successful underscore the critical need for training and support. In fact, it is often claimed that a poor understanding of SBM by the various stakeholders and a lack of training are two of the primary obstacles for successful implementation of the practice

(David, 1989). Areas in which professional development is especially important include budgeting, teamwork and instruction (Rodriguez, 1990).

It is also important to consider that it can take time for SBM to be properly implemented. In fact, it has taken some school districts five to ten years to do so (David, 1989). To a large extent, this is attributed to the fact that it takes time for both campuses and districts to become familiar and comfortable with the defining practices of SBM. It is also important to consider that SBM often increases the workload for staff and administrators (De Grauwe, 2005) because of their expanded roles, which can be a limitation. One study, for example, found that a third of principals operating in SBM environments felt that the increase in time they spent on administrative responsibilities detracted from their focus on instruction (Gauch, 2011).

When operating under decentralization, it is also important to consider opposition and challenges from entities and individuals who may feel threatened by what it entails. Central office administrators, superintendents, school boards and teacher unions all may feel uncomfortable with shifting more autonomy and authority to campuses and the various stakeholders contained within (Rodriguez, 2000). They may perceive it as a loss of control from their respective parts, and they may even worry about becoming obsolete or not needed. These different entities may thus attempt to restrict or block the implementation of SBM. For example, a superintendent who is worried about his principals wielding too much authority may implement policies that severely restrict their

ability to act autonomously. It is therefore critical for the various stakeholders to have an accurate understanding of SBM and what their roles under the practice are.

As demonstrated, while there is a general understanding of what decentralization is, there is not a definitive or prescribed way to carry out the practice. However, SBM is generally characterized by a shift in decision-making to (and to varying degrees within) campuses, especially as it pertains to budgets, staff, and curriculum and instruction. The extent to which teachers, community members, and parents are involved with decision-making can vary significantly. An increase in autonomy is usually accompanied with and tempered by an increase in accountability. Central office district administrators do not become irrelevant or obsolete under SBM; instead, their roles change to focus more on monitoring and providing support to help schools build internal capacity. For decentralization be successfully implemented, a set of essential conditions have been identified. These include a laser-focus on student achievement, strong campus and district leadership, clearly delineated goals and responsibilities, adequate training and support for the expanded responsibilities that typically accompany SBM, and sufficient time for implementation. The following section examines the documented impact that decentralization has had on the areas of student achievement, district and campus staff, and equity.

Impact of Decentralization

Research has been conducted on the impact that decentralization has had in education over the past nearly three decades. A considerable portion of the research has focused on the extent to which decentralization has achieved its primary goal of positively influencing student achievement. Researchers have also examined how decentralization has impacted campus and central office level staff, including teachers, principals and district administrators. In addition, some studies have also examined how decentralization impacted equity. What follows is a summary and analysis of key literature produced in each of these areas.

Student Achievement. Many quantitative studies have been conducted to measure the impact of SBM on student achievement, since raising academic performance is its primary goal. While it is often assumed that SBM results in greater student achievement, studies show that this does not always happen (Rodriguez, 2000). A meta-analysis of 83 studies that examined the relationship between decentralization and student achievement across various countries found “no firm, research-based knowledge about the direct or indirect effects of SBM on students [...] the little research-based evidence that does exist suggest that the effects on students are just as likely to be negative as positive” (Leithwood & Menzies, 1998). A study commissioned by the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank had similar findings across various countries (Gunnarsson, Orazem, Sanchez & Verdisco, 2009). In Chicago, where decentralization became widely practiced, there was no improvement in student performance as measured on standardized

exams (Hess, 1992). Similarly, the state of Kentucky found that schools that implemented SBM did not achieve any gains relative to their peers who did not.

While most of the studies conducted on decentralization's impact on student achievement have not found a positive relationship, there have been some instances in which increased levels of campus autonomy were accompanied by increases in student achievement.

In Maryland, for example, the implementation of decentralization was accompanied by a significant increase in test scores, as was the case in the ABC Unified School District in California (Rodriguez, 2000). A more recent study based on PISA test scores found that decentralization in Europe has been accompanied by increases in student achievement (Hanushek, Link & Woessmann, 2013). Despite these cases, however, there is not sufficient evidence that decentralization has resulted in widespread increases in student achievement.

Central Office and Campus Staff

While research indicates that decentralization has not had a widespread impact on student achievement, there is literature that explores how it has influenced other areas. There is extensive literature that documents how it has impacted teachers and campus staff. Most research finds that SBM often translates to increased levels of staff morale and satisfaction (Rodriguez, 2000). An increased sense of empowerment and professionalism are considered to be the main contributors to this (Lagana, 1989).

Teachers who have a more active role in what is taking place on their campus and who do not feel stifled by prescriptive and restrictive district policies feel more valued and impactful. This tends to be the case in most settings, even outside of the United States. For example, a study on SBM as applied in Israel found a significant positive correlation between SBM and teacher satisfaction (Gaziel, 1998).

While the correlation between SBM and staff morale is often found to be positive, it can also be negative. “Teachers report increased job satisfaction and feelings of professionalism when the extra time and energy demanded by planning and decision-making are balanced by real authority; conversely, marginal authority coupled with requirements for site councils, plans, and reports result in frustration” (David, 1989). In other words, SBM only increases morale if it is authentic and the various stakeholders feel truly empowered. Higher staff morale may also be accompanied by more investment in their work. It may also influence staff recruitment and retention, which also have been found to have an impact on student outcomes (White, 1989).

Equity

Some studies have cautioned that increased levels of campus autonomy may have negative consequences on equity, or the assurance that all students, particularly those from underserved backgrounds, have the resources and support they need to be successful. It has been argued that the introduction of decentralization “has led to deterioration especially in the weakest schools” and that these schools, which tend to

serve high concentrations of low-income and minority youth, “need more support than autonomy” (De Grauwe, 2005). The main argument is that the principal tenets of decentralization – increased autonomy in budgeting, staffing, and instruction – can be detrimental for schools with high levels of poverty and can disproportionately benefit schools serving wealthier student populations. Indeed, a recent study that examined the effects of decentralization on student outcomes across different countries found that more-developed societies with wealthier students benefited from decentralization, whereas it was detrimental in poorer, less-developed countries (Hanushek, Link & Woessmann, 2013). Furthermore, it has been argued that schools with higher concentrations of lower-income students face additional challenges to meet the increased accountability standards that accompany decentralization and are often blamed and penalized for issues that relate more to poverty than to campus performance (Lawton, 1991).

As previously examined, decentralization requires that campus leaders have strong skillsets in areas outside of instruction. Schools that serve higher concentrations of low-income and minority students are more prone to have principals with lower qualifications (Clotfelter, Ladd, Vigdor & Wheeler, 2006). These principals may be less likely to have the skills and aptitudes necessary to effectively handle their expanded responsibilities, especially if adequate training and support are not available. In essence, principals at higher-poverty schools may not be equipped to use their increased autonomy

in budgeting, staffing, and instruction to advance student achievement. In fact, such autonomy, when coupled with weak leadership, may detrimentally impact students.

Campus autonomy in hiring may contribute to further inequities. In districts where campus staffing is conducted at the district level, the district has discretion to place teachers where they feel they are most needed for the district as a whole. However, when schools are allowed to select teachers from a screened pool, there is a tendency for the higher-performing teachers to be recruited by the higher-performing schools that serve more affluent populations (De Grauwe, 2005). Under decentralization, therefore, high-poverty schools may suffer from lower-quality teachers.

Decentralization may also contribute to increased segregation by class and race through exclusionary practices. A study in South Africa, for example, found that high levels of autonomy allowed campuses to implement practices (such as charging activity fees and offering instruction in only one language) that resulted in increased class and racial segregation (De Grauwe, 2005).

Under decentralization, schools that serve wealthier student populations may benefit from additional outside resources and funding. Parent associations and groups may channel additional funding to these campuses. Schools operating under decentralization can typically accept the full amounts and have discretion in how these funds are utilized. They may, for example, hire additional teachers or offer specialty

programs that are not available in schools serving less affluent populations, in turn resulting in further inequities.

Autonomy in curriculum and instruction can also exacerbate issues related to equity. The expectations and quality of instruction can vary significantly by campus under decentralization, especially if a strong curricular framework and set of guidelines are not in place. When describing the effects of SBM on instruction for low-income youth, one scholar warns that schools with large economically disadvantaged populations operating under SBM are especially prone to “impose curriculum which [set] much lower expectations on the students’ capacity for intellectual development and hard work” (Watt, 1989). Low-income and minority students also tend to experience significantly higher mobility rates, and their learning can be disrupted in decentralized systems where schools are using varied curriculum and instructional approaches (David, 1989).

It is also important to consider that under decentralization many school practices are a reflection of values and priorities of the local stakeholders involved. One scholar argues that there are risks associated with this given that schools and communities may have limited access to information or experiences that in turn limit their understanding of available opportunities (Mirel, 1990). For example, a school with a population of predominantly low-income students and parents who are not as familiar with higher education access and opportunities may not be as focused on advanced college preparatory coursework as a school serving a population of students and parents who have exposure and familiarity.

While most of the research on decentralization that mentions equity does so in a cautionary manner, some studies indicate that decentralization promotes practices that support equity in certain respects (Murphy & Beck, 1995). The main argument is that decentralization results in more equitable distribution of resources and opportunities through the empowerment of campuses (Hess, 1992). Schools operating under decentralization are expected to better address the needs of their students, including those from disenfranchised backgrounds. For example, given their increased autonomy in curriculum and instruction, a school can deliver their instruction in ways that are culturally sensitive and responsive to their students' needs. Similarly, a school serving a large ELL population could better allocate their budgets to support their students' needs through the purchase of relevant materials or services.

Summary of Impact. Research on the effectiveness and impact of decentralization indicates mixed results that are highly context specific. Despite its proliferation as a significant education reform effort aimed at increasing student achievement – and some instances of it doing so – there is no evidence that it has done so at scale. The extent to which the lack of widespread impact on student achievement may be attributable to poor implementation is not fully known, although research does indicate that more support is needed for schools to properly implement the practice. Furthermore, while it may not have yet yielded academic results at the scale originally envisioned, research indicates it has had positive influences in other areas such as campus morale. However, there are some potential dangers to decentralization, especially if strong training, support and

monitoring are not provided. In such cases, the literature indicates that decentralization may negatively impact minority and low-income youth and lead to greater educational inequities. This is an area that warrants further exploration and consideration.

In spite of its mixed results, decentralization is still a prevailing practice driven by the belief that schools need to have autonomy and local control in order to do what is best for their students. Some scholars argue that this belief is what is driving the expansion of charter schools, which operate autonomously from large public school systems (David, 1995). It is critical to keep in mind that, as with most other reform efforts in education, there are certainly advantages to decentralization as a concept and as a practice, but these must also be carefully weighed with some of its drawbacks and limitations, and careful attention must be placed to its implementation.

Chapter Summary

Decentralization as an education reform effort was born out of a heightened belief that increasing student achievement levels was a national concern and priority and that applying decentralization practices that had been successfully utilized in the private sector to empower campuses was the most effective way to do so. Underlying this idea was the notion that transferring power and decision-making to campuses would yield the best decisions and would translate to greater levels of campus involvement and investment in student success. Providing schools with flexibility and autonomy with

respect to their budgets, staffing and curriculum is what generally characterizes decentralization. Many states adopted decentralization and required it by law.

While there have been documented instances of decentralization resulting in increased student achievement levels, there is no evidence that it has resulted in the widespread increases that were originally envisioned or hoped for. On at least at some level, this may reflect poor implementation. Decentralization requires that schools and central administrations assume responsibilities and functions to which they may not be accustomed. If not adequately trained and supported, schools and districts may not have the capacity to implement decentralization in efficient and effective ways. Research also indicates that beyond direct student achievement, decentralization can also influence other important areas such as equity and staff morale. As with the case of student achievement, however, these areas also seem to be driven by how decentralization is implemented. There are some risks associated with decentralization, especially as it pertains to serving the needs of economically disadvantaged and minority youth that are countered by claims that decentralization strengthens equity in education.

More than 30 years after decentralization became popular as a reform effort, there is a better understanding of its characteristics, defining practices and impact. However, given ongoing challenges with the implementation of decentralization, with increasing demands for student achievement, and with the need to provide an equitable education to all, it is still a concept and practice that warrants further examination and consideration, particularly at the district level.

Conceptual Framework

To further examine decentralization, this study will employ Bolman & Deal's Four Frame organizational model as a conceptual framework (Bolman & Deal, 2017). This model examines organizations through four distinct lenses: structural, human resource, political, and symbolic. This model is appropriate for the study because of the complexity and multiple dimensions of decentralization and its direct connection to each of the four frames.

As examined in this chapter, site-based management to a large extent is preoccupied with issues related to organizational structure. As described by Bolman and Deal, central concepts related to the structural frame include roles, goals, and policies. These are elements that are critical to decentralization. The literature explored in this chapter also placed significant emphasis on the role that individuals play in site-based management. In particular, much attention was placed on the skills necessary for the implementation of SBM. As such, it will be beneficial to utilize the human resource frame throughout this study.

Because site-based management is at its core about how power and decision-making is distributed, the political lens will also be very appropriate for this study. To a large extent, politics is about defining the way resources are distributed, and this notion is intrinsically connected to decentralization. There is also a symbolic nature to

decentralization, especially as it pertains to the way that the traditional hierarchical relationship between schools and district administrations is conceptualized under SBM.

For these reasons, Bolman and Deal's Four Frame organizational model will allow for a multifaceted examination of how district leaders experience decentralization and perceive it to influence equity. The participants' responses and all data collected will be analyzed through the four frames to provide a thoughtful and rich analysis.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The chapter will begin with an overview of the research method and design of the study, including its epistemology and methodology. A description of the participants and setting will also be provided. This will be followed by an examination of data protocols and procedures, as well as procedures related to the analysis of collected data. The chapter will conclude with a summary of the study's methodology.

The methodology utilized was conducive to examining the experiences and perspectives of district leaders working in a decentralized school system. Specifically, it addressed the two primary research questions of this study:

- (1) How do senior school district leaders experience working in a decentralized school system?
- (2) What impact do senior district leaders perceive decentralization to have on low-income and minority students?

Research Method and Design

According to Crotty, all research has an underlying epistemology (1998). Epistemology can be defined as a theory of knowledge, or the belief about the way things are grasped or understood (Crotty, 1998). Crotty describes constructionism as an epistemology espousing that “meaning comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities of our world” (1998). As such, constructionism is a highly

relevant epistemology for this study, which is focused on the way that district leaders describe and interpret their experiences working in a decentralized school district.

Because this study is focused on perceptions and the way individuals construct meaning from experience, it will employ a qualitative methodology. More specifically, it will employ a phenomenological research design. Phenomenology is defined as a study that “describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007). The purpose of such approach is to examine and understand a phenomenon through the experiences individuals have had with it (Creswell, 2007; Van Manen, 2016). It provides “a deep understanding of a phenomenon as experienced by several individuals” (Creswell, 2007). In this study, decentralization was examined through the experiences and derived meaning of senior district leaders.

According to Creswell, there are two main branches of phenomenology: hermeneutic and empirical/transcendental (2007). The former of these actively incorporates the experiences and beliefs of the researcher, whereas the latter attempts to distance the researcher as much as possible. This study employed an empirical/transcendental approach that focused more on describing the experiences of the participants and that is largely based on Moustakas’ seminal book “Phenomenological Research Methods” (1994). Such approach will be described in detail throughout this chapter.

For the reasons cited, a qualitative phenomenological approach to examine decentralization was well suited for this study, but it also had some limitations. Because a phenomenology focuses on the experiences and meanings of a limited number of individuals, there are issues related to generalizability (Creswell, 2007). Furthermore, while an empirical/transcendental approach to phenomenology attempts to focus on the experiences of the participants, the ability for a researcher to distance him/herself has also been claimed to not be possible (Creswell, 2007). The researcher attempted to reduce these limitations by describing the setting in which the experiences took place and by bracketing his own biases and beliefs (as described later in this chapter).

Description of Population and Sample

A combination of purposeful and convenient sampling was utilized to select the setting and participants for this study. Purposeful sampling entails “[selecting] individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (Creswell, 2007). Convenient sampling involves selecting locations and participants from which the researcher is more readily able to collect data (Creswell, 2007).

The school system selected for this study was chosen both for exhibiting salient characteristics of decentralized systems and for being accessible to the researcher. More specifically, the selected school district met the following criteria:

- At the time the study was conducted and for at least the previous five years it identified as operating under site-based management in official documents or communications and exhibited associated characteristics, such as providing its schools with per-pupil funding and providing them with significant autonomy with respect to staffing, spending and instruction.
- It served a sizeable (over 50%) population of students who were low-income (as determined by free/reduced lunch eligibility) and/or were African-American, Hispanic, or Native American.
- It provided the researcher with access to senior district leaders who met the criteria described below.

It was a large, urban school district serving over 20,000 students and located in the southern region of the United States. For over two decades it had identified itself as decentralized and exhibited salient associated characteristics, had a majority low-income and minority student population, and provided access to district leaders for the study.

Participants selected for this study possessed leadership experience working in the selected setting. Specifically, they met the following criteria:

- They were senior district leaders. This was limited to individuals who supervised schools, oversaw district-wide departments, and reported to the superintendent, in addition to the superintendent him/herself.

- At the time the study was conducted, they worked in the chosen school district or had worked there within the past five years; additionally, they had at least one full year of experience working in the district.

The researcher compiled a list of individuals who met these criteria. He then purposefully created a list of 15 targeted individuals based on their length of experience with the district and their function/scope of responsibilities. The goal was to identify central office leaders from three key areas – school leader supervision, curriculum and instruction, and budgeting – who had broad experience in the district. The researcher ranked the 15 targeted individuals based on the criteria used to select them and approached them individually until ten had agreed to participate in the study. A phenomenological study usually contains five to 25 participants (Creswell, 2007).

Data Collection Protocols

Consistent with a phenomenological approach, two primary data collection protocols were used: semi-structured and in-depth interviews, and relevant and publicly available district documents (Creswell, 2007). The researcher developed an interview guide to use when interacting with the participants (see appendix A). The guide included questions focused on the lived experiences of the participants with respect to decentralization. The goal was to get the participants to describe their experiences with decentralization and how they made sense of such experiences. Furthermore, it included questions aimed at eliciting the participants' perceptions regarding the impact of

decentralization on equity. In order to assess the adequacy of the interview guide being created, the researcher consulted with faculty and other experts in research and in the field being studied. Additionally, the researcher conducted two pilot interviews with individuals who met the participant criteria but were not included in the list of priority participants. No formal data was collected from these participants or included in the study; rather, the purpose of these pilot interviews was to assess whether any adjustments should be made to the interview questions.

In addition to data derived from interviews, the researcher examined relevant documents pertaining to the topic found through a variety of sources including the district website and publications. Information gathered through these sources was important to better understand the context of the study's setting. These documents also helped triangulate the findings and resulted in increased validity and reliability.

Because the study was conducted as a transcendental phenomenology, the researcher sought to assume a neutral position. To do so, prior to collecting any data, the researcher engaged in bracketing. Bracketing is a process in which “investigators set aside their experiences, as much as possible, to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination” (Creswell, 2007). Bracketing involved the researcher reflecting upon his own relationship with the phenomenon being examined. To further contribute towards self-awareness, the researcher kept a reflective journal throughout the study.

Data Collection Procedures

Once the proposal for this study was submitted, defended and accepted by the research committee, the researcher began the process of acquiring IRB approval and approval from the proposed district setting. The researcher completed the steps required for IRB approval by the University of Texas at Austin's Office of Research Support and Compliance. This included completing the required training and submitting all required information and documentation. The researcher also met all requirements necessary to get written approval from the proposed school district location.

Once IRB and district approval had been officially granted, the researcher began the process of collecting data from the study's participants. The researcher reached out in person and by email to the prospective participants (see appendix B), requested their participation in the study, and addressed any questions or concerns they had. A signed consent form, including detailed information on the purpose of the study, was collected from each of the individuals who agreed to participate (see appendix C). The researcher then worked with participants to confirm a time and location where the interview would take place. The interviews were scheduled for one and a half hours, although some lasted more and some lasted less. On a few occasions, the researcher followed up with the participants to request additional clarification. The interviews took place in person at various locations convenient for the participants and that provided sufficient privacy for the interviews.

At the beginning of each interview, the researcher reviewed the purpose and scope of the study as well as the role of the participant. Participants had the opportunity to ask any additional questions or to express any concerns. The researcher used the interview guide to conduct the interview. Additionally, because the interview was intended to be semi-structured, additional follow-up questions were asked based on the responses of the participants. At the end of the interview, the participants were asked whether they had any additional questions or information they wanted to share. The researcher took notes while the interviews were taking place. The interviews were electronically recorded and stored on a password-encrypted computer. Following the interview, the researcher used a professional service to transcribe the interviews. The transcripts and notes associated with the interviews, as well as all gathered documents, were then be ready to be analyzed.

Data Analysis Procedures

After all data had been collected, the researcher began the process of analyzing the interview data according to a methodology described by Creswell and based extensively on the work of Moustakas (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). This entailed:

1. Reflecting on personal experiences of the researcher with respect to decentralization and including them in his journal (bracketing).
2. Identifying significant statements from the participants that relate to decentralization in a process Moustakas refers to as horizontalization (1994).

3. Classifying these significant statements into themes based on their meanings.
4. Writing a textural and structural description of the experiences that described both what was experienced as well as context in which it was experienced.
5. Providing a “composite description that presents the essence of the phenomenon, called the essential, invariant structure” (Creswell, 2007).

The researcher began the data analysis process by writing a description of his experiences with decentralization and his perceptions of it in his journal to foster increased self-awareness. As mentioned, this process (referred to as bracketing) helped the researcher distance himself from the experiences and interpretations of the research participants. It also resulted in increased validity for the study.

The researcher then identified significant statements related to the two primary research questions and highlighted them using the Dedoose software. As mentioned in chapter two, Bolman and Deal’s four frame organizational model (2017) was the conceptual framework used throughout the analysis of the collected data. As such, the structural, political, human resource and symbolic frames described in the framework were used throughout the coding process.

The statements were then analyzed and grouped into a set of three themes that emerged. Each one of these themes was then examined through the experiences that were described and the context surrounding them. The analysis concluded with a synthesis of the findings that will focus on “the common experiences of the participants” (Creswell,

2007). Documents collected through different sources, such as the district website and other publications, were used to describe the setting of the participants' experiences and interpretations and to validate some of the information they shared.

Several different measures were employed to ensure research quality and validity. Clarifying research bias is considered an essential component of qualitative research validity (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998). As discussed earlier, the researcher self-reflected on and bracketed his relationship with decentralization as much as possible, documenting his experiences and perceptions in his journal. The collection of data from non-interview sources (i.e., the district website and publicly available documents) also enabled the researcher to engage in triangulation, defined as “the use of multiple and different sources [...] to provide corroboration evidence” (Creswell, 2007). The study's collected data (such as transcripts) were also shared with the participants to ensure that it properly represented what they said and meant.

Chapter Summary

This chapter began with an examination of the research method and design that were used to examine how central district leaders describe their experiences with decentralization and perceived it to impact equity. A qualitative phenomenological study that examined the lived experiences of leaders working in a decentralized school district was chosen. Semi-structured and in-depth interviews centered on administrator experiences and perceptions, and publicly available district documents served as the

primary sources of data. Such data was analyzed in a multi-step process that included bracketing, horizontalization, grouping and theme formation, description of the experiences and their contexts, and a synthesis of the findings. Through this analysis, the researcher attempted to arrive at a deeper understanding of decentralization and its impact on equity. The following chapter includes the study's findings.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of senior leaders working in a decentralized school system and their perceptions on how decentralization impacts equity. Specifically, the study sought to address two primary research questions:

1. How do senior school district leaders experience working in a decentralized school system?
2. What impact do senior district leaders perceive decentralization to have on low-income and minority students?

As described in greater length in the preceding chapter, to address these questions, a group of ten senior district leaders spanning the major district functions participated in in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Additionally, the researcher confirmed information shared in the responses and provided additional context using publicly available district information. This chapter examines the participants' experiences and perceptions as described in their responses and as grouped in a set of encompassing themes.

Summary of Participants

The ten participants included in this study were identified using the criteria described at greater length in chapter three of this study. Specifically, at the time the study was conducted they had worked for at least one year as a senior leader in the decentralized school system setting where this study took place. A summary of each of

the participants follows. To maintain the confidentiality of the participants, aliases are employed, and any identifying information is omitted from their descriptions.

Gene Stacey had over 15 years of experience working in a variety of educational settings and roles, including teacher, campus administrator, and district-wide departmental leader. Gene had previously worked in a school district that she described as highly centralized. She characterized the district where she was currently working as decentralized.

John Saramago had over 30 years of experience as a principal, principal supervisor, and executive district leader. He had spent his entire educational career in the same district. He characterized the district he worked in as decentralized, although mentioned that at the time he began in the district it was not.

Michael Lee had over 15 years of business operations experience at the district level. He had spent his entire professional career in the same district, which he also characterized as highly decentralized.

Jerome Washington had over 20 years of experience in public education as a teacher, principal, principal supervisor, and executive district leader. He had worked in multiple school systems across various states. He characterized the school district he was currently working in as decentralized by design.

Hilda Cornwell had over 25 years of experience as teacher, principal, principal supervisor, and executive district leader. She had experience working in a variety of

different school districts across multiple states. She described the district that she was currently working in as highly decentralized.

Peter Garcia had over 20 years of experience as a teacher, principal, principal supervisor, and senior district leader across various districts in the same state. He considered the district where he currently worked to be highly decentralized.

Billy Daniels had over ten years of experience as an education researcher, program evaluator, and senior administrator. He had experience working with districts across multiple states. He described the district he was currently working in as more decentralized than any other district he had worked with in the past.

Ruth Middleton had over 20 years of experience as a teacher, principal, and senior administrator. She had spent most of her professional career in another school district in the same state. She characterized the school district she was working in at the time this study was conducted as very decentralized.

Linda Simmons had over 20 years of experience as a speech pathologist, teacher, and district leader. She had worked in various school districts across three different states and described the school district she was working in at the time this study was conducted as centralized.

Edgar Santos had over five years of experience as a teacher, district department head and executive leader. He had worked in two school districts in the same state, and he also characterized the school district he was working in at the time this study was

conducted as highly centralized.

The following table includes additional characteristics of the group as a whole:

Table 1

Participant Characteristics

Number of Participants	10
Average Age	49
Average Years of Experience in Education	26
Gender Breakdown	4 females/6 males
Professional Backgrounds	Principals, Principal Supervisors, Human Resources, Budgeting, Business Operations, Special Populations, Career and Technical Education, Academics, Executive Leadership

Emergent Themes

During their interviews, participants described a wide range of experiences and

perceptions working in a decentralized school district. Throughout the data coding process, over 170 significant statements that captured the participants' experiences and perceptions were identified. These statements were analyzed and subsequently classified into three main themes: autonomy and control, leadership, and equity.

At the heart of the participants' responses was the theme of autonomy and control. This theme has to do with how decision-making and responsibilities are distributed between campuses and central administration. Participants stressed the significant autonomy that principals and schools had in a variety of different areas. They also stressed the limited control that central administration had in directing campus operations.

Participants also stressed the importance of both campus and district leadership under a decentralized model. They articulated the need for effective school leadership with a broad range of skillsets. They also emphasized the need for supportive district leadership and monitoring. Examples of the impact of effective and ineffective leadership were shared.

Equity, or how decentralization affected low-income, minority and other vulnerable student populations, also was a salient theme throughout the participants' responses. In most cases it was described in the context of the former two themes. In other words, participants discussed how campus autonomy, limited district control, and leadership at both the campus and district levels affected low-income and minority

students.

What follows in the rest of this chapter is an examination of the participants' experiences and perceptions as encompassed in the themes of autonomy and control, leadership, and equity.

Theme One: Autonomy and Control

When describing their experiences with and perceptions of decentralization, all participants spoke about issues pertaining to autonomy and control. They described decentralization in terms of campus-level decision-making and agency, especially in the areas of budgeting, curriculum and programming, and staffing. Conversely, they also stressed the limited direct control that central administration possessed in these areas under the decentralized model, while also discussing issues related to influence and tiered autonomy. Their responses echoed and reinforced many of the characterizations of decentralization found in existing literature and described in chapter two of this study.

Budgetary Autonomy

Participants regularly spoke about the autonomy that campuses have in controlling their budgets. Most participants elaborated on the per-unit allocation (PUA) model. As described by several participants and as confirmed through publicly available district documents, this model allotted funding to campuses based on their student enrollment. Schools received a fixed amount of money for each student enrolled and their average attendance. In addition, they received additional weighted funding for students

who met certain criteria, including participation in magnet and career and technical education programming or designation as special education students or English language learners. Under this model, schools received a total sum of funding that was loaded into a campus budget that principals had almost full autonomy in controlling.

Budgetary discretion was described as a key feature of decentralization by various participants. In the following statement, Michael Lee described such feature and contrasts it to the traditional funding model employed by most other school districts:

Unlike most of the districts in the country, we give campuses dollars. So they get a set amount of dollars that they then make decisions on. So they decide what kinds of teachers they're going to have. So principals can make those decisions and also decide where they're going to put their non-salary dollars and decide how much you're going to put in travel or how much you're going to – it may be a principal who is real big on capital and technology. And he wants to put a lot of his non-salary dollars in capital and purchase equipment and so forth for in-classroom electronic instruction. That's principal choice. So we give them dollars, unlike the FTE model where you allocate people. It gives principals that full autonomy to make decisions and be accountable for the decisions they make. They're the CEO of their school; their budget, their kids, and they decide how those funds are best to be spent, without, really, very many district guidelines.

John Saramago characterized budgetary autonomy and funding in the decentralized

model in a similar way:

You're paid by the number of students. We weight the different classifications differently and so, therefore, you have this huge pot and as a principal, I get to decide how to use the funds.

Participants also emphasized the discretion that principals had in determining how to utilize special types of funding. Billy Daniels, for example, discussed the autonomy that principals had in utilizing additional weighted funding for students participating in career and technical education (CTE) programming:

CTE generates additional revenue that comes from the federal government to the state government to the district. The district loads most of this money directly to schools' budgets. The campuses are required to use those funds just strictly for CTE purposes, but outside of that principals have full autonomy to use the funds the way they see fit, whether that's for CTE teachers, CTE professional development, or software or equipment for CTE programs. They usually use their discretion to determine what they think is most important on a campus.

Edgar Santos also described campuses' flexibility to use their budgets:

Principals have a lot of power and control over how they use their budgets. I've seen them, for example, use their money to hire new staff, contract companies to do work for them, buy test preparation materials, or take their students on field trips. I've also seen them use their money to buy furniture, decorations, even

pianos for lobbies of their schools. It really just depends on the principal and what he or she wants to do with the money.

As reflected in the statements above, the participants emphasized that funds could be used for a variety of purposes, including staffing, materials, supplies, facilities and other areas. The ability of principals to allocate their funds the way they wanted was described in both positive and negative terms, as will be explored when examining the themes of leadership and equity.

Autonomy in Curriculum and Programming

In addition to describing how campuses have autonomy in controlling their budgets, the participants also described campus agency in determining curriculum and programming. In the following statement, John Saramago described the level of autonomy campuses had in determining their curriculum.

When we became decentralized the district became very, very lax, in that anyone can be on any different type of program or curriculum. So a vendor could show up at your school and all of a sudden, you're using [program name omitted], right?

Another school could be using [program name omitted] Another one could actually be using the district-written curriculum. It depended on what the principal had as experience, what the teachers wanted, which program they wanted to use.

We pretty much still allow that.

Gene Stacey also described the district-created curriculum and emphasized the autonomy

that schools have in deciding whether to use it:

Even though we try to have some district-wide approaches to things such as literacy, across the district we have campuses teaching things way in different orders, using different resources, some deciding not to even touch or look at the district curriculum.

Hilda Cornwell also stressed the autonomy that schools had in curriculum and programming:

In this district principals have the autonomy to make decisions as it relates to their academic program. They make the decisions on tutoring and the school programming. And also the other resources that are needed on their campus.

The agency that principals had to determine what specialized programs to offer at their campuses was also stressed by various participants. Billy Daniels provided the following example:

A campus can decide what career and technical education (CTE) programs to offer at their campus. We try to help guide them towards offering programs that we think and research shows are best for their students, but the decision at the end of the day is always theirs.

Ruth Middleton pointed out that the district where the study took place had a significant number of English language learners and emphasized the autonomy that principals had in

determining what type of curriculum and programming to provide to these students:

Even though there are services that English language learners need to receive by law, because of decentralization the district varies a lot in its basic provision of services to our English language learners. Most of it depends on the philosophy of that particular principal. It's what the principal feels that he needs to do for his campus – and I wouldn't go so far to say it's always what's best for kids. And I know that sometimes there's external pressures applied to principals, whether it's parents in some areas of our school district have a lot of influence, vendors as well. There is a tendency for principals to get persuaded by these groups to do things are not going to move the school forward.

Similar to John Saramago, Ruth highlighted the role that outside entities can play in influencing principals' decisions.

Principals were also described as having significant autonomy in the way that programming was delivered to students with special needs, as the following statement reflects:

Principals get to make decisions about everything, including what special education services and programs look like. So principals can, for example, say, "Yes, I will have this self-contained class on my campus," or "No, I won't." Here, autonomy is almost total and complete. Each school is its own school. (Linda Simmons)

Similar to budgetary autonomy, the ability for principals to choose curriculum and programming was described in both positive and negative terms. On the one hand, principals were described as having the flexibility to adapt their curriculum and programming to fit the needs of their campus and community and to be innovative. On the other hand, as reflected in various statements above, principals sometimes made decisions that were not guided by best practices for students. The effects that curriculum and programming autonomy had on students will be further examined when discussing the themes of leadership and equity.

Staffing Autonomy

As previously noted, staffing was another area that participants described when talking about campus autonomy and control under decentralization. On numerous occasions it was emphasized that outside of few state-imposed classroom size restrictions, principals had complete discretion over the number and types of positions available at their campuses.

The ability for principals to determine which positions to have at their campuses was stressed by various participants. Peter Garcia, for example, described the autonomy principals had in determining what positions to have at their campus:

In this district, campuses really have a lot of autonomy, other than the criteria of having a building principal and a secretary, to take the money that they have for staffing and really determine the types of positions that they're going to have.

And with that autonomy that they have you'll find a lot of variants in between individual campuses because there's not a staffing formula how they determine their master schedule, the amount of assistant principals they have, whether they have a counselor or not, whether they have a nurse or not, whether they have a librarian or not.

John Saramago reflected on his own former experiences as a principal and characterized such autonomy in positive terms:

As a principal, I get to decide the personnel that I'm going to have. Will I have a dean? Will I have an assistant principal? Will I have a math specialist because we struggle in math? Will I have a literary specialist? I don't want a librarian. I don't need a counselor. I don't want a counselor. That's decentralization. You get to make the decisions. I was at a school where a counselor would not have helped me as much as a social worker. So one of the pleasantries of decentralization, I wasn't forced to hire, literally, a counselor. I hired a social worker. Why? Because they could lead my families to all these other agencies, that their connections were a lot stronger to the community than someone who just counsels, right, ones who run small, little support groups, etc. versus being tied into the community as strong as sometimes social workers are, or the networking is. So that was a decision that I loved being able to make, because it met the needs of my student body a lot better.

Michael Lee echoed similar advantages to the autonomy campuses had in staffing under a decentralized model:

It's your decision on how you staff a campus. Then you do have a better ability to staff your campus, based off your unique student needs. Right? Principals decide how many their teachers are going to have, how many assistant principals, whether they're going to have a nurse, counselor, librarian, how many clerks they're going to have, whether they're going to, say, increase their class sizes a little bit. And trade out a teacher for instructional specialist or reading intervention teacher instead of just a grade level teacher. We have few parameters. But other than that, your class sizes, the type of teachers that you may have, or so forth, is completely up to you. That's probably the most important thing – not every campus is exactly the same. So it does give flexibility to principals to make those adjustments as they see necessary.

Edgar Santos also highlighted principals' autonomy in the staffing composition of their schools:

Our schools look very different in terms of what types of positions are at each one. We don't have the same positions in every school. Instead, we have hundreds of different types of positions and schools pick these based on what they think they need and what they can afford.

As reflected in the statements above, the ability for principals to decide what positions to

have at their campuses was widely viewed as having certain advantages. The flexibility that school leaders possessed to make decisions that were best for their individual schools and communities was highlighted by other participants as well. However, as will be revealed when exploring the themes of leadership and equity, participants also cautioned about some of the potential drawbacks.

Limited Central Control

As central district leaders, participants described limited ability to directly control the areas of budgeting, curriculum and programming, and staffing. Instead, campus leaders had significant autonomy in these areas as described. In addition, the participants spoke about the culture of local autonomy that had become deeply ingrained in the district and highlighted campus resistance to any form of central control.

Throughout their responses, participants regularly expressed limited ability to directly control or even be aware of campus actions. Statements such as the following, for example, reflect the limited control that central leaders had over campus spending:

We don't have much control over how funds are actually spent. It's hard when the board wants to know what programs you have in the district [with] what funds, why funds are being spent in certain areas. Well, when you're decentralized, it's [many] schools making decisions, and the board isn't able to set any really new parameters because we're decentralized. Right? So it does make it more difficult sometimes to answer questions on why funds are being spent in certain ways

because, centrally, we make no decisions (Michael Lee).

The following statement reflects a similar lack of central control with regard to programming:

We have schools that determine programs and pathways, especially CTE, based on sometimes purely the ease of finding instructors when that is probably not in the best interest of the students considering the job market and the forecast of job growth in certain areas. We want to deter from offering programs that are just easy to offer and instead to look at programs that are going to be valuable for these students, so they can get a good job, earn an industry certification, and continue their studies in college if they choose. That doesn't always happen though because, like I said, principals get to decide whatever programs they want to offer, and we can't control that. (Billy Daniels)

Participants also expressed a lack of central control over staffing at the campus level as reflected in the following statement:

It's really frustrating that we can't mandate that all schools have certain positions. It makes my team's work harder because we need to make sure that students are receiving proper guidance and counseling, yet we can't require that there be people at each campus to take on these responsibilities. So many of the schools end up not having certain positions and we are left trying to do the best that we can do given that.

In spite of the limited direct control that the participants expressed having, they described occasions in which the district attempted to exert more central control over certain areas. When discussing these efforts, however, participants would regularly mention a culture of resistance at the campus level. When discussing attempts to exert greater central control over curriculum, for example, Gene Stacey described the following:

There seems to always be this pushback. The leaders want to do their own thing, and so when you try to take a decentralized campus or decentralized district and try to tighten up around certain things, there's always pushback.

Billy Daniels described similar tensions that would arise when he and his division attempted to modify programming at certain campuses:

For a while, my team and I tried to address some programming challenges and inequities at some of our campuses. But it ended up being a big fight between my department and certain campuses who wanted to continue having that complete autonomy to be able to choose the program they want.

Ruth Middleton described a situation in which her team also faced a significant amount of pushback when attempting to require that all schools complete a state-mandated item by a district-created deadline:

I would always get the pushback as I was trying to implement different things here in a more systematic way. You know, for example, when I came here and I joined the district at the end of July, and we still had 25,000 kids who were not

reviewed for their language proficiency status. There's no excuse for that. And then the next year when I set a deadline for campuses to review their kids before school ended because the kids are still there, the pushback was great from the campuses saying "We have so many things that are going on at the campus at that time." And I get it, but I was the campus principal and I was able to get all the deadlines done. How are you supposed to evaluate all the students when it is summer, and all the kids are already gone?

Resistance to district attempts at directing or controlling certain campus operations was described by other participants as well. In addition, some participants spoke about ways in which principals would mobilize and act to prevent any centralization. One way described for them to do so was through communicating to board of education trustees that they were being micromanaged by central administration and were not being given autonomy. The following statement describes this type of situation:

When central office tries to require something, principals complain to trustees that they are being micromanaged. So in decentralization, for us being as long as we have been in, for the board having bought into it as much as they did, wholeheartedly, micromanagement is the horrible word that is the red flag. And so whatever they, principals, they were being micromanaged with, it would be – I mean an immediate end would come to that [...] A principal supervisor should be able to go and have a conversation with a principal without fear that the principal is going to call their trustee, and that trustee is going to call downtown or central

office, and that principal supervisor is going to be in trouble. (John Saramago)

While participants described an overall limited ability to control campus operations, one area that was pointed out as an exception was basic facility maintenance. Principals were described as preferring this area be centrally controlled. The following anecdote shared by John Saramago reflects this:

An extreme form of decentralization occurred for about one year while I was principal. And that was when they even decided “We’re going to give you the money, and you go and hire the landscaping company that you want or the guys that are going to come and keep up your school.” That blew up quickly for the district. Because that’s an example of – that’s a service that the district should never have let go of. And even though they did temporarily, they quickly brought it back under their domain. Because imagine a principal, who are you going to hire? How do you vet those employees? There’s a difference. We had some schools that sit on 5 acres, some that sit on 15 acres, right? I mean, so, and as a principal, I’ll be the first one to tell you, I never bought into it, so I never went to go hire my own gardener. And I was in a very empowered school. The district team still came and they took care of our landscaping, of our cutting of the grass. But I heard from my peers the horrible stories of they would hire people, they wouldn’t show up. They showed up late. They didn’t do good work. And again, as a principal, you don’t want to be in charge of hiring who’s going to be cutting your lawn.

Tiered Autonomy. While the notion that schools had significant control over their budgets, curriculum and staffing was strongly emphasized, the notion of tiered campus autonomy was also brought up, even if more as a recommendation than as a prevalent practice. Tiered autonomy was defined as allowing campuses to having varying levels of autonomy depending on how well they were performing on measures such as standardized exams. Under this model, schools that were performing well would be allowed greater amounts of autonomy than lower performing campuses, who would be more centrally controlled and monitored. This concept is captured in the following statement from one of the participants:

If your school is doing well based on the metrics that we're going to measure and that we agree are measures of a healthy school, then you should have a great deal of autonomy. As long as it's not illegal or immoral, you should have a lot of autonomy. In fact, we should be coming to you and looking at what you're doing so we can replicate that in other parts of the district. But, if you're not showing high levels of efficacy for the goals and the metrics that we also – we want to monitor, then the district should be in your business at little bit more. (Jerome Washington)

John Saramago mentioned that in instances where the district implemented standards or requirements, “high flying” campuses typically received waivers to be exempted from these requirements. This stemmed from a desire to not detrimentally impact things that were producing positive results, or as one other participant described it, “not wanting to

fix what isn't broken.”

Challenges associated with tiered autonomy were described by the participants. It was mentioned that tiered autonomy was implemented as a district practice on numerous occasions, but that schools with lower autonomy would push back and resort to the resistance measures previously described.

Influence vs. Control. While participants stressed that central administration had limited direct control in a decentralized model, several underscored the ability and responsibility of district leadership to positively influence campus behaviors by providing valuable guidance and resources that would be perceived and welcomed as valuable. The following statement from Gene Stacey highlights this notion.

[Decentralization] keeps us on our toes because if what you're producing is not viewed as valuable, schools don't have to use it. But if it is viewed as valuable, schools will embrace and use it. And so I think it's actually keeping us more accountable in a decentralized district as a curriculum department or central office.

The statement above reflects a positive belief around the effect of decentralization. It heightens sense of accountability at the central office level and promotes a sense of urgency to create and provide resources and support that are of high quality.

Ruth Middleton also echoed a similar feeling about the need for central leadership to provide valuable support and resources, and underscored the importance of

relationship building:

We've had to rely a lot on building a relationship with each campus leadership team in order for them to be able to be influenced in carrying out the initiatives that we know are good for students. It is critical for us to be able to have the rapport with the campus principal in order for them to see the value in the services we provide, but also to have the sense of trust that when something else comes around that we have to do, they trust us enough to be able to say, "You know what, I'm not even going to question it because I know that you're going to guide me through it."

Linda Simmons also shared a similar reflection on the need to build trust and provide support that was perceived as valuable:

You have to get the buy-in of the principal to make things happen. And you want the buy-in anyway, but the fact that we are decentralized means we can't just go to a school and say, "But this makes sense and here's why we're going to do it anyway." You can't do that now.

Theme Two: Leadership

Leadership also was a salient theme in the participants' descriptions of their experiences with and perceptions of decentralization. The participants spoke extensively about leadership at the principal, district administrator, and superintendent levels. They underscored the role that leadership played in a decentralized system and provided

examples of what effective and ineffective leadership resulted in under such system.

Principals

Participants in the study described and stressed the especially significant role that principals played under a decentralized model. There was a strong consensus among the participants that the importance of the principal was elevated and the responsibilities of a principal were expanded in a decentralized system. It was stressed that without a campus leader who was effective at operating under a decentralized model, it was not possible for a campus to be successful.

Broad Skillsets. Various participants underscored the need for principals to have a broad set of skills and content knowledge under a decentralized model where they were responsible not only for instruction, but also for functions in areas such as business operations, facility maintenance, budgeting and human resources. The following statement underscores the need for principals to have a wide breadth of skills and competencies in a decentralized setting:

It's hard enough being a building principal when you know the staff that you're going to have and then you just have to design the master schedule. But in a decentralized model, they also need to need to figure out, "What is it that I need to do with this amount of money? What positions do I need? What programs should I implement?" (Peter Garcia)

Billy Daniels echoed a similar sentiment:

Our principals aren't just responsible for learning. They are also responsible for budgeting. They are responsible for maintain[ing] their building. They are responsible for hiring. They are responsible for curriculum. They are responsible for basically all the planning and operations of their schools. That's why it's so hard to find a principal who can do all of these things and be successful.

Edgar Santos also emphasized the variety of skills required of a principal in a decentralized district:

A principal here needs to be a jack of all trades. It's not enough for them to just be good instructional leaders like in other districts. Here they take on so many responsibilities – they do so much. During a day, a principal may need to lead his staff through professional development on instructional strategies, decide what textbooks to buy, find money for new positions, and try to figure out how they are going to meet all of the state minimum standards. They interact with so many different stakeholders – from students, to teachers, to vendors, to parents, to district staff. It's a ton that is on their shoulders and that they need to be able to do.

On various occasions, it was stressed that it was also essential for campus leaders to know their campuses and communities very well. The following statement reflects this idea:

The principal must know the characteristics and the challenges of their school,

everything that they're facing, to be able to make the right decision. So in decentralization, you're really banking on your principal being a quality principal, and being able to be savvy enough. And as research tells us, they must be situationally aware of the needs of the community and the extended community, and the types of personnel that they need to surround themselves with. (John Saramago)

In statements such as the following, participants described the challenges that new principals who came from an outside, non-decentralized school system faced when transitioning to the district.

Whenever I have hired principals who are from surrounding districts that are not decentralized, I've known they're going to require a lot of additional support in understanding that they don't turn around and say, "Where's my own speech therapist? Where's my own diagnostician? Where's my own what we're calling now essential positions?" They're so used to that being provided by central office and they don't realize. You have to navigate through that. (John Samarago)

Billy Daniels echoed a similar sentiment:

A principal may come to the district with a background where [they] didn't have the responsibilities that they now have, such as running their own budgets. I think that is an additional challenge that the principals have that they may not acknowledge initially, but it can kind of consume their day-to-day because of lack

of experience with things that were centralized where they previously worked.

Various participants stressed that because of their expanded responsibilities, new principals to the district need to be coachable and receptive to feedback. Principals that were not so were described as having extreme difficulty when adjusting to the demands of decentralization, as the following statement reflects.

I've seen new principals come in – principals who were really successful in their previous districts. They don't really know what awaits them, and some think that because they were successful before they will automatically be successful here. But they don't realize that if they don't come here with a growth mentality and actively seek or receive help, they will quickly drown in all the many things that they now need to do. (Edgar Santos)

Effective Principal Leadership. Participants expressed that decentralization could be advantageous in situations where there was an effective principal who could manage the different types of responsibilities just described. The following statement reflects this belief:

If you really get rock star leaders in place and they have the autonomy and the creativity and the innovativeness to staff right and to meet the academic needs of the kids, then great things happen, but only if they're high fliers and high performers (Peter Garcia).

A similar sentiment was echoed by Ruth Middleton:

I like some aspects of campuses having a lot of freedom in a decentralized system because I really enjoy strong campus leaders who really know what to do with the money, with the staffing, etc. We have some principals, for example, that understand and have experience serving English language learners and use their budgets to implement programs and strategies that really work for our students. When you have that kind of principal, decentralization really works. I have seen a lot of instances in which really well-skilled campus leaders are able to use the freedom and flexibility they have for amazing things – for good things.

Linda Simmons echoed a similar feeling when discussing the provision of services to students with special needs:

The schools that are doing what's right for students in this decentralized school district are all vested in the success of their students. And this all boils down to leadership, no question. It's the leader. If the leader welcomes everybody and the leader has high expectations for everybody, then the staff is either going to get on board or they're going to find someplace else to work. But it all begins with the leadership. So the schools that are implementing inclusive practices with success are doing so because of the leadership.

Billy Daniels provided a specific example of how a strong campus leader in a decentralized district could lead to significant advantages:

I know this one principal who is doing amazing things for his kids – amazing

things. He's started this innovative CTE program that is just blowing it out of the water. Kids are not only getting exposed to great, high-demand careers, but they are doing really well in their academic coursework as well. And that program wouldn't exist if it were not for the flexibility that that school had to try something new and for the principal who knows how to turn an idea into a plan that worked.

Ineffective Principal Leadership. Statements such as the ones above highlight a shared belief that a campus can flourish in a decentralized system if an effective leader is in place. However, participants also caution that the same autonomy and control that allow effective principals to find creative solutions and implement strategies that promote student success can also be detrimental when ineffective leadership is in place. Participants described situations in which principals made decisions that negatively impacted their students because of their inexperience or limited capacity to handle all the responsibilities associated with being a school leader in a decentralized system. The following statement reflects this belief as shared by various participants:

When we were centralized, principals couldn't do as much harm because the decisions were coming from central office and because you had very few dollars to play with. So you couldn't do as much harm as you can now. (John Saramago)

John provided the following concrete example of how an inexperienced school leader could utilize his/her staffing autonomy to make decisions that negatively impacted

students:

In one case, an elementary school had 19 clerks. 19 clerks, okay? Most other schools with that same enrollment have three. If you are a high school, secondary, when you are getting more transcripts ready, okay, sometimes four or five is reasonable, especially for a very large high school, but not for elementary of 1,200. Despite the school being low performing and struggling academically, especially in science; despite the school having a high ratio of students to teachers. They needed to find a way to cut down the number of clerks, to hire more teachers, to reduce the student-to-teacher ratio.

In this described situation, the principal at the school had the authority to staff her campus the way she saw fit, even if her decisions did not align with widely recognized best practices and common sense. Since she did not agree with the district's recommendation, nothing could be done to increase the number of teachers working with students until she left the school and a new principal was brought on.

Ruth Middleton issued a similar warning about the negative effects an ineffective principal can have in a decentralized system:

With a lot of power comes much responsibility. A lot of decision-making options/ freedom on the hands of maybe someone who's not as experienced or is not really aware of these practices, or just doesn't have the skills to be able to carry something through, it's just dangerous.

Ruth provided several examples of how a principal without the required knowledge or skillsets could adversely impact English language learners. She described for example, principals who detrimentally impacted English language learners by putting them in English-only settings without any scaffolding or supports. As the following statement reflects, she also expressed that principals often lacked the background and expertise in serving English language learners necessary to effectively utilize their available resources:

We have some campuses that are using their money that they're given that they're able to meet the needs of their English language learners, but those are the few campuses that are led by people who have experience with English language learners to be able to know that that is a best practice.

Linda Simmons stressed that principals had the autonomy to make decisions that could negatively impact how special services were delivered and provided a poignant example:

In this district, principals can decide what type of special education programming to provide at their campus. They can decide that they don't want a special education program or class in their school and remove it one year to the next. They can say, "This student has to leave my campus because I'm unable to provide the type of support this student needs." And it means that student automatically has to be sent to another campus. And so it can create long bus rides for students because they are so far away from home. In a district with centralized

special education services, they could not do these types of things.

Linda also stressed that principals had significant autonomy in the special education referral process, and that with ineffective leadership, this could negatively impact students. She described situations in which students with behavior problems, for example, were inappropriately being referred for special needs services.

Peter Garcia provided another specific example of how an ineffective principal could make decisions that negatively impacted students in a decentralized district:

When we don't have a centralized model, and you couple that with not having the right leader in place that's experienced and who lacks support, it's really a train wreck waiting to happen. For example, there are some principals that don't know how to effectively create a master schedule, yet they have full autonomy in doing so. So you'll see some classes that might have seven or eight kiddos in it, and then you'll have others that have 28, 30 kids in that class, and it's not because they weren't staffed right. It's because the schedule wasn't developed correctly.

Peter also spoke about principal competency when discussing hiring practices. He described recurring situations where principals had limited skills in hiring and would not perform standard processes, such reference checks or involving other stakeholders in the interview process.

Gene Stacey provided examples, such as the following, of how principals with limited instructional leadership could also make poor instructional decisions:

I can go into a school and see stacks of test prep books that a leader decided to purchase with their own funds. And a lot of times that's the enemy of what we're doing. And some principals of these schools where there's this urgency to get kids to pass the test, they would rather spend their money on academic intervention test prep-type stuff and less on good first instructional resources, and they're given the opportunity to do that if they want to.

District Administration

In addition to describing school leadership, participants also described the roles and impact of district leadership, including the superintendent, department heads and principal supervisors, in a decentralized setting. They elaborated on the need for district leadership to set the vision and goals for the district, establish parameters and non-negotiables, coach and guide campuses, and provide beneficial training to build the principal and teacher capacity that will enable schools to flourish. At the same time, they also underscored the need for accountability measures to be set by central leadership, and for there to be greater oversight and monitoring.

Vision and Goals. When discussing leadership in a decentralized system, participants underscored the need for the superintendent and senior leadership to establish the overarching goals and direction for the district, as the following statement reflects:

In a decentralized school district like ours, it is critical for the district's leadership to guide the objectives and goals. I think it is really important that the mission and

vision be set for all the campuses to follow. Otherwise, we will have hundreds of schools going in different directions. (Billy Daniels)

Jerome Washington stressed the role of the district's superintendent in setting the district's vision and goals:

A superintendent needs to be clear from the beginning what's the purpose of the decentralized model. Clarity of vision, clarity of purpose are extremely important. If a superintendent is not clear about what he's trying to achieve, if he's decentralizing for the sake of decentralizing, it's no better than a centralized system. However, if he's decentralizing with very clear goals, structures, frameworks, rubrics and a clear sense of what the district is trying to achieve, it can be a positive thing.

Edgar Santos also underscored the importance of vision and goal setting by district leadership:

One of the challenges about us being decentralized is that not everyone always seems to be going in the same direction. What do we care about? What do we want our students to be able to do? Where do we want to go? Sometimes the answer to these questions depend on who you are talking to. Part of the problem may be the that we are a very large system, but we need to have a shared cause and sense of purpose.

Parameters and Non-Negotiables. In addition to setting clear goals, participants

also emphasized the need for the district's leadership to set clear parameters around campus and central authority, as articulated by Ruth Middleton in the following statement:

The district's leadership needs to let campuses know: These are your parameters. These are your resources and how you are able to use them. Now, here we are to help you use the established parameters to be able to maximize student achievement and equity for your students.

Jerome Washington also described the importance of such parameters:

I'll use a metaphor: As the garden grew without trimming, we've got plants everywhere now. My view of decentralization has always been that decentralization is good but it's almost like a social compact. So we have a social compact in society that says, "Well, your right to do whatever you want is going to be inhibited just a bit because we live in a society and there are certain rules and norms of living within the society, so we don't get to kill each other at will, probably the most extreme example. Well, in a decentralized system you have to have some rules as well, you have a social compact, what is decentralized, what's not decentralized.

The notion of standards or non-negotiables set by the superintendent and district leadership was also brought up on several occasions. Participants recognized that principals should have autonomy in operating their campuses, but they also stressed the

need for certain universal expectations or norms. The following statement reflects this belief:

I still think some non-negotiables or some expectations around what a school should and should not do are important. The district should be able to say, “Yes, you can make these decisions. However, here are certain non-negotiables.” (Hilda Cornwell)

Billy Daniels echoed a similar sentiment:

There are some things that need to be done in every school. For example, if college and career readiness is one of the district’s priorities, then schools should not be able to not administer the SAT to their students. All schools should. The district’s leadership needs to establish what is non-negotiable and what is flexible.

Ruth Middleton also stressed the need for norms across all campuses:

I understand that different communities, different schools have different needs. And as a district right now, principals have control over how they spend their budget, what positions they staff, what services they provide. But I think there’s a need to be able to have some core services and consistency. But the current setting that we have in our district is pretty much being able to have the principals access our needs and being able to use the resources that are given in whatever form, in whatever capacity.

Various participants also highlighted the need for the district's superintendent and senior administration to work with the board of education to include the parameters within the district's policies and regulations.

Coaching and Guiding. As previously emphasized when discussing the theme of autonomy and control, most of the participants stressed their limited ability to directly control the areas of budgeting, curriculum and staffing. However, several of the participants expressed that under the decentralized model, it was central leadership's responsibility to positively influence campus decisions by providing training, coaching and support. John Saramago described central leadership's key role as:

[...] asking questions; you should be the thought partner. And again, the goal of the central leader is to be the thought partner, to be the coach so that the principal, who has a lot of responsibility, right, makes the right decisions for his or her community. And again, it all has to lead to increased student achievement.

Michael Lee framed the primary role of central leadership in similar terms, focusing on the area of budgeting:

Our role is to help principals make decisions. I mean, we've got our school supervisors and budget analysts to kind of help them just navigate the financial side of it. For example, whether they can or can't afford to do something. At times we try to play devil's advocate and ask, "If you make this decision, have you thought about this potential impact?" So it's that collaboration to kind of help ask

the questions and say, “Here’s a financial impact of doing this.” Most of our focus is the customer support side of helping them whenever they need assistance.

Hilda Cornwell expressed a similar belief about the function of central leadership in a decentralized setting when discussing her own role:

Principals need to understand that yes, they can make almost all decisions. But as an educator with a lot of experience and many skills, I always try to provide them with additional options that they need to consider. Principals are left to make decisions, or sometimes they don’t see the big picture across the district, or they don’t know that they need X, Y, Z programming to support their students, and sometimes their students lose out. Our job is to support and provide additional resources that we are aware of, to help with professional development and to coach principals around the decision that they make.

Jerome Washington echoed a similar sentiment around the key coaching function of central leadership and administration:

As a centralized district or a central administration, our role is continuously to look at schools based on rubrics and be providing input as to “how are you addressing this issue, what does your faculty look like? Have you done a needs assessment on your faculty needs structure? What does that inform you? How are you aligning your resources?” When you have a support system that can work like that, I think you can see some incredible things happen.

Training. Participants stressed the need for central leadership to help build school leaders' capacity by providing training in the various areas principals were responsible for overseeing in a decentralized setting. Almost every participant pointed to a lack of, very limited, or nonexistent training that specifically addressed how to lead in a decentralized setting, as reflected in the following statements:

As time evolved you had less and less principals that had been trained in how to administer in a decentralized system. When I arrived to the district, I could find very little evidence of any training for decentralized leadership. (Jerome Washington)

Hilda Cornwell expressed a similar need for central leadership to provide training to campus leaders:

Our principals that come into our district usually have been on a centralized model, and now they're moving to a decentralized model. And they struggle. We need to provide them with the training and support that they need to understand decentralization and be successful.

Ruth Middleton also shared a great need for principals to be trained on how to operate within a decentralized setting:

It is very important for district leadership to invest in the development of campus leaders, not only to know what their long-term plans should include but also how they go about using the resources in the most efficient manner in their campuses.

So you give them the power, the freedom, the options, but you also have to invest in the skillset in a very consistent manner. We owe it to our campus leaders to be able to equip them on how to be able to maximize that decentralization. We need to equip them with the skills to handle all the responsibilities, all the budgeting, all the staffing, and not rely entirely on their own experience. Then I think that's the situation that has to be increased in order for a decentralized system to be able to work.

For district leaders to properly support principals, it was described as critical for the leaders to have a solid grasp of the schools' contexts, as the following statement reflects.

Central leadership needs know the landscape of the district. Which is a challenge because we serve many schools, right? But you need to really to know the landscape of our organization and the needs so that as you're working with the campus administrators, you can provide the right guidance. (John Saramago)

This sentiment was also echoed by Peter Garcia in the following statement:

It is critical for us to be fluid and adaptable and realize that all our stakeholders really are different. In order to understand those differences, we have to put our feet on the ground at those campuses and do campus walks and really understand the culture of that campus.

Monitoring. The participants also spoke about the increased need for monitoring by district leadership under a system where campuses wielded significant autonomy. The

role of principal supervisors and department leaders, in particular, were stressed as especially important in this respect. Monitoring was often described as ensuring that there is a system of safeguards. Jerome Washington, for example, used a metaphor of a system of rails and bumpers when describing district monitoring. Such monitoring, he stressed, needed to exist to ensure that campuses do not deviate entirely off course.

Situations were described in which schools were abusing situations, or even breaking the law, because of a lack of monitoring. Examples provided included schools mismanaging funds and spending significant amounts of funds on travel or materials that did not support campus instruction or programming. As one participant expressed:

The district needs to have safeguards in place so that if a school leader is about to make a mistake, we help them not make that mistake because, ultimately, that mistake will hurt students. (John Saramago)

In the following statement, Gene Stacey underscored the need for greater district monitoring:

There needs to be more focus from central office leaders around what types of choices principals are or not able to make and how we know they're going to be good choices or instructionally sound or good for kids. I think some of it hasn't been regulated very closely, so we find out after the fact what leaders did.

Linda Simmons shared a similar belief when discussing the area of special education:

I think that is difficult when principals get to make all the decision. Special education has rules that have to be adhered to or else there could be a significant legal or financial impact. And so they can't do that by themselves. Central office needs to monitor and help make sure that they follow the rules because it's complicated and convoluted.

John Saramago echoed this view when discussing the role that principal supervisors should play in monitoring how campuses are utilizing their budgets.

You often have principals that at the end of the year leave 175,000, 200,000 [dollars] on the table. And they're not high performing and you're wondering "Why didn't you hire more people to work with your struggling students because you had high failure rates." That's been the part that I have felt we need a little bit more direction. We need a lot more direction, actually. That should not be allowed, period. But when you say that should not be allowed, that's centralization because that means someone's looking at the report, someone's asking you the questions, someone's asking you, "Okay. Title 1. It's February, you should be at least at, what, 75% having spent your special revenue. That's what they're for, for this school year. Not to save it, not to roll over for next school year, right. It's meant for this school year." When you provide that kind of very direct guidance, then your ability this school year to make the actual decision is limited.

This statement reflects a belief that even in a decentralized system, there should be central oversight and monitoring in place to ensure that situations such as the one described above do not take place. At the same time, it reflects a recognition that oversight can limit campus autonomy.

Hilda Cornwell also described the need for district monitoring and underscored the resistance with which it could be met:

Some schools, because of decentralization, they've made decisions that have enhanced their school and their school communities. Others have made decisions that, like I said, have hurt them because also we think about the lack of – and I hate to use the word monitoring, but I'm going to use the word monitoring. But that pushback often is, "I'm the principal. We're decentralized, so I can make the decision. Central office does not get to tell me how to run my campus." And so, we're seeing the effects of that.

Accountability. When discussing vision and goals, various participants also emphasized the need for district leadership to create and convey its accountability measures to all stakeholders, as reflected in the following statement:

The district needs to be very clear about the rubric it is going to use to assess campus' accountability. (Jerome Washington)

Edgar Santos also discussed the need for clear accountability measures:

We give schools a lot of autonomy here. However, we need to make sure that they are meeting the district's goals, and that means more than just meeting the minimum academic standards set by the state. Our schools need to know what we as a district value and prioritize, and they need to understand how we are going to gauge their effectiveness.

Theme Three: Equity

Decentralization unchecked is an accelerator for inequity, especially in a minority-rich school district. (Jerome Washington)

Having been in a decentralized district as long as I've been in now, with the high number of schools that we have that are not being successful, and all are in impoverished neighborhoods, right? If decentralization was really working, we wouldn't have the number of low-performing schools that we do in the same neighborhoods that we do. (John Saramago)

Equity – specifically the manners in which decentralization impacts low-income and minority student populations – was also a prominent theme in the participants' responses. The statements above reflect a negative or cautious attitude about decentralization and its relationship to equity. Among all participants, there was a consensus that the way that decentralization was being implemented in the district resulted in or accentuated inequities. When discussing how decentralization impacted equity, participants often returned to the themes of autonomy and leadership that were previously explored.

Participants focused on issues related to consistency and variation, available funding and resources, and human capital when discussing the impact that decentralization had on equity. What follows is an exploration of each of these areas as described by the participants.

Consistency and Variation

As previously explored, participants highlighted the variation in curriculum and programming between campuses that accompanied the district's decentralized approach. Such variation in curriculum and programming was often characterized as deepening inequities between low-income and more affluent students.

Mobility. Participants especially emphasized the effect that it had on students who transferred to other campuses. The following statement points out that low-income students experienced higher rates of mobility and were therefore more likely to be negatively impacted by inconsistent and variable curriculums and programming:

We're talking about in this district, hundreds of campuses that are using different methods and programs. And so we have all things – and I hate to say, even use the word – all over the place. But you have something different on every campus. And there's not a set standard. And so then, thinking about mobility, when children move from campus to campus, one campus has this set of instructional focus. Another campus has another. It impacts student achievement, especially for low-income students that move around a lot. It impacts equity. (Hilda Cornwell)

John Saramago provided a similar account of how decentralized programming and curriculum could negatively impact students:

Neighboring programs or schools could have different reading programs, so the high mobility, as kids move from school to school to school, was creating gaps because they were going from one reading program to another one completely different. Unfortunately, the same would even happen with bilingual programs and bilingual students who transferred to another school. [...] Those are some of the challenges that when the principal gets to decide “This is what my school’s going to look like,” it makes it more difficult for our children that are mobile.

Billy Daniels also emphasized how decentralization impacted mobile students:

We have a high mobility rate in students here. Many students who are in a CTE program or sequence will attend one campus and leave and then attend another campus and their background as far as what they were exposed to can vary greatly because of the lack, I think, of unified programming across our district. So that been a big issue.

Vertical Alignment. In addition to negatively impacting students who transferred from one school to another, participants also discussed the impact that decentralized curriculum and programming had on certain student populations as they progressed from one level of schooling to the next. For example, when discussing English language learners progressing from elementary to middle school, and from middle school to high

school, Ruth Middleton expressed the following:

In a decentralized district, principals often focus on their campus and ignore the big picture. Meaning that, yes, I'm responsible for my kids in elementary, pre-K through fifth, but then where does my responsibility fit in the larger scope of doing what's best for kids? This tends to translate into a lack of vertical alignment between schools. If we don't provide campuses the whole picture and this is where you fit, and this is your responsibilities for that, and this framework that you use, then I think a lot of the big picture is lost and I'm only going to do things that are good for me. I know that that's not what the campus folks intend but I think that's in the right consequence and effect that comes out in the wash.

In this described situation, immigrant students who were learning English were impacted negatively by the lack of alignment between schools as they progressed through their educational trajectory.

Available Coursework and Programming. Participants also spoke about how availability of programming and certain coursework could vary based on the types of students being served. They suggested that schools and geographies with more sizeable low-income populations in general had more limited advanced-level coursework, including Advanced Placement and dual credit. In the following statement, Billy Daniels described this situation:

You have some principals whose vision it is to decrease the amount of advanced

college level courses in the campus and shift them over to some other options for the students. I think at low-income schools, principals sometimes focus on meeting the state's accountability requirements and neglect the long-term goals for their campus. We want to increase academic rigor for all students, but principals may only have a short-term goal there where they want to just maybe concentrate on just getting students to pass the standardized exams. So they don't focus on things such as the SAT, completion of career pathways, certifications, or Advanced Placement. That's why we have parts of town where there aren't really many advanced programs. Students from, let's say the north, for example, where most students are black and Hispanic, have to travel extensive amounts of time using our bus transportation to attend a program with a health science program. And that of course hurts our students, especially our minority students. I think if we had a more centralized approach, we could see an expansion of programs and opportunities for students in all our schools.

Edgar Santos also described how the type of programming available at schools could vary significantly depending on the background of the students:

I think one of the most unjust aspects of our school district is that some campuses have tons of advanced offerings, like Advanced Placement courses, and other campuses have very few. And it's no surprise that schools like [school name omitted] and [school name omitted] with a lot of wealthier kids are the schools that have those courses. In some of our more high-need schools, we don't offer

almost any advanced offerings, so those kids miss out on getting college credit while they are in high school, just because we don't have the same expectations for them.

Gene Stacey stressed a desire for programming to be more consistent and equitable between campuses, as the following statement reflects:

In an ideal world if I made the decisions and I understand there'd be community and leader pushback, but there need to be certain non-negotiables at every campus. Certain programming, certain branding of the district that says, "If [you] went to one of those district schools, we at least know that you were exposed to certain things and you were given certain supports and programs and certain resources not based on which side of town you went to school on." (Gene Stacey)

These types of inequities that stemmed from variation and inconsistencies in programming and curriculum weren't entirely attributed to autonomy or the decisions made by principals. The amount of available funding and resources also were described as playing a significant role in influencing curriculum and programming. In other words, variation across schools was not due entirely to the agency that schools had in choosing what curriculum and programming to use, but also due to their varying financial constraints. Consistency and variation in curriculum and programming were also described in the context of human capital and leadership turnover. The following two sections will explore these areas in greater depth.

Funding and Resources

When discussing equity, all participants also spoke about available funding and resources under a decentralized model. The following statement reflects a shared skepticism among participants that decentralization leads to an equitable distribution of resources:

If I can go to a high-poverty school and a non-high-poverty school and I can see the same in terms of resources, then I would say we have an equitable situation going on. But if I'm lacking anything that I need to help my kids succeed, then we don't. And so if decentralization is supposed to be a means to accomplish that, why does it look so different between campuses? (Linda Simmons)

When discussing available resources, participants often returned to the issue of autonomy and the funding model associated with decentralization. Several participants also spoke about the intersection between the district's decentralized model and its magnet and school choice programming. The role that outside funding played in relationship to equity under a decentralized model also was discussed.

PUA and Enrollment. As previously described, the amount of funding a campus received under the decentralized system was determined by a weighted per-student model (PUA). While this model included additional weighted funding for populations considered at-risk, almost all participants expressed that overall the funding formula adversely and disproportionately impacted low-income and minority students. The negative impact on the district's lowest academically performing campuses, which

comprised almost entirely low-income and Latino and African-American youth, was especially emphasized. As described in the following statement, these campuses often suffered from decreased enrollment, which reduced their available funding and in turn made it more difficult to properly serve their students.

I think of schools like [school name omitted], for example. [School name omitted] has continued to decline in enrollment, and you've got [school name omitted], who is also an extremely small high school, and you've got [school name omitted], we can go through the list, you've got [school name omitted], very, very small elementary school and they struggle every year to provide basic services.

(Michael Lee)

As confirmed in publicly available district documents, the schools listed by the participant have some of the highest percentages of low-income and minority students in the district.

The concept of school size/enrollment and economies of scale also came up when discussing equity and available resources. Various participants described smaller schools with lower enrollment, such as the lower-performing campuses, not experiencing and benefiting from economies of scale like larger campuses did. Statements such as the following reflect this notion:

From a financial perspective, a major disadvantage is a decentralized system using a PUA funding model benefits schools of larger size, so as you get bigger

the economies of scale just generate more dollars, so it leaves behind our smaller schools. So if we put money in the system and we decide that we're going to increase our premium and allocations to schools, your small schools don't get much of that because they're small. So a big school gets a lot more in funding just because of sheer size, it's like anything, just like a business, a large corporation just by its sheer size has access to more resources versus a smaller store. And so when you're a small campus and we're in a system where our state hasn't even appropriately funded school districts throughout the state, you don't have the money to push into your smaller schools without taking away from your larger schools, so you end up a lot with schools having to make tough decisions like "I can't afford to have a nurse, counselor or librarian," or "I can't afford to have a fine arts program," or "I can't afford to have a social worker" or you end up with larger class sizes because you just don't have the economies of scale to just fund you and your basic needs. So the smaller you get, the more inequities there are, and the larger you are, the more access you have to funds and you can offer more. Unless you've got a really well-funded system then as campus are small you're going to have equities and then we are worsening that in our own system. So economies of scale, I think, is a big challenge in a PUA system. (Michael Lee)

Michael Lee expressed that he thought funding a decentralized model negatively impacted smaller schools, and not explicitly low-income and minority students. However, like other participants, he expressed that struggling schools with lower enrollment tended

to be composed almost exclusively of low-income and minority youth. He listed a set of schools he thought were most detrimentally impacted by the funding system under decentralization; as confirmed in publicly available district documents, all these campuses were over 95% African-American, Latino, and low-income.

School Choice. School choice and magnet programs were also often discussed in relationship to decentralization, enrollment, funding, and equity. The district's school choice policy allowed students in the district to attend schools outside of their zoned area to participate in magnet or specialty programs. The district also facilitated participation in this process by providing free transportation to students to attend any school in the district. The ability for students to opt out of attending their zoned schools to attend magnet and specialty schools was described as driving and accelerating the precarious financial situation of campuses serving predominantly low-income and minority students as the following statement reflects:

There is this domino effect at our most academically struggling and high-poverty schools. If you have a school that doesn't have the right leader that's innovative, has all the resources, all the essential positions, all the programs, and somebody else does, then what happens is those kids can migrate to those campuses. And then you lose kids, so then you lose funding. And when you lose funding, then you lose more of those teachers because they're not making the money to add staff. And so you lose other programs. So when you lose other programs, you lose more kids. You lose more kids, you lose more programs. You lose more

programs, you lose more kids. Schools like [name omitted] that literally could have 1,300 students have 300 instead. And it's not because there aren't students zoned to those campuses. It's because they don't have all the components, programs, and resources that you'd find under a centralized model. (Peter Garcia)

This downwardly spiraling financial situation for campuses serving predominantly low-income and minority students was also described by Jerome Washington:

If your school has a very specialized program, and you decide that you're going to have a particular program and that you're going to have a certain profile of students that you want to come into your school and your program, in a decentralized model you have pretty much full authority to make that happen. So what ends up happening is that you end up – I'm not saying skim but you end up getting a certain profile of students who tend to be more affluent. Whereas if you're in a historically underserved neighborhood or community, number one you're at a disadvantage because in a decentralized system you get less students, so you get less resources and if you don't have any kind of programming that is attractive to neighborhood students.

The following graphic (figure 1) illustrates the impact that the funding model under decentralization, coupled with the district's school choice policies, was described to have on schools with high levels of poverty:

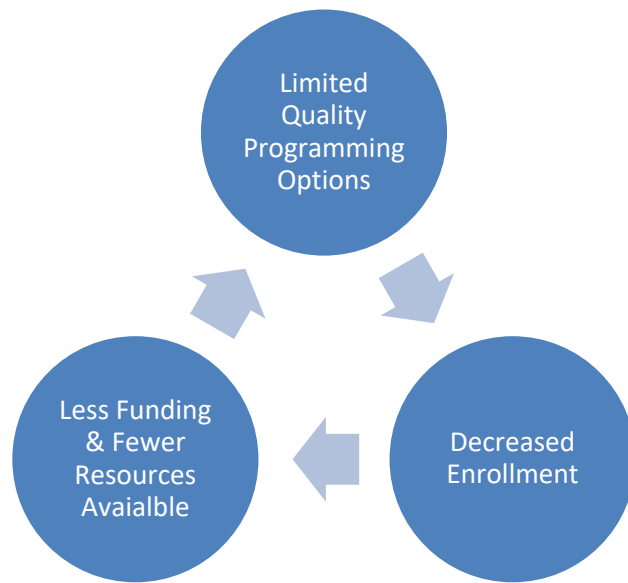


Figure 1. Programming, Enrollment, and Funding Loop

Several participants also underscored the additional per-student funding that was allotted to students designated as gifted and talented or participating in magnet programs and attributed this to increased inequities.

When you dig deep, you often find big differences in available funding between two campuses with similar enrollment. There are financial inequities in overall budgets based on specialized funds like the magnet funding that go to campuses based on some programs. When you add up all the specialized funds, there can be huge differences in the funding going to campuses. (Edgar Santos)

The fact that low-income and minority students were less likely to participate in school choice options and, as a result, were more likely to attend their zoned campus with fewer resources was also stressed. Billy Daniels provides the following account:

If you look at the percentage of students who are attending our highest-performing campuses with magnet programs to the percentage of students even demographically that are attending traditional neighborhood schools, you see a huge gap and increase in the percentage of white and Asian students at certain campuses compared to the overall district enrollment as far as the percentage they represent. A study was done that showed that the magnet programs in this district were among the most economically and racially segregated in the country. When you also consider that the programs with magnet get extra funding, it makes it extremely unfair and inequitable.

Ruth Middleton expressed a similar sentiment:

I think where the issue with low-income students comes into play is the equity issue in the magnet program. Well, there's a tendency for involved and wealthier parents to be able to look for school options for their students. But for low-income parents or parents who trust the system, like the parents of English language learners, are going to trust that their son's school is going to provide them with a quality education. We need to be able to think outside the box and see how we can [provide] information around the opportunities available through school choice to all parents.

For reasons such as these, participants such as Gene Stacey cautioned against the negative impact that school choice in combination with a decentralized funding formula

could have on students from low-income or minority backgrounds:

School choice, combined with decentralization, tends to leave out and hurt neighbor school kids who maybe do not opt to go to another school of choice in a low-income, underserved community.

Available resources and positions. Participants stressed the impact that limited funding could have on campuses in a decentralized system. They pointed to significant disparities between campuses. Resources available to students and staff were described as varying significantly between campuses with wealthier student populations and campuses with high levels of poverty. Participants highlighted the scarcity of basic resources and essential personnel at some of the district's neediest campuses, which, under the decentralized budgeting model, had very limited funds.

In the following statement, Billy Daniels provides an example of the limited resources available at one of the district's schools.

Earlier this week I participated in a walk-through of one of our historically African-American campuses. It used to be a gem in the African-American community. It sent its graduates to schools like Morehouse, Princeton and Harvard. Because of its reputation, the school had extremely high enrollment. Today, the school is a shadow of what it used to be. Enrollment is not one-fifth what it used to be and because of that the school struggles to operate fiscally. I walked into the kitchen in its culinary program and there were no ingredients for

the students to cook with because the campus did not have sufficient funds. Instead of learning how to cook hands-on, students were reading from outdated textbooks. It was very disheartening. (Billy Daniels)

Publicly available district documents confirm that over 95% of the school's students qualified for free/reduced lunch.

Edgar Santos also stressed the significant resource disparities between schools:

Look at a school like [school name omitted] and compare it to a school like [school name omitted]. In one school every classroom has an electronic smartboard worth thousands of dollars and is full of technology for kids to use.

The other school can't even afford to buy textbooks for its students to use and we have to try to raise outside money for them to do so.

Publicly available district documents indicated that the school described as having more resources had a much smaller percentage of minority and free/reduced-lunch-eligible students than the school described as lacking resources.

Participants also highlighted the fact that under decentralization, campuses were responsible for purchasing equipment and maintaining certain aspects of their campuses. As illustrated in the following example, this was pointed out to be an especially significant and common problem at low-performing, high-poverty schools with limited funding:

The district struggles with making sure that all students have equitable access not only to a trained teacher but also a gym floor that is acceptable to run on. That's been a struggle over the years. A lot of times our low-performing schools share very common characteristics like gyms that haven't been resurfaced in a decade, which is unacceptable really if you're thinking about the health of the children. Or equipment for physical education that's broken or missing. Or there not being enough equipment to make an adequate program. We've seen similar situations in other areas such fine arts as well. (Gene Stacey)

When discussing equity, the inability for campuses with high poverty and limited enrollment to fund certain positions was also underscored by various participants. As previously described, principals had full autonomy in determining which positions to have on their campuses, although they were constrained by their available funding. Campuses with high concentrations of poverty and lower enrollment could find it challenging or not feasible to fund non-teaching positions such as nurses, counselors and librarians, as the following statement reflects:

Funding is driven by enrollment. And so smaller, more low-SES schools are having to cut positions that they need. For example, I call those essential positions of course: the nurse, the social worker and the counselor. (Hilda Cornwell)

Because low-income students were described as being less likely to have access to quality healthcare, and because they were also described as being more likely to be in

stressful environments, participants stressed the negative impact that a lack of counselors and nurses had on low-income students. For example, when discussing the lack of counselors across many campuses, Hilda Cornwell expressed:

When a school doesn't have a school counselor but students are dealing with traumatic issues related to poverty and there's no one there to support them, and so we see their behaviors; they're acting out. Then we see referrals to special education because people feel that they have a behavior problem when maybe a school counselor or social worker could have been there to help them cope with their problems.

Hilda shared the following anecdote to illustrate the negative effects stemming from a lack of nurses across all schools:

We had a situation where one of our high-poverty schools did not have a school nurse. And we had a child there that was real diabetic and that did not receive what they needed because they didn't have a nurse. And so we had some crisis situations. And so how we deal with a crisis when there's not a nurse? We had to call in 911.

The impact that a lack of certain positions had on low-income students was also stressed by Peter Garcia:

Inequity comes into play if kids don't have the medical attention that they need because their school does not have a nurse; if kids don't have a librarian in place,

which really is the heart and the hub of the school; if they don't have counselors there that could coach them and talk them through the challenges of constantly moving, and understanding that mobility, if not addressed academically and socially, really impacts those kids. And the events that they're going through, not having a counselor there to check on them and care for them. And when you don't have a team of mom-dad-coach-counselor-cheerleader because it's not staffed right, because the leader didn't use the funds wisely, you really can look a lot – and a lot of our, over the years, highest-poverty, lowest-performing schools, and they were missing some of the key ingredients in meeting the needs of those communities.

Edgar Santos also noted the impact that limited funding could have on student-to-teacher ratios:

Some of our high-poverty schools don't only lack counselors and nurses, they can't even afford sufficient teachers. So students are in classrooms with 30, 35 or more students. And of course this has a negative impact on the ability for students to learn.

Outside funding. Several participants pointed to the role that outside funding played in a decentralized model and how it impacted equity. They highlighted the role that parent and community organizations can play in exacerbating inequities between campuses with higher concentrations of low-income and minority-student populations

and campuses with more affluent student populations, as reflected in the following statement:

In low-SES schools, principals often have limited resources. They don't have support of the foundations or PTOs. And so they made instructional decisions based on their resources. That, we've seen now, that has hurt children because of the fact that they don't have a formula or we don't have a set standard across this district. Some of our higher-performing have the total packages, I call it. They have a fully functioning library, they have a full-time school nurse, they have a full-time school counselor, and additional support staff that can provide the services that they need. (Hilda Cornwell)

Linda Simmons echoed a similar sentiment:

If a school can't afford something, they are not going to have it. And then who's going to get it for me? I'm going to be responsible for raising the money myself. Whereas in some schools, I may have a very strong parent organization. And they may take it upon themselves to just continue to fundraise, so we can have extras. But here I can't even get the minimum, let alone extras.

Under the decentralized model, the district lacked any sort of redistribution mechanism and had little direct control over how outside resources were utilized by campuses. This, in turn, meant that campuses with more affluent or connected parents could fund special extracurricular and enrichment programs and even additional teachers for their campuses.

A school's ability to secure outside resources was not described as depending entirely on the student population served. In the following statement, Gene Stacey also points out the role that campus leadership played in the securing of outside resources.

Sometimes there is a leadership team on the campus who has engaged the community to come and help support or has mobilized grants or other interests or has a louder voice with the central office and is able to use target assistant funds or other resources. I think the efficacy of the leader plays into that, too. If you have an instructionally sound leader who understands the pedagogy of good curriculum and instruction and assessment, even if it's a lower-performing school, I feel like they tend to be more aligned and they tend to do better with some of these things and they fight for their resources that they need whereas others don't.

In other words, campuses vary in their ability to secure outside resources not only based on the types of students they have, but also based on their leadership. This variation can lead to further inequities.

While participants stressed the negative ways in which funding under the decentralized model affected low-income and minority students, some participants also shared some of the ways that in theory, if not in practice, it was supposed to benefit such students. In the following statement, John Saramago reflected on one of the original arguments for moving toward a decentralized model:

I was a principal before we went to decentralization. So we had the FTE model.

You were given X amount of positions based on the actual number of students that you had. So the argument I remember that they were making in moving us towards centralization was “Let’s say I’m at a very difficult school, right. Very difficult population and I’m at 698, but the magic number is 700 for you to qualify for an AP. It’s not equitable for you to be in a much tougher situation, a struggling school, need more resources and really only three students determine whether you have an AP versus a school that’s not high-risk having the additional resources,” and that’s how they sold us on the concept of “Let’s move towards a per-unit allocation and let’s weight the special populations differently.” That way a school such as the one I described, school A, 698, very, very tough, a lot of retainees, a lot of at risk, a lot of – so they were weighted heavier than others.

The argument, as reflected in the statement above, was that a weighted PUA model would promote equity. Participants in the study, however, expressed skepticism that this had taken place since decentralization had been implemented. Instead, as articulated in the following statement by Jerome Washington, they believed that a decentralized funding model resulted in a situation where:

What you have is the haves and the have-nots, and what ends up happening is you end up empowering and developing and really building enclaves of excellence without the ability to then invest resources in schools that have by definition equitable needs that are not being met.

Several participants noted that having access to adequate funding was critical but was not sufficient for a school's success under a decentralized model. As John pointed out, "any additional funding is only as good as how the principal decides to use it." The following section further explores the role that human capital plays in promoting or hindering equity in a decentralized setting.

Human Capital

The ways in which decentralization impacts human capital, and in turn equity, at the campus level were also discussed by several of the participants. In addition to the lack of certain essential positions at high-poverty schools previously described, participants spoke about how principal and teacher effectiveness could vary significantly between schools under a decentralized model. The ability to recruit, retain and develop effective human capital at schools with high concentrations of poverty under a decentralized model was a recurring topic when participants spoke about equity.

Principals. As previously explored when examining the theme of leadership, participants stressed the importance of strong and effective campus principals who could meet the varied demands imposed by a decentralized model. Participants also emphasized the need for the district to ensure that highly effective school leaders were placed in schools with high poverty, as reflected in the following statement:

Especially at our most under-served campuses, our innermost under-served communities, it all really begins with being able to successfully attract

experienced and highly effective leaders that know how to use their autonomy to be innovative and help students. (Peter Garcia)

Billy Daniels also expressed the importance of having strong leadership at schools with high concentrations of poverty:

Principals are important in every one of our schools, but they are extremely important in our greatest-need campuses. A principal there has a bigger role in shaping student outcomes, and it can be a lot more challenging to do so.

Peter Garcia also underscored the significant and positive role that a strong principal can have:

I think decentralization can have a very positive impact on equity with the right leader in there and knowing the community and knowing the kids that that leader serves, if done right.

School leaders at these campuses were described as not only having to often contend with fewer resources but also with a student population with greater academic, social, and physical needs, as the following statement reflects:

A principal at a school with high poverty often must do more with less. It's not the same to serve a group of students whose parents are middle and upper-middle class professionals [as] to serve a group of students whose parents struggle to get by. There is a lot more need. It's not that wealthier students don't also have need,

but when you have kids who come to school hungry, whose parents were deported, who don't have access to the same social capital, more work needs to be done. And usually those schools have fewer resources. (Edgar Santos)

Despite the expressed need for strong principal leadership at schools with high concentrations of poverty and minority students, such schools were described as the least likely to have strong leadership, as reflected in the following statement:

The campuses that serve the kids with the most needs were typically getting really brand-new people. And you would have the campuses that were highly successful and did not have the same economically disadvantaged proportion of students; they had a stack of quality, qualified, experienced administrators from within the district and from outside the district knocking at the door, wanting to get into those places. And we didn't really have that, say, pool or even anything like it at our campuses where we needed that experience the most. (Peter Garcia)

Peter also underscored the challenges associated when you coupled this with the increased demands that decentralization placed on school leaders.

Those campuses were having to settle in a lot of cases for brand-new principals without experience in a decentralized model and trying to figure out how to not only be a principal and an instructional leader, but a business manager, and how to design a master schedule but how to be innovator. A lot of things were not on the radar at the right time and negative things have happened. And I think that's

why many of the campuses with high poverty rates are in this situation that we've been in the last few years

Unfortunately, while participants emphasized the need for there to be extremely strong campus leadership at campuses with high concentrations of poverty, the statements above reflect that those campuses were more likely to get ineffective leadership incapable of effectively operating within a decentralized setting. The negative effects that a weak or ineffective principal can have in a decentralized district were previously explored when discussing leadership. Students attending high-poverty schools would therefore have to deal with some of the effects that were described, including poor instructional practices, weak programs, poor resource allocation and special education misidentification. All of this, of course, was described as harmful to low-income and minority students and resulting in greater inequities.

Teachers. Teacher recruitment was stressed as an area that was particularly challenging for schools serving high concentrations of low-income and minority youth. Under the decentralized model, teacher candidates went through a centralized process to be screened and placed in an applicant pool. The hiring and placement of teachers, however, was determined entirely by the principals and applicants. Several participants described how this negatively impacted campuses with high concentrations of low-income and minority students.

As was the case for principals, participants described a natural tendency for

experienced and high-performing teachers to gravitate towards higher-performing schools with lower concentrations of low-income youth. Conversely, they emphasized the struggle that schools with high concentrations of low-income and minority students had in recruiting experienced and talented staff. The following statement reflects this phenomenon:

At some of our higher-performing campuses, it's seen as a privilege to work there. So you have tons of high-quality applicants for every position they have. In our more low-performing schools, it's very hard to get high-performing teachers to apply. The district has tried different things, like providing one-time bonuses to incentivize teachers, or partnering with outside organizations, but honestly it's still a big problem. (Billy Daniels)

Under decentralization, the district had no ability to distribute effective teachers across campuses in an equitable manner. This limited control over teacher placement was cited as contributing to inequities, as described by Linda Simmons:

Teachers pretty much get to pick and choose where they work, in spite of what research tells us is best for kids. So students with low economic status perhaps don't get the best teachers.

The ability for the district to assist campuses with identifying strong candidates was also described as challenging under a decentralized model.

Most districts have a profile of a teacher that you can use across the entire district,

but in a decentralized model that teacher's going to vary depending on the type of campus that you're at. When you are recruiting teachers in a more centralized school district, you really are recruiting, for the most part, in general, for the campuses because there is more uniformity in what they do instructionally. And then you were just fine-tuning to figure out, "Okay. Which campus would they be the best fit at?" Here, instead of just concentrating on a district as a whole, we have to go out and spend a lot of time canvassing the schools to determine the individual and varied needs that hundreds of campuses have. (Peter Garcia)

Working with universities' teacher-preparation programs to develop a pipeline of qualified candidates was another challenge identified because of such variation of programming.

If the district had some consistencies, then you could really find universities that align with what you're doing in certain areas and certain people you could identify characteristics but because everybody does things a lot differently and implements programs differently and academics differently it really makes it challenging. (Peter Garcia)

Turnover and Retention. Turnover and retention for both principals and teachers was another area that was highlighted as troublesome under a decentralized model. As Gene pointed out and as echoed by other participants, "Lower performing schools with higher concentrations of poverty tend to experience larger teacher and leader turnover."

Several participants described how such turnover was especially harmful to students because of the lack of standardized curriculum and programming as exemplified in the following statement:

In our lowest-performing, high-poverty campuses, we have high turnover of principals. So from principal to principal, because there's not a standard across the district, instructional decisions sometimes are made that hurt children. (Hilda Cornwell)

John Saramago echoed these sentiments:

It goes back to when there's not a consistency. Meaning at some of our at-risk schools, or as my superintendent likes to call them, historically underserved, underperforming. You have a lot of turnover in the principalship. Well, with every principal comes a different program. Right? "Well, no, I prefer this program." "No, I want this program." There's not a consistency there. So that frustrates teachers because they don't know what to expect year to year to year to year. So then it becomes difficult for us to retain the right teacher, right, at those difficult schools or challenging schools. So I think that's been a negative for decentralization that I have seen from a central administration point of view: Things shouldn't automatically be changed because the principal is making the decision and has full authority to make that decision in a decentralized model. (John Saramago)

In this statement, not only is the relationship between turnover and a lack of centralized programming and curriculum explored, but also how this negatively impacts teacher retention. Ruth Middleton also brings attention to the negative impact that principal turnover had on teachers:

A lot gets lost from one year to another if a new leader comes into play. And because we have that autonomy, as a new leader, I'm almost encouraged to be able to change the system. I'm coming in, I'm making changes. In some instances, they're due. However, you know, our teachers, our campus staff, also wants a sense of consistency, of trust building just so they can stay put as well. And I think when we go in and have this freedom that we're given to be able to change all those different things then that's lost in the process. And sometimes it's because of that trust, or teachers don't feel less committed to something because it's going to change next year, because a new thing's going to come and there's not a core set of values. But if they know where they fit in the great scheme of things, then at least they have some guidance and stability.

Billy Daniels also expressed concern about how principal turnover negatively impacted students at low-performing schools with high levels of poverty:

We allow principals to make the decisions, I think, based on the constituents or the community that they serve. And I think from the surface that seems great. But you have to look at the mobility rate of a lot of our principals at some of our most

challenging campuses. It means that there is constant change at those schools and no stability. Programs there change all the time and usually aren't successful because by the time they start showing some results, a new principal comes in and a new program is started. Our lowest-performing schools need time to get better, but every time we have a new school leader it's like the clock is being restarted. We don't see this happen at our more affluent schools. There, principals usually stay around for years, and they are able to see programs and initiatives through.

Several other participants also pointed out that turning a low-performing school around is a process that usually takes years, and the lack of stable leadership makes it difficult for the schools to succeed.

When describing principal turnover, participants also expressed concern about how even schools doing well serving high concentrations of low-income youth could quickly deteriorate when an effective principal leaves the campus. John Saramago described this phenomenon:

When the effective principal leaves, and that passion leaves, and the people that came with him leave with him or her. Then you see it crumble. So I believe that when you see some of our schools that have been struggling for many, many years, when you look specifically into that, there's been a lot of different approaches used. And that's why we haven't had consistency, and that's why they continue to struggle for as long as they have.

Professional Development. In addition to human capital inequities stemming from issues related to staff recruitment and retention, participants also expressed concerns about inequities caused by limited and varying professional development based on funding disparities. Gene Stacey shared an example of such inequities:

I met with a principal last week who shared with me all this money that she has that she has to spend and wants to use to have her teachers participate in a professional development opportunity provided by Harvard. But I have another campus across the district that also would love to do that and has no money and needs some supports and they can't send the two teachers that they want to send, whereas this other campus is looking to send like eight or nine. So it's not just the curriculum limitation, but the professional development of teachers and what can be offered to teachers. Principal autonomy and budgetary limitations are creating discrepancies around teacher efficacy.

High-poverty schools with low enrollment were described by other participants as well as not being able to afford as many professional development opportunities as schools with larger and more affluent student populations. Because these schools also faced greater challenges in hiring highly effective staff, it was also described as more challenging for them to provide their own internal professional development.

Regarding training and professional development provided by the district, participants expressed that it was challenging and at times not feasible for central

leadership to provide specific training and support due to the extremely wide variety of programs, curriculums and resources available under a decentralized model. Peter Garcia described the challenges associated with attempting to provide professional development given the variety of programs:

Because each campus is different, we try to develop trainings that span an A-to-Z portfolio, but of course we can't provide training on every program that exists.

We try to focus on what all teachers should have in common.

The following statement provides an illustrative example of how the variation in resources previously described also makes it challenging to provide tailored professional development:

Science labs may or may not exist the same way across the district, so we differentiate our professional development as much as we can. However, when you put teachers from a school that has inadequate resources in their science labs with some who have beautiful, well-kept science labs, that has a dividing line across the district. (Gene Stacey)

The district's size and the number of schools it had was described as a contributing factor making district support and professional development challenging:

The sheer number of campuses just adds to the mix and makes it more complicated for us to support and guide schools. It just expands that type of intense one-to-one work almost, and it just takes a little bit longer. It's not

impossible but it just takes so much more effort. (Ruth Middleton)

Providing professional development in a decentralized system was also described as challenging because schools had agency to decide what training to participate in. Linda Simmons, for example, described the following situation:

Until recently when the district required it, the district had not provided standardized professional development to all school leaders with regard to special education practices and requirements for years. Prior to that, it was hit-and-miss because every training we did was always “Come if you want to.” This was the first time it was absolutely required. So that was a step in the right direction to help them build a capacity of our leaders around special education.

A lack of required training for all principals was described as negatively impacting vulnerable student populations, such as those with special needs. It was emphasized that low-performing schools with high poverty were the campuses that were often the least likely to participate in any professional development opportunities.

As reflected in the statements above, decentralization made it challenging for every school to receive the professional development that it needed. The variation in programming, coupled with a lack of resources and internal capacity at schools with higher levels of poverty, often resulted in teachers and campus leaders serving low-income youth having more limited opportunities to grow and develop. As a result, it often contributed to schools that served higher concentrations of poverty and minority youth

having teachers and school leaders who lack adequate preparation.

Chapter Summary

The senior leaders who participated in this study described a wide variety of experiences working in a decentralized district. When describing such experiences, the participants often stressed issues pertaining to autonomy and control, leadership, and equity. This chapter examined each of these themes, providing illustrative examples and responses provided by the participants.

The participants stressed the level of autonomy that campus principals had in controlling their budgets, implementing curriculum and programming, and determining which positions to staff. They provided specific examples of principals exerting almost full control over these areas. Participants also underscored the limited direct control that they, as central office leaders, had over campuses. They also described forms of resistance that would be exhibited when central leadership attempted to exert more direct control, or when they attempted to implement a system of tiered autonomy. Even so, participants highlighted that they could impact campuses through influence, rather than through direct control. For this, participants emphasized the need to establish trust with campuses and to provide support and resources that were perceived as beneficial in helping campuses meet their goals.

The participants in this study also elaborated on the role and impact of campus and district leadership in a decentralized system. They emphasized that decentralization

required that principals possess a broader set of skills and abilities than in a centralized setting. Participants expressed that effective principals could innovate and adeptly adapt to their schools' needs in a decentralized setting, and they provided examples in which campus autonomy yielded positive outcomes for students. At the same time, they cautioned about harm that could be caused to students when ineffective principals had nearly unfettered autonomy.

Participants also emphasized the key roles that central district leadership played in a decentralized system. The importance of the superintendent and senior district setting the vision and goals and establishing clear parameters and non-negotiables was stressed. In addition, participants described the importance for district leadership to help build campus capacity by providing coaching, guidance and quality training. The need for district leadership to set up accountability systems and monitor campuses was also emphasized. The participants pointed to a need for greater oversight, safeguards, support, and standardization in certain areas.

Equity was another salient theme that the participants discussed. Participants acknowledged that campuses needed flexibility to adjust to their local contexts, and they highlighted instances in which autonomy was utilized to positively support students. However, such benefits and advantages were countered by the expressed beliefs that decentralization – at least as it was being implemented in the school district – had profound negative effects on low-income and minority student populations.

The participants emphasized the effects that inconsistency and variation in programming and curriculum could have on vulnerable student populations, including students with high levels of mobility and English language learners. They also described situations in which schools with higher concentrations of low-income and minority students chose to provide fewer advanced courses and specialized programming, in turn limiting opportunities for certain groups of students.

Participants also spoke extensively on the manners in which the funding model associated with decentralization could severely impact campuses with high concentrations of poverty. Such schools often lacked the enrollment necessary to generate enough revenue to provide adequate services and attractive programming. The district's school choice policies were described as compounding this problem, because students who tended to be wealthier or who possessed greater social capital would often choose to leave the under-resourced campuses, thereby exacerbating the problem by reducing available funding even further. Outside entities who channeled money to certain schools, such as parent organizations, were also described as contributing to the inequities in a system that had limited checks and balances.

A lack of adequate funding meant in many cases that campuses with high levels of poverty could not afford basic materials and resources. Additionally, positions such as nurses, counselors, and librarians were scarce at these campuses. The detrimental effects of a lack of these positions on students from low-income backgrounds was emphasized.

In addition to a lack of certain positions at campuses, participants also expressed that human capital could vary significantly between schools that served high concentrations of poverty and those that did not under a decentralized approach. Principals at schools with high levels of poverty were described as often lacking the skillsets necessary to operate under decentralization, and as a result the low-income students they oversaw were more likely to suffer from some of the negative consequences that were attributed to ineffective leadership. Similarly, such students were more likely to have weaker teachers due to the lack of centralized systems to ensure that human capital was channeled where most needed. The high levels of principal and teacher turnover in high poverty schools were also described as particularly harmful to students given the lack of standardized systems and the accompanying lack of stability. Participants also expressed that it was challenging to provide meaningful professional development centrally in a large decentralized district and this disproportionately impacted campuses with high concentrations of poverty and fewer resources because they often did not have the same ability to procure their own outside training.

Finally, it is worth noting that despite some of the described challenges and drawbacks associated with decentralization, when discussing their overall thoughts on decentralization, most of the participants described a belief that decentralization could be beneficial if certain conditions were met, as the following statements reflect:

Decentralization really can be beneficial. It can work given a well-funded system, all the right leaders, and all the right support systems. (John Saramago)

Decentralization can work if there's some training for principals and central office leaders, but there are some non-negotiables that principals and school communities must abide by. But they need support from central office. (Hilda Cornwell)

I love it when we get the right person in there and we can support them and make sure that they're in communities where we need them the most. And they have all the critical components and the essentials and the flexibility to be innovative. What I really dislike, really hate, about decentralization is if you don't get the right person in there and they're not innovative and they're not creative and they're not thinking about designing something that meets the needs of that community, what happens with a campus is really, really negligent and a disservice to the community. And when you just leave the kids that don't take advantage of other options to go elsewhere, you're left with a campus that is generally with mostly – well, if not all – economically disadvantaged minority students that don't have access to the limitless opportunities and the resources that they deserve. And the thing that I think – just to circle back about how do you overcome that and that's – if you're going to be in a decentralized model, make sure that your best leaders have the experience and they're where they need them the most, supplement it with a lot of district support and give our kids the opportunities that they deserve. (Peter Garcia)

I think [decentralization] is good because principals are the ones on campuses

who know their campuses, know their children, know their parents, know their community but so far decentralization in this district is creating inequities that we see, and we've never been able to address the funding issues with smaller campuses. (Michael Lee)

Maybe with more regulation, maybe with a little bit closer watch as to what type of choices are made and how they're implemented, decentralization could be better. I mean, I've heard of other school districts across the country that tend to brag that they're decentralized and it's a good thing, and they seem to find success in it. Here I feel like it's been loose, like it's almost been too much. (Gene Stacey)

Overall, I think at some point decentralization can be beneficial, based on the percentage that the district allows the autonomy of the schools. From what I've heard from the superintendent who first implemented decentralization here, the decentralized model then was a little different from what we currently have in the district. There was still more structure in some centralized decision-making happening at the district level. We've kind of gone away from where a lot of it is decentralized, where even the overall budget of campuses is strictly driven by the principal. I think if we were to ensure that there was more guidance on decision-making and fiscal responsibility, but the fiscal nature of decision-making by the principals, that model could potentially work. I just think the current model we

have isn't functioning in the best interest of our district but also in the best interest of students overall. (Billy Daniels)

I think if used well, decentralization can be able to close the achievement gap because schools have the flexibility to do just that, to be able to invest the resources where they need to be able to do so. If I were to go back to being a principal, I wouldn't want to be a principal anywhere else but here because of the fact that you can do so much. But principals need to know where they fit into the larger scheme of the district. There need to be parameters. And they need to know how to operate within these parameters to use their resources to maximize equity. (Ruth Middleton)

What follows is an examination of how the findings presented in this chapter connect to the study's research questions and to the existing literature described in chapter three. It will also revisit the conceptual framework used for the study and will discuss implications for future research and for practice.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

This chapter includes an examination and summary of the study's findings. It will begin by reviewing the study's problem statement, purpose, and methodology. The relationship of the study's findings to the two primary research questions will then be examined. This will be followed by a connection to the existing literature on decentralization and the conceptual framework described in chapter two. The chapter will conclude with implications for practice and suggestions for further research.

Problem Statement

Decentralization has received a considerable amount of attention from researchers seeking to understand its characteristics and impact. A majority of the research produced has focused on how decentralization has impacted student achievement, as this is widely considered to be its primary purpose (David, 1995). For the most part, these studies have not found evidence that decentralization has positively influenced student achievement in widespread ways (Hess, 1992; Leithwood & Menzies, 1998; Rodriguez, 2000; Gunnarsson, Orazem, Sanchez & Verdisco, 2009).

Beyond examining its impact on student achievement, some studies caution that decentralization may lead to increased levels of disparities for low-income and minority students (De Grauwe, 2005). However, while there has been some limited research on how decentralization impacts equity, most of it has been conceptual in nature and there is still a need to better understand the relationship. This is especially important given that

throughout the past decade, decentralization has still been employed by large school systems that serve sizeable populations of low-income and minority youth (Fitzpatrick, 2012).

There has also been research produced on how decentralization has impacted campus staff, including principals and teachers (Rodriguez, 2000; Lagana, 1989; Gaziel, 1998; David, 1989; White, 1989). Studies have often been conducted to examine how principals and teachers experience and perceive working in decentralized settings. These studies have pointed to evolving roles for campus staff and indicate an overall level of satisfaction among teachers and principals with decentralization (Rodriguez, 2000).

While there has been extensive research on decentralization's impact on student achievement and campus staff, there is still a need to understand how it impacts districts as a whole. Specifically, there is a need to better understand the experiences and perceptions of individuals who have witnessed and experienced decentralization from a district-wide perspective. Similarly, there is a need to better understand how decentralization affects equity from a set of broader, district-level experiences and perspectives.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to examine the experiences of senior leaders working in decentralized school districts and their perceptions about how decentralization impacts equity. Specifically, the study sought to answer two primary research questions:

- (1) How do senior school district leaders experience working in a decentralized school system?
- (2) What impact do senior district leaders perceive decentralization to have on low-income and minority students?

In addition to these primary questions, the study also explored some of the broader characteristics, advantages, disadvantages, limitations and unintended consequences of decentralization.

Methodology Overview

In order to address the research questions, a phenomenological approach was utilized. Phenomenology focuses on the meaning that individuals construct with a particular type of experience (Creswell & Poth, 2017). As such, a phenomenological approach was especially well suited for this type of study seeking to examine district leaders' experiences with decentralization and their perceptions of the impact of decentralization on equity.

The study examined the experiences and perspectives of individuals with extensive leadership responsibilities in a large decentralized school district. Through a combination of in-depth interviews and triangulation with publicly available district publications, the researcher described the experiences and interpretations of the participants, drew themes from such experiences and interpretations, and situated them within their respective settings and contexts. The goal of such approach was to arrive at

the core or essence of decentralization and the ways in which it impacts equity through the lived experiences of school district leaders.

Summary of Results of Research Questions

The participants' responses described in chapter four directly addressed the two primary research questions of this study. First, they captured revealing experiences of leaders working in a decentralized school district. Second, they illustrated the leaders' perceptions of the manners in which decentralization impacts equity.

Regarding the manners in which senior leaders experienced working in a decentralized school system, participants emphasized their limited direct control over campuses and stressed the autonomy that campuses had in determining their budgets, programming, and staffing. They provided examples of the ways that campuses had used such autonomy to operate in distinct ways. They also described experiences in which attempts by central leadership to exert direct control over these areas were met by opposition and various forms of resistance. As they reflected on their limited direct control, participants underscored the ability and need for them to positively influence campus behaviors by building trust with campus leadership and by providing services and resources that were perceived to be beneficial.

The participants in the study also described experiences that emphasized the importance, role and impact of campus and district leadership in a decentralized system. These experiences underscored how campus outcomes were especially reliant on strong

and effective principal leadership in a decentralized setting where principals assumed greater responsibilities and required a broader range of skillsets. The participants provided examples of effective and ineffective leadership and the resulting impact on students. They agreed that when strong leadership was in place, students benefited from the campus autonomy provided by decentralization. They also emphasized that the autonomy could be destructive and detrimental when ineffective leadership was in place. Experiences with both effective and ineffective school leadership were provided to illustrate this.

The participants also reflected on their own roles and experiences as district leaders. They described the need for central leadership to provide a clear vision and accompanying goals to campuses. The need for central leadership to establish parameters and non-negotiables, coach and guide school leaders, and provide beneficial training was also emphasized. Monitoring campuses and implementing a strong system of accountability was also described as critical.

The findings from the study also clearly capture the participants' perceptions of the manners in which decentralization impacts equity for low-income and minority students. Participants described experiences that emphasized the negative impact that decentralized programming and curriculum had on economically disadvantaged students with high levels of mobility, on English language learners, and on students who required special education services. The participants also described negative experiences in which campuses with higher levels of poverty and minority students did not have the same

opportunities to participate in advanced or specialized programming as schools with more affluent student populations.

The role that the funding model played in a decentralized system was also emphasized. Participants stressed that schools with the greatest levels of poverty often lacked sufficient funding to provide adequate instruction, programming and support. This was attributed to the funding model that provided schools funding based on enrollment. The schools with the highest concentration of poverty and minority students tended to have low enrollment, as underscored by various participants and as confirmed through publicly available district documents. The district's school choice policy, which allowed students to opt to attend any school outside of their neighborhood, was described as a contributing factor to the decreased enrollment and lower available funding at such schools. Despite these schools having significant needs for their student populations, they often lacked the funding to provide basic services and to have essential positions such as counselors, librarians, or nurses. Funding from outside organizations, such as parent organizations, also was described as widening the inequities between schools with higher concentrations of poverty and those serving more affluent populations.

The challenges associated with ensuring that there was effective human capital at schools with high concentrations of poverty under a decentralized model were also emphasized. Participants expressed that leadership at such schools often lacked the effectiveness and skillsets necessary to properly serve their students. They also stressed that campus-based hiring often resulted in more effective teachers working in schools

with lower levels of poverty. Principal and teacher turnover and retention were also described as particularly harmful to low-income and minority students attending schools that operated in a decentralized manner and which lacked stable curriculum and programming. It was also described that schools with high levels of poverty often found it more difficult to afford or receive professional development to the build the capacity of its staff.

Despite the experiences and perceptions expressed by the study's participants, decentralization was not characterized as entirely negative. In fact, most participants expressed a belief that decentralization had the potential to support student achievement and to narrow inequities. However, they believed that the manners in which their district operated under decentralization lacked the necessary conditions for it do so.

Connection to the Literature

The findings presented in the preceding chapter reinforce and add to the existing literature on decentralization and its relationship to equity. The three primary themes and topics that emerged in the participants' responses are ones that were mentioned and described in the literature on decentralization that was described in chapter two of this study.

The theme of autonomy and control that emerged from the participants' responses directly intersected with previous literature on decentralization. Clune & White (1988), for example, described the same autonomy in budgeting, staffing, and curriculum that the

participants emphasized. David (1989) also discussed autonomy and campus decision-making in these areas. Rodriguez (2000) focused on autonomy in instruction, an area that was also explored in this study when discussing curriculum and programming. Rodriguez (2000) also underscored the tension that could accompany the transfer of control and decision-making from central administration to campuses. This tension was also echoed in the participants' responses. The descriptions and characterizations of autonomy and control did not deviate from what was found in previous literature. Rather, they reinforced that decentralization is indeed characterized by the ability for campuses to exert direct control over their operations and a limited ability for central leadership to do so.

Similarly, the findings of this study also reinforced existing literature on campus and district leadership. As previously noted, individuals such as Steinberg & Cox (2017), Guthrie (1986), David (1989), Rodriguez (2000) and De Grauwe (2005) emphasized the importance of leadership in a decentralized setting. They underscored the critical and varied functions of a principal in a decentralized system, as did various participants in the study. The literature produced by these individuals also echoed the participants' responses regarding district leadership's role in establishing parameters, setting goals, monitoring and implementing accountability measures.

As noted in chapter two, literature that directly examined the relationship between decentralization and equity was scarce and was mostly conceptual in nature. The findings of this study, however, reinforce and add to the existing body of literature. As echoed by

De Grauwe (2005), participants in the study expressed a belief that loosely regulated campus autonomy could be detrimental to campuses with high concentrations of poverty who lacked effective leadership and adequate resources. Hanushek, Link and Woessmann (2013) examined decentralization's impact across various countries and found that it was detrimental in countries with higher levels of poverty, and a parallel could be drawn between wealthier and less affluent schools. Participants in the study pointed out that schools with high levels of poverty were more likely to have inexperienced and ineffective principals, a notion that was also echoed by Clotfelter, Ladd, Vigdor, and Wheeler (2006). Like participants in the study, De Grauwe (2005) also warned that campus autonomy in hiring could result in disparities in teacher competence between campuses and in varied programming offerings that result in class and racial segregation. Watt (1989) also cautioned that available curriculum and offerings could be of lower quality and rigor in schools with higher levels of poverty, a notion that was also expressed by the participants in this study.

The amount of funding available to campuses with low enrollment and high levels of poverty under a decentralized funding model was stressed by participants in this study, but not referenced in the existing literature on decentralization. Similarly, the intersection of decentralization with school choice was not an area that previous literature examined. By addressing and bringing light to these topics, this study adds to the existing body of literature on decentralization and equity.

Conceptual Framework

As described in chapter two, Bolman and Deal's (2017) Four Frame organizational model was utilized as the conceptual framework for this study. This model views organizations through four frames: structural, human resource, political and symbolic. The first three of these frames were especially beneficial throughout the process of organizing the participants' responses into the overarching themes.

The theme of autonomy and control that emerged from the participants' responses closely aligned with and stemmed from the political frame. Bolman and Deal describe the political frame in terms of power and decision-making and describe power and conflict as two of its central concepts. The study's participants discuss autonomy and control in similar terms. At its core, participants characterized decentralization as power and decision-making sitting with campuses and not district leadership. When discussing the resistance and backlash that they faced when attempting to exert more direct control over campuses, they underscored conflict that would often arise.

The theme of leadership is also closely aligned with and derived from the human resource frame. Bolman and Deal describe needs, skills, and relationships as the three central concepts of this frame. The participants focused extensively on these areas when discussing campus and district staff. They especially underscored the wide breadth of skills necessary for principals and district leadership in a decentralized district. They also elaborated on the relationship between campus and central office leaders and on their needs.

When discussing autonomy and control and leadership, participants often spoke about roles, goals and policies, concepts that Bolman and Deal described as central to the structural frame. For example, as noted in the study's findings, participants stressed the need for roles and scope of authority for central and campus leadership to be clearly delineated and reflected in district policies. The participants also stressed the need for district leadership to establish and communicate clear goals.

Equity was a theme that was discussed often in the context of the political, structural, and human resources frames. The authority and decision-making authority that campuses had in establishing their budgets, staffing their campuses, and selecting their programming and curriculum was often discussed in relation to equity. Similarly, the types of leaders and human capital in place was discussed as influencing outcomes for low-income and minority students.

Implications for Research

As noted, the findings of this study reinforce much of the existing literature on school district decentralization. However, the finding also presented additional areas for which further investigation would be beneficial. A closer examination of the intersection of school choice and decentralization would be especially helpful. This was an area that most participants highlighted as having a significant impact on schools with high concentrations of poverty, and yet there is limited research on the topic.

Similarly, much could be gained from a closer examination of the per-unit/student allocation funding models that participants in the study emphasized as characteristic of decentralization. What are the broader effects of this type of school funding system, especially on schools with high concentrations of low-income and minority youth?

The lack of essential personnel such as librarians, counselors, and nurses in high-poverty schools operating under decentralization was another area that participants emphasized and for which additional investigation would be beneficial.

Lastly, this study examined decentralization within the context of one school system. However, additional research aimed at assessing the extent to which the study's findings are characteristic of all school systems operating under decentralization would be beneficial. For this, similar studies conducted in a variety of decentralized school systems would be appropriate.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study also have significant implications for educational leaders in decentralized school systems and those considering moving towards decentralization. District leaders should also be cognizant of the elements that participants described as critical for a decentralized school district to be successful. These included effective campus and district leadership, clearly established goals, delineated

parameters of authority, capacity-building coaching and training for principals, district-level monitoring, and strong systems of accountability.

Participants especially emphasized the need for certain types of leadership at the campus and district levels under a decentralized model. Superintendents and district leaders should consider the required skillsets and competencies of school and district leaders when making hiring decisions and when developing systems of professional development.

District leaders should also ensure that clearly defined goals are communicated to and understood by all stakeholders. School and district leaders must also understand the extent of their decision-making authority and their requirements and responsibilities in reaching such goals. District leaders should also make every attempt possible to ensure that all campuses are receiving the coaching and training necessary for them to build capacity and utilize their autonomy to maximize student achievement and opportunities.

Lastly, district and campus leaders should closely monitor and take appropriate actions when needed to ensure that no group of students is negatively affected under a decentralized approach. Special attention should be placed on ensuring that funding resources are distributed equitably between campuses. Additionally, measures should be taken to ensure that vulnerable student populations, including mobile students, English language learners, and students with disabilities, are not detrimentally impacted by

variation in programming. District leaders should also ensure that all schools have equitable opportunities to recruit and develop strong human capital.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that schools are best positioned to know the needs of the students and communities they serve and that they require flexibility and autonomy to meet such needs. This belief drives the practices of school districts that have embraced decentralization and have given significant amounts of autonomy to schools and their leaders in the areas of budgeting, curriculum and programming, and staffing. As the findings of this study reveal, however, providing schools and their leaders with such autonomy is not sufficient, and when the required conditions are absent, can even be detrimental to students, particularly those from low-income and underserved backgrounds. As such, school districts that decide to operate under a decentralized model should take a cautious approach to ensure that student achievement and opportunities are maximized and the benefits of decentralization are reaped.

Appendix A

INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Title

Decentralization and Equity: A Phenomenological Study of How School District Leaders Experience Site-Based Management and Perceive it to Impact Low-Income and Minority Youth

2. Principal Investigator

Richard Anthony Cruz, RAC4476, Department of Educational Administration

Researcher Opening Statement: Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this study that seeks to examine how school district leaders experience working in a decentralized school system and how they perceive it to impact equity.

Definitions: For the sake of this study, decentralization is broadly defined as schools having significant levels of autonomy. Equity refers to ensuring that all students, but particularly those that are low-income and/or minority, have access to the support, resources and instruction necessary for their success.

Background Questions

1. Can you please tell me more about your current role?
2. What areas and what roles do you supervise?
3. Can you briefly describe previous roles that you have held in education?

Familiarity with Decentralization

1. Would you describe the school district you are currently working in as being decentralized? (Again, decentralization is defined as schools having significant levels of autonomy with regard to their budgeting, staffing and instruction). Please elaborate.

2. Do you feel that your experiences as a leader in the district have been shaped or informed by decentralization? Please elaborate.
3. If you have worked in other school districts before, can you please elaborate on how they compared with regard to decentralization?

Experiences with Decentralization

1. Can you describe one or more salient experiences you've had that illustrate the defining characteristic and effects of decentralization with regard to the particular area(s) that you oversee?
2. As a central office district administrator, what are the broader implications or effects of decentralization that you have experienced or witnessed?
3. In a decentralized model where schools have a significant amount of autonomy, what do you believe is the role of central administration?
4. What would you say are the greatest advantages of decentralization and its greatest disadvantages? Please elaborate on experiences that support your position.
5. If you previously worked at a campus, have your thoughts around decentralization changed since becoming a central administrator? Please elaborate.
6. What support or training have you received regarding decentralization?

Perceptions Around Decentralization and Equity

1. Do you think that decentralization has any impact (negative or positive) on equity? (Again, equity is defined as the extent to which students, particularly those from underserved backgrounds, receive adequate levels of support, resources and instruction) Please elaborate.
2. Please describe experiences you've had or incidents you have witnessed that illustrate a relationship between decentralization and equity, especially in the area(s) that you oversee.

3. What conditions do you think need to be in place for decentralization to positively impact equity?
4. Given all of your experiences, what are your overall thoughts around decentralization? What is its overall impact on equity?
5. Is there anything else you would like to share with me or would like for me to know?

Appendix B

RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Dear Prospective Participant,

My name is Richard Cruz, and I am a doctoral student at the University of Texas at Austin in the Cooperative Superintendency Program (CSP). I am conducting a research study as part of my doctoral degree requirements. My study is tentatively titled: Decentralization and Equity: A Phenomenological Study of How School District Leaders Experience Site-Based Management and Perceive it to Impact Low-Income and Minority Youth. This email is an invitation to participate in this research study.

The purpose of this research is to examine the experiences of senior K-12 district leaders working in decentralized school districts (where school campuses have significant autonomy in areas such as budgeting, staffing, and instruction) and their perceptions about how decentralization impacts equity I am seeking to interview up to 15 district leaders who have worked at least one year in the district over the past five years.

Participation in this study will require an in-depth interview of approximately 90 minutes, although additional time may be required. Interviews will occur at a time and place convenient for your and will be audio recorded. Your participation in this study will be strictly confidential and any data containing identifying information about you or your school district will be masked or excluded from final study reporting. After two years, the digital interview recordings and transcribed data will be deleted.

By agreeing to participate in this study and signing a consent form, you will be giving your consent for the researcher to include your responses in his data analysis after you have a reviewed a transcript of your responses for accuracy. The consent form will be provided prior to the interview, and after reading it, you may consent by signing it. Your participation in this research study is strictly voluntary, and you may choose not to participate without fear of penalty or any negative consequences. You will be able to withdraw from the study at any time, and all interview responses will be deleted if you choose to withdraw.

By participating in this study, you will contribute to the current literature on decentralization and equity. No compensation will be offered for your participation. If you have any questions, you may contact me at (####) ###-#### or my dissertation chair, Dr. Norma Cantu, at email@aol.com. Any questions about the research can

also be directed to the university's Office of Research Support at orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu.

Please respond to this email to let me know if you are willing to participate in this study.

Thank you for your consideration,
Richard Cruz

Appendix C

CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

IRB USE ONLY

Study Number:2017-08-0096

Approval Date: 11/14/2017

Expires: 11/13/2020

Name of Funding Agency (if applicable): NA

Consent for Participation in Research

Title: Decentralization and Equity: A Phenomenological Study of How School District Leaders Experience Site-Based Management and Perceive it to Impact Low-Income and Minority Youth

Introduction

The purpose of this form is to provide you information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to participate in this research study. The person performing the research will answer any of your questions. Read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to take part. If you decide to be involved in this study, this form will be used to record your consent.

Purpose of the Study

You have been asked to participate in a research study about the experiences of district leaders with regard to decentralization and the relationship between decentralization and equity. The purpose of the study is to examine the experiences of senior K-12 district leaders working in decentralized school districts (where school campuses have significant autonomy in areas such as budgeting, staffing, and instruction) and their perceptions about how decentralization impacts equity.

What will you be asked to do?

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

- Participate in an in-depth interview
- Review transcribed data from the interviews

This study will take place in a face-to-face or telephone interview of approximately 90-minutes in length. The study will include up to 15 study participants.

Your participation will be audio recorded.

There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this study.

You will receive no direct benefit from participating in this study; however, findings may be used to inform districts' policies on the development, implementation, and discontinuation of performance-based pay systems.

Do you have to participate?

No, your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate at all or, if you start the study, you may withdraw at any time. Withdrawal or refusing to participate will not affect your relationship with The University of Texas at Austin (University) in anyway.

If you would like to participate, please sign and return this form to the researcher. You may reach out to him by emailing or calling him (email@gmail.com, ###-###-####) and he will pick it up from you at a convenient time. Alternatively, you may mail it to him at Richard Cruz, XXX., Houston, TX. You will receive a copy of this form.

Will there be any compensation?

You will not receive any type of payment participating in this study.

How will your privacy and confidentiality be protected if you participate in this research study?

Your privacy and the confidentiality of your data will be protected by the researcher referring to you with a neutral alias, not disclosing any information you share to other participants, ensuring the details of the data cannot be traced to participants, and all data will be locked in a secure location.

If it becomes necessary for the Institutional Review Board to review the study records, information that can be linked to you will be protected to the extent permitted by law. Your data will not be released without your consent unless required by law or a court order. The data, which will be masked, resulting from your participation may be made available to other researchers in the future for research purposes not detailed within this consent form. In these cases, the data will contain no identifying information that could associate it with you, or with your participation in any study.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be audio recorded. Any audio recordings will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the recordings. Recordings will be kept for 2 years and then erased.

Whom to contact with questions about the study?

Prior, during or after your participation you can contact the researcher **Richard Cruz** at ###-###-#### or send an email to **email@gmail.com** for any questions or if you feel that you have been harmed.

This study has been reviewed and approved by The University Institutional Review Board and the study number is **2017-08-0096**.

Whom to contact with questions concerning your rights as a research participant?

For questions about your rights or any dissatisfaction with any part of this study, you can contact, anonymously if you wish, the Institutional Review Board by phone at (512) 471-8871 or email at orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu.

Participation

You have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of this form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time. You voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

As a representative of this study, I have explained the purpose, procedures, benefits, and the risks involved in this research study.

Print Name of Person obtaining consent

Signature of Person obtaining consent
consent

Date

References

- Bolman, L. G., & Deal, T. E. (2017). *Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice, and leadership*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Campbell, A., Kunisch, S., & Müller-Stewens, G. (2011). To centralize or not to centralize?. *McKinsey Quarterly*, (3), 97-102.
- Carl, J. (2009). Industrialization and public education: social cohesion and social stratification. *International handbook of comparative education*, 503-518.
- Clotfelter, C., Ladd, H. F., Vigdor, J., & Wheeler, J. (2006). High-poverty schools and the distribution of teachers and principals. *NCL Rev.*, 85, 1345.
- Clune, W. H. & White, P. A. (1988). *School-Based Management: Institutional Variation. Implementation and Issues for Further Research (Rep. No. RR-008) (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, Consortium for Policy Research in Education.*
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2017). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage publications.

Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. Sage.

David, J. L. (1989). Synthesis of Research on School-Based Management. *Educational leadership*, 46(8), 45-53.

David, J. L. (1995). The who, what, and why of site-based management. *Educational Leadership*, 53, 4-9.

DeBoer, J. (2012). *Centralization and decentralization in American education policy*. Peabody Journal of Education, 87(4), 510-513.

De Grauwe, A. (2005). School-based management (SBM): Does it improve quality?. *EFA Global Monitoring Report*.

Equity. (2017). In *Merriam Webster's Online Dictionary*. Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/equity>

Fitzpatrick, K. R. (2012). School-Based Management and Arts Education: Lessons from Chicago. *Arts Education Policy Review*, 113(3), 106-111.

Gardner, D. P., Larsen, Y. W., Baker, W., Campbell, A., & Crosby, E. A. (1983). *A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform*. United States Department of Education.

Gauch, P. K. (2011). *Site Based Management – Principal Perceptions and Behaviors after 19 Years of Implementation*. (Doctoral dissertation) Virginia Tech.

Gaziel, H. (1998). School-based management as a factor in school effectiveness. *International Review of Education*, 44(4), 319-333.

Gunnarsson, V., P. Orazem, M. Sánchez, and A. Verdisco. 2009. *Does local school control raise student outcomes? Evidence on the roles of school autonomy and parental participation*. *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 58 (1): 25–52.

Guthrie, J. W. (1986). School-based management: The next needed education reform. *The Phi Delta Kappan*, 68(4), 305-309.

Hanushek, E. A., Link, S., & Woessmann, L. (2013). *Does school autonomy make sense everywhere? Panel estimates from PISA*. *Journal of Development Economics*, 104, 212-232.

- Hess Jr, G. A. (1992). *School Restructuring, Chicago Style: A Midway Report*.
- Lagana, J. F. (1989). Managing change and school improvement effectively. *NASSP Bulletin*, 73(518), 52-55.
- Lawton, S. B. (1992). Why restructure?: an international survey of the roots of reform. *Journal of Education Policy*, 7(2), 139-154.
- Leithwood, K., & Menzies, T. (1998). A Review of Research Concerning the Implementation of Site-Based Management*. *School effectiveness and school improvement*, 9(3), 233-285.
- Malen, B., Ogawa, R. T., & Kranz, J. (1990). What do we know about school-based management? A case study of the literature – A call for research. *Choice and control in American education*, 2, 289-342.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2013). *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach*. SAGE.
- Merriam, S. B. (1988). *Case study research in education: A qualitative approach*. Jossey-Bass.

- Miller, W. I. (1942). *Democracy in Educational Administration: An Analysis of Principles and Practices*. Teachers college, Columbia University.
- Mirel, J. (1990). What history can teach us about school decentralization. *Network News and Views*.
- Mojkowski, C., & Fleming, D. (1988). *School-Site Management: Concepts and Approaches*.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Sage.
- Murphy, J., & Beck, L. G. (1995). *School-Based Management as School Reform: Taking Stock*. Corwin Press, Inc., 2455 Teller Road, Thousand Oaks, CA 91320-2218 (paperback: ISBN-0-8039-6176-6, \$23.95; hardback: ISBN-0-8039-6175-8).
- Ogawa, R. T., & White, P. A. (1994). School-based management: An overview. *School-based management: Organizing for high performance*.
- Patrinos, H.S., & Fasih, T. (2009). Decentralized decision-making in schools: The Theory and Evidence on School-Based Management.

Rodriguez, T. A. L. (2000). The implementation of site-based management across Texas: An empirical study.

Smith, S. (1998). School by School: How site-based management is transforming education in Austin. *The American School Board Journal*, 185, 22-24

Smylie, M. A., Lazarus, V., & Brownlee-Conyers, J. (1996). Instructional outcomes of school-based participative decision making. *Educational evaluation and policy analysis*, 18(3), 181-198.

Steinberg, M. P., & Cox, A. B. (2017). *School Autonomy and District Support: How Principals Respond to a Tiered Autonomy Initiative in Philadelphia Public Schools*. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 16(1), 130-165.

Texas Education Code. District-Level and Site-Based Decision Making. ch.11, sub ch. F, §§11.251-11.255,. 1995 TX.

Van Manen, M. (2016). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. Routledge.

Watt, J. (1989). Devolution of power: the ideological meaning. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 27(1).

White, P. A. (1989). An overview of school-based management: what does the research say?. *NASSP Bulletin*, 73(518), 1-8.

Vita

Richard Anthony Cruz graduated with a Bachelor of Arts from Yale University in 2007 and received a Master's in Educational Administration from the University of Texas at Austin in 2017. He worked at the law firm of Baker Botts, LLC before joining Teach for America in 2008 and becoming a teacher in the Houston Independent School District, where he was named Teacher of the Year for two consecutive years at his campus. In 2010, he founded a program and nonprofit organization called EMERGE Fellowship that has helped hundreds of low-income students receive full scholarships to attend and graduate from the nation's top colleges and universities. In 2013, he became an assistant superintendent for the Houston Independent School District, and since then has also served as a chief and officer for the district. He has received numerous local and national accolades and awards for his commitment to helping all students - especially those from underserved communities - succeed.

Richard may be contacted via email at cruz.tomp@gmail.com

This dissertation was typed by Richard Anthony Cruz