AN EXPLORATION OF THE EXPERIENCES OF A GROUP OF SCHOOL LEADERS
UNDERTAKING A SYSTEMIC EFFORT TO ELIMINATE THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP IN
THEIR HIGH-PERFORMING SUBURBAN DISTRICT

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Abstract

Achievement gaps are not limited to lower socioeconomic or underperforming school districts. On the contrary, many of the nation’s highest-performing suburban schools experience significantly lower college applications, higher drop out rates and disproportionately low representation in AP and honors-level courses amongst their black, Hispanic and lower income students. Despite legal mandates that hold all schools accountable for raising achievement in their low-performing sub-groups, leaders of high-performing suburban schools often lack sufficient skill to address equity issues and, consequently, may be reluctant to challenge long-standing structures of power and privilege in their school communities. While case studies are often effectively used as learning tools in many administrator preparation programs, research examining the achievement gap work of leaders in this demographic is limited. This case study chronicles the experiences of a high-performing suburban district that has worked for over twenty years to address its achievement gaps. While various initiatives have been employed over the tenures of two superintendents, the district’s shift four years ago to a systemic approach appears to be making a difference. This study informs the reader of the challenges and lessons learned as reported by eleven of the districts’ leaders and analyzes their actions through the perspectives of organizational change and social justice theories. It is intended to provide practical insight that may be used by leaders of other high-performing suburban districts as they prepare to implement their own achievement gap initiatives.

Keywords: achievement gaps in high-performing suburban schools, teacher resistance to change, cultural competence training, culturally relevant schools, equitable schools, leadership and school equity initiatives, organizational change models, professional development for equity
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Chapter I: Introduction

In the United States, we feel an economic and moral imperative to challenge the status quo. Closing the achievement gap and closing the opportunity gap is the civil rights issue of our generation. One quarter of U.S. high school students drop out or fail to graduate on time. Almost one million students leave our schools for the streets each year. That is economically unsustainable and morally unacceptable.

-Arne Duncan, 2010, U.S. Department of Education

A white, mid-career teacher in a high-performing suburban high school sat with her administrator, tearfully explaining why she lost control one afternoon and was heard screaming at students from the hallway. She described a pattern of student disengagement and behavioral problems beginning early in the school year. According to the teacher, the most challenging students in the class were two African American boys who were capable but often disruptive and disengaged. “I’ve tried everything with this class! I’ve finally decided that they can’t handle anything creative. So, I put them in rows and do worksheets with them,” she explained tearfully.

In probing the teacher’s perceptions, she appeared oblivious to some unique characteristics of this class. From the perspective of race and gender, the ethnic composition made it atypical in the context of this suburban high school which is comprised of eighty percent white students and twenty percent minority students (mainly students of color) - this class was composed of approximately forty percent students of color and more than half of the students were male. Ten years ago, the racial composition of this class was unlikely due to the small numbers of students of color in the school. However, in the past ten years, a rising number of minority students have enrolled including a significant number of Hispanic students. This shift in student composition mirrors the experiences of many suburban districts across the United States.
Though in a high-performing district with a graduation rate of over ninety percent, students of color at this school frequently underperform and are less likely to attend college. Advanced Placement (AP) and honors courses contain a disproportionately high number of white students. In an attempt to “desegregate” its classes, the district has eliminated low-level English and math classes that were far less rigorous and heavily populated with students of color and students with disabilities. In spite of occasional discussions about the continued lagging test scores amongst Hispanics and black students in the school, few ideas have been generated to address the district’s disparities in achievement between its white students and students of color. In spite of occasional discussions about the continued lagging test scores, few ideas have been generated to address the district’s disparities in achievement between its white students and students of color. Several high school history curricula have been updated and some English teachers have adjusted their readings to reflect a more diverse student audience.

The discussion continues between the teacher and her administrator. Eventually, the teacher admits that she is unfamiliar with current research regarding cultural competence in the classroom. Her demeanor becomes more reflective when she realizes that some of the choices she made in class management and instruction for her students run counter to theory about motivation and engagement.

**Statement of the Problem**

**Gaps in achievement for students of color.** Despite the federal civil rights legislation of the 1960’s and the passing of such reform efforts as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) over thirteen years ago, schools in the United States remain largely segregated (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Most school districts across the country - urban, suburban and rural alike - report lower levels of proficiency, disproportionate enrollment in gifted and honors-level courses and lower graduation
rates in their black and Hispanic students in comparison to their white peers (Darling-Hammond, 2010). In addition, students of color more often encounter inferior instruction, curriculum, school counseling and academic support than white students (Darling-Hammond, 2010). This noticeable difference in achievement between white students and students of color in the U.S. is known as the achievement gap. For the purposes of this study, the achievement gap will be defined as “the persistent disparity between the performance of African American and Hispanic students and that of white and Asian American students (Evans, 2007).” It is also defined as the “gap between students of different racial groups whose parents have roughly the same amount of education” (Ferguson, 2006 as cited by Walser, 2006).

**A rapidly changing demographic indicates future challenges.** According to projections by the Department of Education, minority students in U.S. schools are in the majority for the first time in American history (Hussar & Bailey, 2013). From 2000 to 2010, the percentage of Hispanic students attending U.S. schools increased from sixteen percent to twenty-three percent while the percentage of white public school students decreased from sixty-one percent to fifty-two percent; the Black student population remained relatively stable, falling from seventeen to sixteen percent (Aud, Wilkinson-Flicker, Nachazel, & Dziuba, 2013).

Statistics indicate that the country’s white population is diminishing while its population of Asians and Hispanics is increasing rapidly; the black population in the U.S. remains relatively stable. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Among these minority groups, the Hispanic population is growing most rapidly (Liu & Liu, 2012). California’s Hispanic population exceeded its white population for the first time ever this year; this shift occurred in New Mexico several years ago (National Public Radio, 2015). Connecticut’s Hispanic population grew nearly fifty percent from 2000-2010 (Censusviewer) and it has been estimated that twenty percent of its
working age population will be comprised of minority populations in 2020 (Coelen & Bergen, 2006). Furthermore, as the current Hispanic population is comprised of a predominance of young people who are currently in their childbearing years, American schools can continue to expect increasing numbers of Hispanic students to enter their doors in the foreseeable future (Crouch, Zakariya & Jiandani, 2012). Thus, the challenge of educating an increasingly diverse population of students is anticipated to increase.

**The impact of the achievement gap on the nation.** Current predictors of future success of these student subgroups are troubling as indicated by the results of international academic assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The PISA compares international performance on more complex reading, math and science skills than is typically measured by U.S. standardized tests. In 2006, while white and Asian students scored above average on the PISA test, poor performances by students of color pulled U.S. scores well below the average rankings of countries of similar socioeconomic status (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

The results of low proficiency and dropout greatly impact an individual’s ability to successfully engage in a competitive job market and threaten the financial stability of the nation in a variety of ways. For instance, young adults who do not graduate from high school experience significant employment challenges in comparison to their better educated peers; these disparities widen even more during economic recessions (Sum, Khatiwada, & McLaughlin, 2009). According to a 2014 report to the CT General Assembly, it is estimated that a high school dropout earns about $260,000 less than a high school graduate over the course of a lifetime; it is estimated that high school dropouts will cost the nation more than 337 billion dollars in lost wages (The Achievement Gap Taskforce, 2014). Dropouts are more likely to experience
unemployment, poverty, incarceration and debilitating physical and mental health problems (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007). Not surprisingly, the average life expectancy is often shorter for dropouts (Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007).

**High-performing suburban schools are not exempt from achievement gaps.**

Demographic changes in the ethnic and racial diversity of the population are not limited to the cities in the U.S. In 2013, approximately one-third of students in suburban schools were black or Hispanic (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Although the preponderance of achievement gap literature focuses on underperformance of minority students in urban, low-income settings, the nation’s rural and suburban district report similar disparities in achievement between their students of color and their white students (Singleton & Linton, 2005). Connecticut, a state that is among the wealthiest in the nation, is home to some of the highest-achieving students in the country (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). However, despite its high-performing statistics, it also lays claim to one of the largest achievement gaps in the nation (Cowan, 2008; Butrymowicz, 2011). In comparing standardized reading and math tests, the state’s Hispanic and African American students recently scored, on average, twenty-eight to thirty-five points lower than white students (The Achievement Gap Taskforce, 2014). In addition, the percentage of its third-grade white students who met the state’s goal in reading was approximately forty points higher than the state’s Hispanic students. Finally, only 23.6 percent of the Connecticut’s African American students and 30.6 percent of Hispanic students graduate college on time compared to 40.6 percent of their white peers (The Achievement Gap Task Force, 2014).

Yet, Connecticut’s experience is not unusual - disparities in academic proficiency, college attendance and graduation rates exist between students in wealthier, high-performing suburban
districts throughout the nation (Ferguson, 2002). While Connecticut’s gap is clearly impacted by its significant disparities in wealth, its achievement gap cannot entirely be attributed to the impact of poverty (Cowan, 2008; Butrymowicz, 2011). In fact, variances in achievement occur even in its wealthy, high-performing suburban districts in which students’ families have similar incomes (Ferguson, 2002). In the past, the size and voice of the minority population in the nation’s high-performing suburban schools were small enough to be overlooked due to overall high graduation rates and above-average standardized scores. However, changes in federal and state accountability initiatives including the recently reauthorized No Child Left Behind Act, Response To Intervention (RTI) and new teacher evaluation programs now require public school districts to disaggregate and set goals based on achievement data. All schools can now see the levels of disproportionate achievement and opportunity that exist within their subgroups and are being held increasingly accountable for achievement of all students. Leaders of high performing districts who have never before been required to address the performance of their lowest achievers are now responsible for improving lagging performances in these student subgroups (Noguera, 2008).

**Significance of the Research Problem**

**Leadership skills needed for equity work.** The root of the marginalization of students of color appears to be longstanding societal beliefs and practices operating at both systemic and individual levels in schools of all types (Noguera, 2008; Diamond, 2006). Thus, school leaders need to be well informed as to the kinds of practices and policies that can impact the achievement of their lowest-achieving subgroups of students and possess the skill and resources to orchestrate improvement plans that will lead to sustained systemic change. In high-performing suburban schools where achievement disparities may be less obvious to the school community,
leaders must be able to convey how the use of equitable practices and culturally competent instruction benefits *all* students (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). They must access key data that reveals the extent of the problem to the school community and create constituency, accountability structures and continuously monitor the impact of improvement initiatives.

However, unlike many other changes that require pedagogical shifts, closing the achievement gap in schools typically requires active reflection by staff on issues of white privilege and social justice as well as training in culturally responsive instruction and practices (Howard, 2006; Gay, 2002). This process can raise controversy and discomfort especially for white staff as they engage in examination of their role in a system that has been historically biased against minorities (Howard, 2006). Improvement plans often require the discarding of long-standing policies and practices that reserve privileges for elite groups of students and staff. Thus, leaders engaged in improving equity in their high-performing districts need to be prepared to address any personal impact that equity initiatives may have on staff and students as steps are taken to unbalance the status quo.

*The importance of direct and ongoing involvement by top leadership.* It is clear that the enactment of such broad and complex transformative actions requires a high level of influence, authority and management skill. This level of systemic change cannot effectively be delegated to one group of stakeholders; school leaders must be prepared to remain on the front lines throughout the change process to resist the organizational tendency to default to old practices and increase the chances for success. (Holme, Diem, & Welton, 2014).

In spite of the presence of data indicating disparities, research indicates that dominant groups rarely initiate social justice changes without external pressure to do so (Gay, 2013). Superintendents, principals, and other administrators are well situated organizationally to
orchestrate such large-scale change in culture and pedagogy due to their formal authority and broad access to critical resources. This includes direct access to key evidence that can expose inequities and motivate staff to make the personal effort and sacrifice needed to bring about systemic change. Furthermore, administrators have significant control over allocations of people, time and training resources needed to operationalize the values and mission of a school. This places them in a powerful position to enact change both in the provision of human and material resources and the close monitoring of pedagogical implementation (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997).

Finally, when equity efforts are met with opposition by elites or dominant groups (Skrla & Skeuritch, 2001), the gravitas of their formal authority and access to central office administrators and boards of education may be useful in building powerful constituencies among various groups in the school community to support transformational efforts (Skrla & Skeuritch, 2001).

**Lack of preparedness to lead equity initiatives.** Administrators often report feeling largely unprepared to address deficits in culturally competent pedagogy and admit to a lack confidence in their ability to manage the resistance encountered when addressing issues of equity and race in their schools (Theoharis, 2007; Hynds, 2010). Despite the growing accountability demanded by federal and state mandates to correct disparities in achievement, most school administrators receive little formal training in understanding equity issues or skills for making substantive improvements in this regard (Rivera-McCutcheon, 2014). Leader preparation programs typically focus on management of organizations and rarely include more than a course or two on the topic of equity; candidates are not generally screened during the admission process for their potential suitability to lead equitable schools (Rivera-McCutcheon, 2014). In recognition of the need for such practical training, administrator preparation programs are beginning to respond by including more reflective and collaborative opportunities as well as
mentoring requirements to help potential school leaders develop their identity and hone their practical skills (Sherman, 2008).

**Deficiencies in the Evidence**

To date, there has been minimal case study literature published about high-performing suburban districts that have successfully addressed their achievement gaps. Existing research mainly focuses on urban experiences or explains isolated initiatives in suburban settings. There is relatively little exploration of the experiences and perspectives of successful leaders in high-performing suburban districts that can help others prepare for this process. As peer review of case studies has proven effective in training leaders to anticipate their future roles and challenges (Sherman, 2008), the addition of case study research including reflections and perspective of leaders who have learned from their equity experiences would likely prove a valuable and timely resource given the rapidly increasing diversity of students in this demographic. Case studies that illustrate how districts build constituency, anticipate various sources of resistance, and provide supervision and ongoing professional development could help districts embarking on equity initiatives to maximize their resources and avoid common errors.

Among the few case studies exist that chronicle such transformational processes in high-performing suburban schools is a 2011 self-study of an achievement gap reduction initiative published by the leaders of the Arlington Public Schools (Strand, Smith, Cotman, Robinson, Swaim & Crawley, 2011). Their intensive work over twelve years resulted in notable increases in minority student achievement. This case study includes detailed first-person narratives from six administrators and community leaders who recount the process of making systemic changes in beliefs and pedagogy in their district. However, though detailed and informative, this case study
may not be entirely applicable to some suburban districts as its minority population is more than fifty percent and a substantial percentage of the population is economically disadvantaged.

The following studies and organizations offer valuable information to leaders interested in achievement gap initiatives in suburban districts:

- Case studies reported by the Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard University include overviews of numerous, racially diverse and highly successful schools around the country. However, only two of the schools in the study were located in high-performing suburban districts. While this overview offers valuable information on systemic changes including creating a focus on instruction, increasing engagement, supervision and the use of technology, these studies do not include first-person perspectives of the school leaders who enacted these changes (Ferguson, Hackman, Hanna, & Ballantine, 2010).

- In 1999, fifteen middle and upper-income suburban districts created the Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN) across the country to examine and share perspectives as they worked to address achievement gaps in their schools. To date, MSAN has conducted surveys and has provided research that can help suburban districts to dispel myths about achievement and focus on skill development, improving access to resources and building teacher-student relationships to improve confidence and engagement (Ferguson, 2002). This organization continues to expand and offers a valuable network to high-performing suburban schools seeking information about effective achievement gap practices.
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the personal perspectives of the leaders of a high-performing district following an almost twenty-year process of attempting to reduce its achievement gap. The study examines the history of its efforts to improve equity through participants’ reflections as well as the specific actions taken over the tenure of two superintendents to establish a singular mission, transform culture, and implement pedagogical changes to increase achievement and opportunity for the district’s students of color. Included are participant quotes discussing their experiences managing stakeholder resistance and how the leadership managed to remain committed to this process over many years of slow but steady change. The study includes key “lessons” learned along the way that can be used by other districts seeking to implement equity initiatives in their districts.

It is anticipated that the addition of this research to the case literature on the elimination of achievement gaps in high-performing suburban schools will offer a practical resource to other administrators, professional developers and school improvement teams seeking to improve equity in districts with similar characteristics. By offering the personal perspectives and lived experiences of those who underwent transformational changes successfully, this case study can provide the type of experiential learning that has been identified as useful and practical to leadership preparation (Sherman, 2008).

Position of the Researcher

The researcher has resided in an upper middle-class suburban community for most of her life and completed professional studies at both a high-performing suburban private university and a highly diverse urban state university that offered exposure to a wide variety of students from both an ethnic and cultures and socio-economic perspective. She has worked in education
for thirty years in three high-performing suburban school districts in Connecticut. Her experience with schools in this demographic has been through the perspective of a student, a secondary-level teacher, a curriculum coordinator, a Dean of Students and, for the past seven years, a high school Housemaster (Assistant Principal). The researcher’s current administrative position is in a high-performing suburban high school comprised of a majority white student body. Its minority population is comprised of mainly African-American and Hispanic students; the school’s Free and Reduced Lunch population is approximately twenty-five percent. Through her seven years as academic administrator to approximately 500 students annually, she has experienced the challenges of addressing achievement gaps and has focused her doctoral studies on exploring solutions.

**Researching from the position of outsider.** Researchers must avoid the tendency to make generalizations about the experiences, goals or backgrounds of members of any group of study participants. In the case study described in this paper, the potential exists for the researcher to make inaccurate assumptions about the experiences of the staff or school community at the study site. As every school district and building has its own culture, one cannot assume that the level of knowledge, awareness, training or acceptance of issues regarding race, privilege, cultural competence or previous experience with these issues is identical. Briscoe (2005) warns about the limited lens of the researcher, citing the denigration and stereotyping of female roles in Africa and Asia by some Western researchers as an example of the negative effects of researcher bias. He claims that by applying their own feminist definitions of these constructs, researchers marginalized the community and the maternal power held by the participants.

Perhaps the most significant challenge for the researcher is her lack of personal experience as a person of color - this places her in a second-hand position of understanding the
complexities of race and privilege from the viewpoint of a minority student, parent, teacher or administrator. However, learning as much as possible about research participants can help to mitigate a lack of firsthand experience. In some cases, researchers spend significant amounts of time living amongst the participants they intend to study. Alexander & Mohanty began their collaborative work with a learning period in which they each investigated the others’ cultural context so that each could become more knowledgeable (Alexander & Mohanty, 1997, as cited by Fennel & Arnot, 2008). This base knowledge allowed them to approach their study from an informed position and a “more equal exchange regarding their positionality and understanding of the micro-macro politics of practice and praxis” (Fennel & Arnot, 2008).

The researcher’s past and current experience as a student and educator in three high-performing suburban schools may also be viewed as an asset to this study as she is intimately acquainted with the inner workings of high-performing school districts. Furthermore, her current position working with struggling students, many of who are students of color, brings first-hand experience to her understanding of the problem from a school leader’s perspective. She has spent a great deal of time working with parents of underperforming Hispanic and black students to collaborate on solutions.

In addition, the completion of four years of doctoral-level study on the topic of educational social justice has helped to inform the researcher’s understanding of the complexities of the achievement gap. For example, an area of initial ignorance by the researcher was the impact of Hispanic cultural values on students’ post-secondary planning. For most of her career, the researcher worked almost exclusively with white suburban families whose post-secondary plans for their children typically included attendance at out-of-state, four-year colleges or universities. However, research indicates that not all cultures aspire to this type of post-
secondary plan regardless of their ability to pay for tuition. For example, in many Hispanic families, young adults are encouraged to remain local and share their knowledge and assets within the community. For these students, less value may be placed on individualism and more emphasis on staying with the family and attending school locally than is experienced by many of their white peers (Walker, Ice, Hoover-Dempsey & Sadler, 2011). Consequently, the researcher learned that school personnel must reflect on the degree to which they impose Eurocentric values and expectations about college and career on their students and be better prepared to provide post-secondary planning to students who choose alternate pathways. This insight has been helpful in avoiding assumptions that could lead to barriers in communication with families.

In general, attempting an achievement gap study as a person who has not been a member of a participant group that has historically suffered from inequities in schools, namely black, Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students, places her in a position in which assumptions or generalizations could potentially be made about the performance or needs of these students. Care has been taken through reading and professional development to avoid making generalizations about the individual experiences of the students, families and staff of this district. For example, researching conflicting communication styles and how they may lead to misunderstandings and disengagement in classrooms has been helpful in informing the researcher’s practice as a supervisor and instructional leader (Kunjufu, 2002). In addition, the researcher attended a two-day workshop on institutional racism during the time of her dissertation experience to better equip her to undertake this study. This workshop helped her as a white individual to better comprehend the history of institutional racism in schools and uncover potential blind spots in regard to recognizing inequitable educational practices. These understandings as well as others underscore an appreciation by the researcher for the need for
professional development in high-performing suburban schools in order to create more effective learning environments that meet the needs of all students. However, the researcher remains aware of the potential limits of her own understanding given her lack of first-hand experience as a target of racial discrimination in her education.

Research Question

This study stems from the researcher's personal interest in improving the leadership knowledge and skills needed to reduce achievement gaps in the high-performing suburban district in which she is an administrator. Its purpose is to assist leaders of schools in this demographic to identify effective equity practices by studying the leadership experiences of a district that has spent significant time planning and implementing a comprehensive strategy for reducing its achievement gaps. Its central question aligns with a qualitative study design and addresses various components of this topic (Creswell, 2012). This study is designed to answer the question:

How is the leadership of a high-performing suburban district experiencing an ongoing process of transformation as it works to eliminate its achievement gap?

In particular, the researcher will examine how the leadership in this district is pursuing its mission to make substantive changes in practices and beliefs towards the purpose of improving the achievement of its students of color, addressing its pedagogical deficiencies, developing constituency and support, managing resistance to the process and other potential barriers to the change process and is taking measures to sustain its achievement gap work over the long-term. Interviews explore how the leaders are experiencing this process including how they maintain their own commitment and stamina throughout the process of leading this challenging work.
Theoretical Framework

Specifically, research indicates that leaders of schools who are seeking to eliminate their achievement gaps must be prepared to do the following:

• accurately assess staff readiness for change and build staff commitment to cultural competence and socially just practices
• access technical expertise and resources
• implement ongoing professional development that results in culturally competent instruction and attitudes
• provide ongoing supervision and support to insure fidelity of implementation
• manage the transformation process including building critical support and address resistance constructively (Boykin and Noguera, 2011)

The following is an examination of two theories that are considered by the researcher as relevant and informative to school leaders as they seek to transform their districts’ mission and culture and improve pedagogy to increase their effectiveness in teaching students of color.

The Burke-Litwin organizational change model. In the 1960s, George Litwin investigated the relationships between the psychological reactions of employees and organizational conditions such as managerial behavior, structure and systems (Burke & Litwin, 1992). This early research led to the confirmation of a link between positive work climate and higher organizational performance. Litwin captured these relationships in a causal model that allowed for the testing of the impact of organizational climate on employee motivation and performance (Burke, 2002). In the 1980s, W. Warner Burke expanded Litwin’s theory, explaining the distinction between climate and culture (Burke & Litwin, 1992). Together, they refined the earlier model, identifying twelve variables that impact organizational performance
and organizing them in a hierarchical diagram. These variables are situated in an open system to acknowledge that a change in any of them will have resonance on the whole system. However, the level and position of each variable indicates its weight and potential to change an organization’s behavior based on its relation to the system, group or individual process.

Burke-Litwin’s organizational change model identifies twelve variables that influence behavior at the worksite. While changes in any of these factors can impact the rest of the variables, five variables have the greatest influence on organizational behavior because they impact the larger system and are, thus, are situated at the top half of the chart (See Figure 1):

- **External forces** on leadership are the most common influences for transformational change and may also have an impact on culture.
- **Organizational culture** including how an organization promotes honesty, creativity and communication has a strong impact on leadership behavior.
- **Setting mission (goals) and strategy** are most impacted by leadership and external forces.
- **Leadership behavior** including how it shapes values and commitment is most strongly influenced by external forces and culture.

The remaining eight variables are found in the causal model:

- **Structure**, or the decision-making route and extent of collaboration within an organization, is directly linked to task requirements and connected to management practices.
- **Management practices** including levels of accountable and consistency and the level of employee involvement, as well as organizational **systems** (how employees learn their jobs, how and what information is provided) are directly linked with climate.
• *Individual values & needs* (fulfillment of employees’ needs to feel secure, valued, included in the group and interested in the work) are related to motivation.

• *Motivation* (staff commitment/motivation to achieving organizational goals and how they are rewarded/retained) is directly related to individual performance.

• *Task requirements* (how skills are utilized, the challenge level of the work and who is promoted) are linked to motivation.

• *Individual and organizational performance* (the development of pride in working for the organization, levels of employee involvement and “open accountability”) (Burke & Litwin, 1992) result from the impact of all of the above factors.
Figure 1. The Burke-Litwin model (Adapted from Burke-Litwin, 1992)

Creating urgency for change. Successful transformational leaders approach change at the systems level of the organizational hierarchy (Burke, 2002). Creating a sense of urgency for change by leadership has been identified in some research as the most important stage of effective transformation (Culey, 2012). Urgency impacts mission and strategy as well as culture. These priorities are corroborated by more recent research that indicates that workplaces with clear strategic goals combined with strong, supportive cultures have the greatest chances for success; conversely, underperformance tends to co-exist with a lack guiding vision, goals and
purpose, and bureaucratic, poorly aligned systems (Jaruzelski, Loehr, & Holman, 2011).

According to Culey (2012), leaders who do not develop this sense of urgency in employees to consistently address an organization’s most important goals are “ultimately ineffective”.

Though the Burke-Litwin model contends that culture change has the greatest impact on behavior, leaders often underestimate the challenge of moving people out of their comfort zones (Kotter, 1996). Burke & Litwin (1992) acknowledge that leaders often fail to make changes in organizational behavior when they choose to work solely at the transactional level— that is, focusing on making changes in the everyday systems that impact a worksite’s climate, for example, such as schedules, rules and other aspects of daily management. The researchers describe organizational climate as “perceptions that individuals have of how their local work unit is managed and how effectively they and their colleagues work on the job” (Burke & Litwin, 1992). Leadership behavior directly impacts climate through its influence on management practices, systems and policies and organizational structure. Climate can be differentiated from culture in that it is more visible— it involves how work is managed including the systems in place to accomplish a job and the rewards gained for accomplishing the work. Climate is situated in the lower half of the chart; the practices that influence climate are referred to as transactional as they refer to the agreements of “give and take” that occur at the worksite and impact groups and individuals rather than the whole system. While such changes may have resonance, the Burke-Litwin model of organizational behavior indicates that large-scale organizational change is more likely to occur as a result of changes to mission, strategy, leadership and culture.

The importance of creating a culture for change. Culture is the unique “thumbprint” created by an organization’s deep-rooted assumptions and beliefs, its values, and its more visible behaviors, language and symbols (artifacts) (Jones, Jimmieson & Griffiths, 2005). Culture is
linked to the readiness of an organization to change; an employee’s perception that a change is necessary and possible in an organization influences his or her motivation and readiness to make a change in behavior (Jones et al. 2005). ‘Culture eats strategy for breakfast’ is a quote generally attributed to Peter Drucker – it emphasizes the critical role of creating a culture for change. A lack of emphasis on culture is a common cause of failure when leaders overlook it and focus efforts exclusively on strategy and skill development (Torben, 2014).

Burke-Litwin’s causal model (1992) indicates that leadership behavior has a direct influence on the culture of an organization. Organizational culture can be defined as the powerful but less obvious messages that employees receive about how “things are done” in their workplaces (Burke & Litwin, 1992). Culture includes how values and norms manifest themselves and result in expectations for how people should perform and interact internally within the organization and in dealing with the external world. It has an impact on the entire organizational system and, for this reason, is situated at the top half of their chart. Burke-Litwin describe changes in culture as transformational because of its significant impact on the system as a whole – culture influences all of the key variables of organizational behavior, either directly or indirectly.

Implications for school leadership and school improvement. Burke-Litwin’s Organizational Change Theory (1992) offers a hierarchical model for understanding organizational dynamics and the leadership actions that have the greatest impact on organizational behavior. Ultimately, the Burke-Litwin model underscores the power of leadership as a significant influence on the dynamics of an organization; a leader’s choice to actively pursue or ignore inequities in schools will have resonance throughout the organization. For leaders interested in making transformational changes in their schools, the model’s
hierarchical and causal characteristics identify which organizational factors have the greatest impact on systemic, group and individual behavior.

While the model was not developed specifically for the field of education, it has applicability in the organizational context of the school as leaders attempt to make widespread transformation in the area of social justice. Through the study of Burke-Litwin’s model of organizational change, school administrators can infer the critical role that they potentially play in influencing the commitment, values, mission and strategy needed to make organizational change. This conceptual framework can be valuable in informing school improvement plans as leaders deliberate priority and emphasis of action. The model’s distinction between transformational and transactional behaviors is especially instructive in illustrating why isolated changes at the transactional level (located at the bottom half of the hierarchy) often do not resonate as widely as changes in the more high order elements located at the top of the organizational chart. It suggests that implementing change at the transactional level not likely to lead to wide-scale improvement. For example, when school leaders assume that an increase in teacher preparation or instructional time will automatically change their practices in instructing low-achieving students without implementing corresponding professional development and accountability measures, they miss critical steps needed to make a significant impact on overall behavior of an organization. In fact, research indicates that schools that get results from increases in time do so by pairing these changes with skills training and by targeting teachers’ fundamental beliefs about teaching and learning (Cushman, 1995). Another common mistake is enacting expedient, low-level interventions such as cultural diversity celebrations and didactic professional development presentations to transform school culture. By ignoring the complexities of the school environment including hidden messages, curricular issues, unjust
policies and adult attitudes, such transactional measures implemented by school leaders fail to make significant improvements for students of color (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

**Critical Race Theory (CRT).** American educators typically receive training in Eurocentric approaches to education in both content and philosophy (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Given this fact, it is understandable that teaching practices in the United States do not generally reflect the diverse perspectives and values that are often present in students. Developing culturally responsive instruction is far more complex than simply intellectualizing learning styles or differences in cultural norms and behaviors. Culturally responsive instruction is defined for the purposes of this study as the planning and implementing of an instructional program that uses the “cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively” (Gay, 2002). For many educators, acquiring this skill involves undergoing a potentially difficult psychological process of confronting beliefs and experiences of white privilege, colorblindness and power (Anders, Bryan et al., 2005). This process can be distressing when educators discover for the first time the historical oppressiveness of the American school structure; the experience can be especially challenging for liberal white teachers who are committed to social justice but who have never been challenged to see their own inadvertent participation in an unjust system (Howard, 2006).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) was originally developed in the 1970s by legal experts Bell and Freeman in reaction to their dismay at the slow desegregation of the legal system. It was their belief that society’s failure to change essential beliefs and values about race and privilege led to the failure to implement desegregation legislation (Bell, 1992). They identified the presence of a variety of dynamics at work that prevented such change including colorblind practices and interest convergence. Colorblind practices are those behaviors that ignore racial
differences and their contribution to experiences of power and privilege (Howard, 2006). Interest convergence is the practice by which dominant groups protect their own status by insuring that any opportunities offered to minority groups benefit themselves as well (Bell, 1992).

Ladson-Billings (1998) applied CRT to the school context and related its principles to the inequalities of an American educational system that mirrors the values and beliefs of its greater society. According to her seminal research, correcting staff beliefs and practices that lead to ineffective and unjust practices in the classroom is critical to promoting achievement by students of color. For example, a practice common to many white educators is colorblind behavior, or the failure to acknowledge racial differences amongst diverse students. This usually occurs as a result of the fear of being politically incorrect or the worry that raising the issue of race could lead to accusations of racism by students of color (Howard, 2006). Though white teachers may pride themselves in treating all students the same and not “seeing” color, they may not realize that they inadvertently further marginalize their students of color by not attending to various learning and communication styles and by failing to recognize students’ cultural assets in their instruction (Howard, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1998). A lack of understanding of differences may cause teachers to unfairly and inaccurately judge student ability and performance and may lead to student disengagement in the classroom (Gay, 2002).

Ladson-Billings (1998) uses the principles of CRT to inform the process of transforming attitudes and beliefs held by the school community. She maintains that the building of critical awareness and cohesiveness can occur through the use of specific re-education techniques that include the sharing of personal experiences involving power and privilege amongst diverse staff and students. She maintains that this can be accomplished through the use of shared narratives and counter-storytelling to examine the permanence of racism, whiteness as a property asset and
the impact on students of how power is portrayed in curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 1998). When diverse groups of teachers and students share their personal perspectives and experiences about power and privilege, a more accurate depiction of disparities can emerge as light is shed on what was previously invisible to some individuals. Through this communication, educators who previously may not have been able to perceive the marginalization of some students through curriculum, instruction or school cultural practices increase their awareness and can take measures to create more inclusive environments.

Research indicates that culturally competent teachers are skilled in providing rigorous instruction that leverages the strengths and "funds of knowledge" (González, Moll & Amanti, 2005), or background knowledge of students, to promote their engagement and understanding. For example, Gay’s seminal research (2002) illustrates how some communication practices that are more common to certain cultures can often be misconstrued as intentionally disruptive by less culturally competent teachers and lead to conflict. In her studies of cultural differences in approaches to learning, she points to the communal nature of learning in many families of color to illustrate why cooperative learning and storytelling can be powerful instructional strategies for minority students. Consequently, school leaders must plan ongoing opportunities for teachers to improve their cultural competence in order to improve achievement in their diverse classrooms.

The need to address colorblindness and racial stereotypes is corroborated throughout the research on eliminating achievement gaps. During the process of re-educating staff and the transformation from colorblindness to cultural competence, participants typically travel through several stages of development. In their study of a professional learning community focused on improving cultural competency, Brody & Hadar (2011) describe a non-linear framework of teacher transformation comprised of four stages including anticipation/curiosity, withdrawal
from the process, self-awareness and, if successful, permanent change and re-integration. Howard (2006) also describes similar stages of transformation specific to addressing “white denial”, or the refusal to acknowledge differences in access to power or privilege between white individuals and individuals of color. Howard (2006) and Brody & Hadar (2011) indicate that participants can move forward and backward among these stages depending on a variety of factors including individual readiness, perceptions of experiences with others, levels of rigidity, support and empathy; they acknowledge that some individuals never make the attitudinal changes needed to significantly improve practice.

Ladson-Billings (1998) focuses on the importance of examining interest congruence and its bearing on desegregation as a means of building community amongst educators and students as well as critical thinking skills. Interest congruence exists when solutions designed by white individuals to address achievement or access by students of color ultimately offer equal or greater advantage to white students than to students of color. For example, some CRT advocates have criticized equity “solutions” such as magnet schools and affirmative action programs in higher education, claiming that, in reality, these responses to a lack of access to education by minorities do not provide the promised advantages to people of color and, instead, benefit more white students (Ladson-Billings, 1999). School leaders can look for instances of interest convergence through a review of their district policies and practices. Finally, CRT advocates maintain the ineffectiveness of incrementalism, or taking a slow and graduated approach to desegregation, which they believe has resulted in minimal progress towards equity for people of color (Ladson-Billings, 1999). When schools seek to avoid disturbing the status quo by addressing systemic issues of inequality through gradual and modest changes, it is unlikely that transformation will occur. This aspect of CRT theory aligns with organizational change theory as
it suggests that real transformation results from a significant, systemic disruption of the organization rather than from targeting transactional practices. School leaders can extrapolate from this theory that small, isolated adjustments to the school routine do not change the powerful systems in schools that lead to underachievement by students of color.

**Summary of theoretical framework.** Elements from both Organizational Change Theory and Critical Race Theory (CRT) in combination can be highly informative to school leaders as they prepare to eliminate achievement gaps in their schools. Burke & Litwin’s Organizational Change Theory (1992) indicates that leaders must make changes in culture, mission, values and goals in order to create large-scale changes in their organizations. In fact, it has been found that a distinguishing difference between managerial school leaders who simply react to individual instances of injustice and those who lead for social justice is the latter’s focus on the proactive and ongoing development of equitable environments (Rivera-McCutcheon, 2014). While it is not uncommon for leaders to limit their equity activities to “fixing” transactional issues in their organizations such as curriculum or scheduling, this theory indicates why it is unlikely that such practices will lead to large-scale change due to their failure to address many of the systemic, root causes of inequity entrenched in school culture (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Burke & Litwin, 1992). The Burke-Litwin model offers leaders an explanation of the hierarchy of influence in organizations that can help leadership to prioritize actions needed for transformation.

CRT offers an understanding and a methodology for achieving critical levels of awareness of how race and privilege impact equity. It has implications for creating equitable instructional and classroom management practices. A key component of promoting culturally responsive pedagogy is the expansion of teachers’ technical knowledge and skills in working
with diverse cultures including an understanding of various cognitive styles and communication practices. Thus, school leaders who wish to improve the performance of underachieving students of color in their schools may refer to the principles of CRT as they plan for the professional development of their staff. They must recognize that an effective training plan for improving culturally responsive instruction recognizes the highly individualized, non-linear nature of transformational change and the need for significant time, technical and emotional support throughout the process.

In combination, these theories have relevance to school leaders as they seek to understand the strategies that have been found to have the greatest resonance within organizations and that provide the appropriate knowledge and skill required to alter longstanding organizational beliefs and practices around race, power and privilege. Both offer valuable insights to school leaders that can inform a plan for the transformation of schools into places of equity for all students.

**Chapter summary.** Leaders of high-performing suburban school districts have not historically been required to account for their schools’ relatively small subgroups of underachieving students. However, more recent changes in federal and state accountability laws now require all public schools to disaggregate their data and use it to improve the achievement of all students regardless of the high achievement of the majority. Despite these requirements, a lack of preparation for equity work in school leader preparation programs poses a barrier to their ability to seek solutions to their achievement gaps. Furthermore, leaders of high performing suburban districts often experience the added challenge of attempting to convince elite stakeholders to embrace the systemic changes needed to insure equity for typically small underserved groups of students. These leaders need to be especially adept at applying the
pressure necessary to disrupt the status quo while establishing positive relationships with key stakeholders.

This single-case study uses organizational change and social justice theories as the lens for examining the practices of a school leadership of a high-performing suburban school district undergoing a transformation to eliminate its achievement gaps. It describes from start to finish the various actions taken by a district over a period of almost twenty years. It examines the impact of many decisions and practices from the perspectives of these eleven leaders who have been intimately involved with the planning and/or implementation of a variety of initiatives undertaken to promote equity. It is designed to provide practical information to school leaders of high-performing school districts who wish to learn best practices through an examination of the actions taken by an experienced district.

**Contents and Organization of Paper**

This dissertation contains five chapters. The first chapter explains to the reader the significance of the problem, the research question and an overview of the study. It also includes information about the researcher’s positionality and steps taken to overcome possible bias during the study. It discusses two theories that have influenced the researcher’s lens and helped to drive the research question and interview questions posed to the eleven participants. Chapter II includes a detailed review of the literature on creating equitable schools and the current state of leader preparation for this challenge. Chapter III presents the methodology employed in this case study including protocols used for interviewing the eleven participants and coding. Chapter IV presents the research findings. Finally, the last chapter discusses key implications from this research including some lessons that can be learned from this case study by leaders of similar districts. It also includes study limitations and research suggestions for future study of effective
approaches to eliminating achievement gaps in high-performing school districts.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Organization Statement

This literature review examines the pivotal role of school leaders in the successful implementation of achievement gap reductions. It explores documented leader practices and priorities that appear most critical to the change process, describes valuable skills used by leaders who implemented successful change initiatives and describes instances of failed attempts by leaders who did not exhibit these behaviors. It includes a review of two theories that may be used as underpinnings of efforts to eliminate achievement gaps in schools: Burke-Litwin’s Organizational Change Model and Critical Race Theory (CRT). These frameworks can be useful in guiding leadership on where to focus priorities to elicit large-scale change in organizations. This literature review also identifies the specific learning about social justice that educators must engage in order to effect critical pedagogical changes in individuals and systemically. Finally, it examines some of the unique challenges and barriers commonly experienced and how leaders maintain their stamina and commitment throughout the transformation process.

The Achievement Gap Threatens the Strength of the Nation

The continued segregation of schools by race and income and the unequal provision of resources serve as the basis for a wide disparity of opportunity between white students and students of color in the United States (Darling-Hammond, 2010). In spite of civil rights legislation of the 1960’s and 1970’s, vestiges of centuries-old beliefs about race and pedagogy continue to exist and result in low expectations for children of color even in many of the country’s highest-performing districts. Inequitable policies and practices continue to deny
students of color access to the most valuable educational resources while conferring opportunity on others (Boykin & Noguera, 2011).

In her 2010 publication entitled *The Flat World and Education How America’s Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Future*, Darling-Hammond (2010) uncovered wide disparities in instruction, curriculum and resources leading to significant differences in student performance, mainly divided along lines of class and race. In addition to the challenges presented by prejudicial belief systems and poor pedagogical practices present in the classrooms, cultural mismatches between teacher and student cognitive and communication styles often present barriers to learning for students of color (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Chamberlain, 2005; Gay, 2002). Consequently, high school graduation rates have historically been substantially lower for black and Hispanic students than for white and Asian students in U.S. schools. According to national statistics from 2011-2012, only sixty-nine percent of black students and seventy-three percent of Hispanic high school students received a diploma in four years, as compared to eighty-six percent of their white peers (Stetser & Stillwell, 2013). Though graduation rates have been on the upswing, the situation remains especially alarming in regards to achievement of male students of color. Only fifty-two percent of black males and fifty-eight percent of Hispanic males who entered ninth grade in 2006-2007 graduated in four years as compared to seventy-eight percent of the white males in their cohort (Holzman, Jackson & Beaudry, 2012) Though more recent long-term data has indicated improvements in math and reading in Hispanic and black students (Madrid, 2011; Vanneman, Hamilton, Anderson & Rahman, 2009), the achievement gap itself has not been greatly reduced since comparable advancement has been experienced in the white and Asian student population (Boykin & Noguera, 2011).
In many schools, Hispanic and black students continue to be largely absent from more rigorous courses including Advanced Placement classes and Gifted & Talented programs (Boykin & Noguera, 2014; Kohler & Lazarin, 2007; Harris, Brown, Ford & Richardson, 2004). Black males, in particular, are generally overrepresented in special education and in low rigor courses that do not adequately prepare them for college (Kunjufu, 2002). In 2003, only six percent of California’s black and Hispanic high school graduates completed the courses and tests needed to attend a two or four-year college (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Furthermore, Hispanic and black students (especially males) frequently do not apply for the most rigorous post-secondary opportunities at the same rate as their white peers despite demonstrated ability in high school. For example, while the rates of college attendance by Hispanic students is increasing, their rates of enrollment in four-year colleges and their degree completion are lower than those of their white and Asian peers (Ross, Kena, Rathbun, KewalRamani, Zhang, Kristapovich, & Manning, 2012). Such unrealized opportunity has led to widely disparate rates of unemployment, poverty and crime.

**Student Diversity Increases While Teacher Diversity Remains the Same**

An increasingly diversifying population of students in the U.S. has created an urgency to equip schools to meet a wide variety of needs. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2013), the percentage of white public school students in the U.S. decreased from sixty-seven percent to fifty-four percent between 1990 to 2010, while the percentage of Hispanic students increased from twelve percent to twenty-three percent. In comparison, eighty-eight percent of U.S. teachers graduating from teacher preparation programs are female, white non-Hispanic and derive from middle-class backgrounds (U.S. Department of Education, 2007-2008; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Pollock, Deckman, Mira & Shalaby, 2010; Kunjufu, 2002). In addition,
the vast majority of teachers are between the ages of forty-five and sixty-five years (Ladson-Billings, 2005). As American school systems originate mainly from European traditions, teachers typically receive professional training from an orientation and social order that places white people in a position of power (Chamberlain, 2005). Curricula reflect a fairly limited, monocultural orientation that often does not acknowledge or engage students from more diverse backgrounds (Pritchy Smith, Bryant, Howell, Fang He, Taylor, Sapp, Botelho & Duarte, 2010). While some teacher education programs offer courses regarding diversity, many do not provide adequate preparation to teach the wide variety of students that will enter today’s classrooms (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Ladson-Billings, as cited by Sailes, 2008).

**Achievement Gaps in High-Performing Suburban Schools**

According to the Pew Research Hispanic Trends Project, white students constitute approximately fifty-nine percent of the enrollment in suburban schools (Fry, 2009). In fact, in 2006-2007, suburban schools educated approximately fifty-one percent of the nation’s Asian students, thirty-six percent of the country’s Hispanic students and thirty-three percent of its black students. Despite a change in demographics across the country, much less attention has been focused on the achievement gaps that exist in high-performing, suburban schools. In these districts, relatively high graduation rates and college acceptances have kept the spotlight off of their low-achieving subgroups (Ferguson, 2002). Yet, substantial achievement gaps do exist in these schools, even when per pupil spending is high and the income disparity between students is not substantial (Boykin & Noguera, 2011).

For example, one of the greatest achievement gaps in the country can be found in Connecticut, a state that is among the wealthiest in the nation. In 2009, the divide between Connecticut’s low-income and affluent students on standardized fourth- and eighth-grade reading
tests spanned three grade levels; its overall standardized scores ranked the state at the bottom of the nation for its significant achievement gap (Butrymowicz, 2011). Though the disparity is most noticeable in its poorer urban areas, Connecticut’s minority students who reside outside of its urban areas in wealthier, high-performing suburban districts still generally perform below the levels of their white peers (Moran, 2011; Cowan, 2008). Similar underperformance of minority students has been noted in high-performing suburbs across the country (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Ferguson, 2002).

**Leader Accountability Increases for Achievement in High-Performing Schools**

Prior to the twenty-first century, federal and state accountability policies deemed schools successful when eighty to ninety percent of their students passed standardized achievement tests (McKenzie, Christman, Hernandez, Fierro, Capper, Dantley & Scheurich, 2008). Schools that met this standard were less impacted by national reform efforts. Typically, the students who were among the less successful ten to twenty percent were of low-income status, were often students of color, ELLs or students from other minority groups (McKenzie et al., 2008). The nation’s standard for accountability began to rise with the passing of No Child Left Behind legislation in 2001. This law addressed underachievement by various subgroups and required public schools to show growth and reach for 100% proficiency in their students (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). More recent external accountability systems and reform efforts such as Response To Intervention (RTI) and achievement-related teacher evaluation have further pushed the performance of less successful sub-groups into the foreground (Rivera-McCutcheon, 2014). The requirement that schools disaggregate achievement data to determine underperforming sub-groups and create improvement plans to address low proficiency now applies to even the highest-performing suburban districts.
However, despite external accountability mandates to address achievement gaps, leaders of high-performing districts are often under pressure from their school communities to maintain practices that cater to the highest achieving students (Gay 2013; Hynds, 2010). They are continuously expected to insure that their institutions can compete against other top schools for the highest accolades and the best opportunities. Leaders of high-performing districts can face pushback from parents, community and even staff to maintain the status quo and avoid making changes that might upset the balance of privilege and power in their schools. This often results in the diversion of resources including the highest level courses and the most experienced teachers to the promotion of the top echelon of performers (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). This phenomenon of reserving the best opportunities for those at the top of an organization to assure their status or dominance is known as “opportunity hoarding” (Tilly, 2003).

**Critical Leadership Skills Needed by Transformational School Leaders.** By virtue of their places in the organizational hierarchy, principals, superintendents and other top administrators are uniquely positioned to create large-scale change in the delivery of equal educational opportunities to students. Through their roles leading their district’s instructional supervision, accountability systems and policies, they can significantly influence decisions about mission, culture and pedagogy and create systems of monitoring to avoid a default back to old exclusionary practices (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997). However, leaders of social justice change must be politically adept and build constituency to support increased opportunity and achievement for their minority students. Such skill is important to overcoming the resistance that has been found to be particularly common in high-performing school systems when social justice efforts focus resources on subgroups of students who may be judged as having less status or potential by others (Hynds, 2010; Shields, 2010; Theoharis, 2007). Withstanding the political fallout of
unbalancing the status quo can be challenging and can take a personal toll on school leaders (Starr, 2011; Theoharis, 2007). Consequently, leaders benefit from having the gravitas of formal authority behind them, as well as the support of their central office administrators and boards of education, to insure the longevity of critical initiatives and to protect themselves against the political risks of making transformational change (Skrla & Skeuritch, 2001).

In reality, most school administrators receive very little training in research-based approaches addressing achievement gaps (Miller, 2013; Rivera-McCutcheon, 2014; Lashway, 2003). While a lack of leader vision in an organization has been found to be a significant barrier to the improved functioning of organizations, administrative preparation programs typically focus on developing management skills and generally do not screen candidates for their interest or commitment to leading equitable schools (Miller, 2013; Rivera-McCutcheon, 2014; Cohn & Moran, 2011; Lashway, 2003); Though more than half of the states in the U.S. now require mentoring as a component of new principal certification, many of these programs are poorly devised and ineffectual (Miller & Martin, 2014; Miller, 2013; Lashway, 2003). Also, since the average age of public school principals is 45 years, many of the current school leaders received administrator certification prior to the establishment of more rigorous leadership standards (Goldring, Gray & Bitterman, 2013). Consequently, school leaders frequently lack updated information and training in the skills needed to effectively plan and implement the kinds of systemic changes needed to transform today’s schools into equitable environments.

The value of case study to skill development. In the absence of adequate professional training to address achievement gaps, most school principals report learning through their own reflections on lived experiences gained in the field (Bisschoff & Watts, 2013). Access to comprehensive case studies during the leader preparation period may offer a practical learning
resource to less experienced school leaders embarking on transformation efforts (Bisschoff & Watts, 2013). Yet, to date, there has been minimal case study literature published that highlights the experiences of high-performing suburban districts that have successfully addressed their achievement gaps. Existing research mainly focuses on urban districts or brief descriptions of improvements in discreet gap areas in suburban schools. Even when the literature describes specific programs or improvements, it often fails to address in depth the challenges from leaders’ perspectives. There are few practical examples indicating how leaders build constituency, anticipate and manage resistance, implement ongoing professional development, provide close monitoring throughout the process and maintain the personal stamina to sustain the change process. These skills are critical to prospective leaders and school improvement teams (Miller, 2013). Furthermore, most of the existing case studies do not highlight the actual perspectives of leaders of high-performing suburban districts as they progressed through their school transformation processes. The availability of such testimony can provide an invaluable learning tool to prospective leaders in their professional preparation programs, either as a resource for consideration by school improvement teams or as a source of discussion by professional learning communities.

One exception in the case study literature is a 2011 self-study of an achievement gap reduction initiative published by leaders of the Arlington Public Schools. They describe their equity efforts over a twelve-year period that resulted in substantial increases in their minority student achievement (Strand, Smith, Cotman, Robinson, Swaim & Crawley, 2011). This book includes detailed first-person narratives from six administrators and community leaders who recount the process of making systemic changes in beliefs, pedagogy and district policies. However, since demographically, this district is comprised of a minority population (black,
Asian and Hispanic) of more than fifty percent, this study may not be entirely informative to districts with smaller minority populations.

Additional case studies offering illustrations of achievement gap work in suburban districts are available through Harvard University’s Achievement Gap Initiative. This research includes descriptions of numerous racially diverse and highly successful schools around the country that have reduced their gaps in various areas of achievement (Ferguson et al., 2010). However, relatively few of the schools in this study are located in high-performing suburban districts. Also, while the research offers valuable information on systemic changes including the creation of a vision statement focused on instruction, engagement, supervision and the use of technology, it does not offer an account of how leaders experienced and managed the dynamics of transformation.

A useful resource for high-performing suburban districts is the Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN), an organization created in 1999 by fifteen middle and upper-income suburban districts across the country to share perspectives and best practices for addressing achievement gaps. This organization offers opportunities for high-performing suburban schools that wish to network professionally about achievement gap practices. Action research conducted focuses on skill development, improving access to resources and building teacher-student relationships to improve confidence and engagement (Ferguson, 2002).

The Importance of Addressing School Culture. School leaders including principals are situated in key positions in the organizational hierarchy to set a tone of high expectations for all students in their schools. Research indicates that successful transformational leaders dig deeply into the culture of their schools to overturn evidences of injustice as a critical step in planning for change. Schools that fail to address culture in their school improvement plans often miss a
critical step in their equity planning (Wagner, 2005); in one study, a high school principal attributed the failure of her efforts to her school’s exclusive focus on curriculum, instruction and assessment to the exclusion of culture. She stated, “We were working so hard on curriculum alignment, instructional practices, assessment strategies and selecting add-on programs that would meet our students’ needs that we simply forgot about our people.” (Wagner, 2005, p. 11), Nelson, Bustamente, Onwuegbuzie & Wilson (2008) identified organizational domains of cultural competence including a school vision that results in a diverse curriculum, student interaction and leadership, teacher sensitivity, good instruction, family outreach, conflict management, and assessment. Some general indicators of a school’s cultural competence include a mission statement that explicitly addresses diversity, the implementation of annual cultural competence training, the monitored promotion of minority staff, and the presence of a diversity task force (Nelson et al., 2008). Policies regulating teacher recruitment and students’ access to the most challenging classes can indicate the culture of a school as does the presence or absence of student organizations focused on equity (Nelson et al., 2008).

The Center for Improving School Culture (2005) recommends four steps to schools as they embark on the task of improving cultural responsiveness and equity: assessment and analysis of the current culture, identifying areas needing improvement, continued monitoring and adjusting of practice. Some schools complete equity audits using such tools as the School-Wide Cultural Competence Observation Checklist (SCCOC) as a guide (Nelson et al., 2008). Bustamente and Nelson (2009) recommend reviewing school documents (school improvement plans, achievement data, curriculum documents), administering perception surveys, observing classrooms, hallways, meetings, and social events. They recommend gathering input from all stakeholders and developing a data team to graph data, discuss and interpret data, possibly led by
an expert in this field. Additionally, assessment practices should be examined for possible unreliability resulting from cultural content/construct bias, language barriers or students’ lack of familiarity with testing procedures (Chamberlain, 2005).

**Eliminating deficit thinking in staff.** One of the challenges to school leaders is determining how understandings and actions involving race and privilege factor into educational decisions and climate in their buildings (Evans, 2007). Deficit thinking is a construct founded in the belief that the failure of students results from their personal or cultural deficiencies or characteristics rather than due to ineffective instructional practices or discriminatory school policies. When educators blame parenting and poverty for poor achievement, such rationalizations shift responsibility away from schools and create a major barrier to creating culturally competent environments for students (Dray & Wisnecki, 2011). The flexibility of instruction and high expectations needed to improve student achievement in diverse classrooms do not typically exist within a deficit model of instruction and behavior (Evans, 2007). Instead, this paradigm promotes the lowest of standards for the most needy students by focusing on perceived weaknesses rather than leveraging the strengths of students (Starr, 2011). In regard to students of color, deficit thinking has historically been implicated in the creation of inferior curricula that ultimately trains students for less independence and social empowerment than does the curricula offered to white students (Harris, et al., 2004).

While critical to the transformation process, the shift from deficit thinking to achievement-oriented attitudes and equitable practices can be challenging for school leaders to implement and typically requires ongoing professional development, collaboration, oversight, supervision and support (Johnson & Ullne, 2005; Harris et al., 2004). As such, leaders need to avoid one-shot programs that do not involve an ongoing and comprehensive approach (Boykin &
Noguera, 2011). They must closely monitor the transformation process and use performance data to inform rather than penalize teachers. Leaders must also avoid delegating their leadership power to those without demonstrated commitment or adequate skill to implement the plan and monitor progress. Skrla & Skeuritch (2001) studied five Texas districts attempting to reduce their achievement gaps. In each district, the superintendent was identified as the key person to lead transformational change to address achievement gaps. In each case, the initial impetus to change originated externally as a result of new accountability requirements created by the state of Texas. The five superintendents admitted that each of their districts had been dominated by deficit thinking that legitimized the acceptance of poor performance and academic inequities (Skrla & Skeuritch, 2001). The superintendents in the study admitted their own complicity with this system and need for personal change before beginning the process with their schools. Each began the transformation by first examining his or her own views and biases and by increasing their technical knowledge about teaching and learning. The superintendents described the steps they took to rid themselves and their schools of deficit thinking:

- They provided indisputable evidence in the form of disaggregated data to their staff to show that the system was not serving all students.
- They garnered Board support for this politically difficult issue by placing the justification for these changes on the state accountability system.
- They re-educated themselves and found exemplars for good teaching in schools with similar conditions.
- They reflected on and replaced their own deficit thinking with “anti-deficit orientations” and actively worked to spread this new orientation to the larger school community.
• They celebrated success but continued to set ever-increasing targets for achievement; as the achievement gap closed, they went further to address opportunity imbalances (Skrla & Skeuritch, 2001).

**Promoting cultural responsiveness in the classroom.** Culturally responsive education is characterized by attitudes and practices that promote inclusion and authenticity for all students (Nieto & Bode, 2011). The foundation of any culturally responsive school is the fundamental belief that all children want to learn and are capable of doing so (Brown, 2007). Constructivist theory asserts that learning depends on a student’s ability to make connections to new ideas through the context of his or her own lived experiences and that these connections are created through the social act of dialogue and interaction between teacher and classmates (Freire, 2000). Freire (2000) believed that schools should be spaces in which the language and lived realities of the students comprise the curriculum so that students make meaning of the subject matter in the lived context of their own experiences. He maintained that teachers must know and consider their students’ unique knowledge and backgrounds in their planning and instructional choices.

   Culturally responsive teachers demand excellence from all students. They engage students in critical thinking about social inequities and model responsible behaviors in their interactions and activities (Ladson-Billings, 1995). These teachers learn alongside their students, joining in the community of learners in classroom activities. The pedagogy of culturally competent teachers emphasizes the preservation of cultural differences and group awareness of racism and oppression. It seeks to incorporate differences rather than simply promote tolerance or attempt to homogenize (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Culturally competent teachers incorporate the backgrounds of their students into their students’ daily work through both curricular and instructional choices (Ladson-Billings, 1995). They engage students in curricula and activities
that are personally and socially relevant to their lives. Ladson-Billings (1995) studied the practice of a veteran white teacher who was extremely successful in teaching math to her African American students. The teacher incorporated into her math lessons physical movement and references to students’ family structures to help them engage in relational concepts of fractions. Through her recognition of both the power of physical movement and the importance of family relationships to her students, she approached math instruction in a way that held meaning and effectively engaged all students in the learning process. Research indicates that students in culturally competent classrooms tend to experience higher attendance rates, fewer disciplinary referrals and higher standardized test scores (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Leaders must insure that educators appreciate the importance of a positive teacher-student relationship in promoting achievement of students of color. Research indicates that the key factor in determining teacher success in promoting the achievement of minority students appears to be the quality of the relationships they build with students (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Pantic & Wubbels, 2012). In addition, black and Hispanic students more often than white students attribute their academic achievement to their relationships with their teachers rather than to their own ability (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). Specifically, student-teacher interactions must build self-efficacy and self-regulated learning in students (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). While there is no evidence that the race of a teacher determines his or her effectiveness teaching children of color, teachers’ views and beliefs about race do translate into the experiences they create for their students (Robinson, 2007). Both overt and unintentional behaviors by teachers including the knowledge that they emphasize and their communications convey their underlying beliefs and values to students (Pantic & Wubbels, 2012). The fact that the majority of U.S. teachers come from different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds than their students creates
a challenge to the creation of authentic and nurturing school environments for minority students (Ladson-Billings, 2005). Thus, leaders must act to mitigate the fact that educators tend to be most comfortable instructing students with whom they share a common cultural background (Landsman & Lewis, 2011).

**Building family partnerships.** It is essential that leaders set expectations for staff behavior that reflect an appreciation for students’ cultural backgrounds and garner the support of families in promoting academic success (Rivera-McCutcheon, 2014). Research indicates that, in high-performing, equitable schools, educators view their roles as part of the community and, consequently, view themselves as partners with parents (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). They learn about the backgrounds of their students to avoid misunderstandings or the promotion of stereotypes that can prevent schools from reaching out to families.

Leaders need to insure that staff members are respectful of cultural differences in their students and are aware of the impact of family behaviors as they relate to support for student learning. Ignorance about cultural differences may cause teachers to misinterpret parent behaviors and their support of their children’s education (Walker et al., 2011). Uninformed teachers may fail to recognize supportive behavior and affirm only the kinds of family support that are most familiar to them such as attendance at school conferences or chaperoning of school trips. They may fail to understand that cultural differences, not necessarily a lack of caring, may be the primary reason why some parents do not come to school. For example, in a study of Latino parent involvement in school, parents were found to hold strong cultural beliefs that the school is the primary source of teaching for their children (Walker et al., 2011). The researchers noted that the Latino interpretation of the word “educated” implies a level of politeness and submissiveness; the parents in this study did in fact report that they perceived frequent
communication with the teacher as a sign of disrespect by the family (Walker et al., 2011). The researchers in this study indicated that this cultural belief in many Latino families may explain why less overt gestures of support such as helping with homework and affirming the value of education to their children are sometimes more common than school visitations. Yet, such cultural differences in family behavior may be misinterpreted by the less culturally competent teacher as disinterest or a lack of caring.

**School Transformation Achieved Through Changes in Mission**

Many schools that view social justice as a priority pledge their commitment explicitly in their mission statements (Rivera-McCutcheon, 2014). In a Minnesota study, a school principal who transformed one of St. Paul’s worst performing elementary schools describes the strong relationship he perceived between his leadership actions and the success of his school’s improvement efforts (Sheppard, 2013). His improvement strategy was based in the belief that school leaders must create an organizational environment in which strong instruction can make a difference by laying key groundwork including a clear mission and a culture of respect and high expectations. He emphasizes hiring the right staff and getting rid of “toxic” teachers who are not aligned with the school’s mission and who refuse to use research-based instructional practices. He discusses building constituency by empowering successful and committed staff with leadership roles, gaining faculty and parent trust through communication and collaboration, and spreading a can-do message to all members of the school community. He describes establishing high behavioral expectations for students and staff and maintains the need to supervise instruction closely to insure that the identified transformational practices are enacted with fidelity. He maintains that instructional supports can only be utilized effectively by staff at the classroom level in a carefully constructed environment that is aligned with the school’s core mission and
values (Sheppard, 2013). A study of a successful Maryland principal’s actions indicates a similar theme: achievement gaps can be closed through the presence of a clear mission followed by a “relentless focus on fidelity and quality in implementation” (Boykin & Noguera, 2011).

Leithwood and Jantzi (2005) examined transformational leadership in thirty-two leadership studies. The researchers divided behaviors into categories including those that set direction (establish vision, group goals and high expectations), assist staff members (offer individualized support, intellectual stimulation and model key values/practices) and redesign the organization through new cultures, support structures and productive relationships within the school community. They indicate that, while a fourth category, transactional behaviors (contingent rewards, management by exception, staffing/instruction/monitoring/buffering), appears in some of the leadership literature, it has not proven very impactful. These priorities of action by leaders are consistent with those indicated in Burke and Litwin’s organizational model.

An extensive international study by Robinson (2007), measured the impact on student achievement of five key leadership dimensions in high performing schools: ensuring a positive learning environment, establishing goals & expectations, aligning resources, curriculum planning, development and assessment, and teacher learning & development. It was determined that those leader practices that focused most directly on planning and supervising instruction and facilitating teacher learning had the greatest measurable impact on student achievement. Robinson (2007) also observed that regular leader involvement in classroom supervision, setting expectations for instruction and the use of data to inform decisions were always present in high-performing schools though the effect was greater at the elementary than at the high school level. In these high-performing schools, the principals took on the roles of “leaders of learning” and were called upon for instructional advice by teachers more often than in lower-performing
schools (Robinson, 2007). In addition, Robinson (2007) concluded that goal setting carries more weight when goals are directly embedded in effective teaching and classroom routines. While alignment of resources with mission (coherence) was also seen as important to achievement, the hiring of quality teachers had the most impact within the category of resource alignment (Robinson, 2007). In this study, it was observed that principals in high-performing schools more often vetted and hired their own staff.

Similar findings are corroborated in a study by Timperley (2011) who illustrated that a key way for principals to build trust in staff is by supporting, and even leading, professional development. The principals in Timperley’s study were viewed as especially knowledgeable about teaching and learning by their staff. They communicated an explicit relationship between teacher learning and student learning and examined student data with a focus on achievement rather than on teacher evaluation.

The organizational research of Heifetz and Laurie (1997) has relevance to school leadership and aligns with the organizational research of Burke and Litwin in their discussion of the importance of managing the “rate of change” and maintaining a “healthy level of tension” in employees throughout the process (page 124). Resistance is a likely phenomenon in the transformative process and is often the result of fear of the unknown, feelings of disorientation, embarrassment, discomfort with unfamiliar practices, poor timing, a tendency to default to old habits, lack of appropriate support for change and resentment by staff. Leaders can learn from this research that they need to anticipate and support the discomfort that change may trigger and be sensitive to the sacrifices that some staff may experience as a new equilibrium is established (Mabin, Forgeson & Green, 2001). Thus, managing change effectively requires identifying resistance in its various forms, providing clear direction, allowing staff to take ownership, and
making sure not to accept or reinforce negative behaviors of individuals (Mabin et al., 2001). Leaders must provide a balance of support and constant pressure to implement changes throughout the process to create the desired improvements system-wide.

**Improving Hiring Practices.** School leaders must insure that hiring practices screen prospective employees for values and beliefs that align with the mission of their schools (Rivera-McCutcheon, 2014). While cultural competent pedagogy can be learned, personality orientations or belief systems do impact teachers’ approaches to students and have been found to influence their receptiveness to promoting diversity. For example, teachers who exhibit paternalistic characteristics typically believe that certain groups have superior knowledge over others, tend to exert more control, value adherence to tradition and exhibit less flexibility about social realities. Conversely, liberal-minded teachers tend to be less prescriptive and more likely to promote individuality (Pantic & Wubbels, 2012) While the establishment of a culturally diverse staff can benefit the school community by offering a broad range of experiences and perspectives, the hiring of individuals who possess culturally responsive attitudes and develop close supportive relationships with students appears to be most critical to students’ success (Johnson & Ulne, 2005).

**The Importance of Effective Professional Development.** According to Stanfield (1985), the social sciences emerged after the Civil War to promote capitalism. They were dominated by white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant males who created a structure of power and governance that secured their position in these fields. Furthermore, a disregard of diverse cognitive styles led to the development of widespread assumptions about intelligence as it related to race, gender, ethnicity and class (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Stanfield, 1985). As a result, the hegemony of euro-centrism did and still often does determine the social knowledge that forms
the basis of what is valued in our public schools and higher education institutions. In spite of the pressure by the current standards-based reform movement to define one set of “best practices” that apply to all learners by, educators need to respond to differences in students by planning curriculum and instruction that allow for multiple meanings and appeal to various learning styles (Rivera-McCutcheon, 2014; Blackmore, 2006; Gay, 2002).

However, simply raising awareness about institutional racism and equity is not sufficient as a strategy for enacting organizational change. In fact, teachers are generally critical of approaches that teach theory without offering practical strategies for altering their practices. A study of pre-service teachers enrolled in a cultural sensitivity university course indicated that, while many of the participants developed an understanding of the concepts critical to addressing diversity, they initially left feeling unprepared to change their behaviors citing a lack of practical ideas and skill level (Pollock, et al., 2010). Transformational school leaders must insure that professional development targets learning theory and offers strategies for practical implementation in the classroom so that a mission of equity can be implemented. (Pollock et al., 2010). Leaders must also design training activities that are differentiated to the developmental levels of staff and create the greatest potential for their success (Drago-Severson, 2009).

The research on adult learning combined with principles of CRT has great relevance for leaders responsible for planning professional development in schools. Both emphasize the importance of individual reflection and dialogue in diverse groups as part of an ongoing process of reflection. The constructivist concepts of autonomy in the learning process and the benefits of individual and group reflection are important themes of adult learning theory. Meirzow studied the psychological processes involved in adult learning and suggested that change in an individual’s behavior often occurs when a participatory process of critical reflection following a
“triggering event” acts as a stimulus to viewing one’s self and the world differently (Franz, 2007). In this instructional approach, the learner explores the novel event and dialogues with others to consider multiple interpretations of the experience. Brookfield's constructivist approach is similar in its democratic approach to teaching and learning to counter social injustices, however it focuses less on the internal struggle and more on the importance of peer reflections on commonly held assumptions and the act of building a shared vision of social action (Franz, 2007).

**Reflecting on ‘whiteness as privilege’**. The literature on professional development in the area of cultural competency for educators clearly specifies the need for reflection through exercises in interrogating whiteness (examining the power and privilege bestowed upon white people) through the sharing of narratives (Gay, 2002). However, leaders must understand that the process of attaining such awareness is neither linear nor emotionally or cognitively simple (Howard, 2006; Chamberlain, 2005). It often requires a “casting off” of fundamental beliefs about gender, class and race that may be deeply rooted in educators’ own personal experiences. This process may prove highly uncomfortable and challenging for some participants (Howard, 2006). However, it is especially important for educators to be aware of how their behaviors may create or uphold barriers to achievement in students of color. Robinson’s (2007) research indicates that educators need to embrace three critical facts:

- Privileges based on racial classification do exist.
- Each of us develops unconscious biases that are a result of living in a society in which unequal treatment occurs.
- Successful teaching and learning environments can be created when educators uncover or acknowledge their biases, reflect and create new practices.
According to Dantas (2007), teacher competency programs must include exposure to multicultural education theories, culturally responsive pedagogy, culture as a construct, sociocultural theories on literacy practices, self-reflection and reacting to cognitive dissonance, developing skills to constructively handle disruptions, ways to include families, and learning to connect curricula to learners’ cultural identities. Re-education approaches are founded on the premise that such knowledge is gained through exposure to lived experiences in an authentic context (Gay, 2013). Anders, et al. (2005) studied the process of addressing “white denial” (the practice of being unable to acknowledge one’s own privilege and role in an oppressive structure). They describe the potential for transformation by participating in the experience of “subalternality”, prolonged immersion in unfamiliar communities such as that experienced during study abroad programs. Sharing narratives following these novel experiences allow the individual to reframe lived experiences, identify the unique intersectionality (critical mitigating factors such as gender, race and class on one’s experience of power) and more critically analyze their lived experiences in terms of power and privilege.

Other techniques include the completion of self-narratives and the “retelling” of these stories through a new lens after close contact with a new culture (Mitton-Kükner, Nelson & Desrochers, 2010). Gay (2010) describes success in using poetry and metaphor as alternatives to narrative descriptions or explanatory essays. Such exercises allow teachers to delve into personal reflections on race, culture, and their own ethnicity and promote creativity, freedom of expression and empowerment. She describes the practice of having them write pedagogical “creeds” to be used in their classrooms to align their actions with appropriate support. She also promotes the study of various cultural communicative styles that can result in clashes and misunderstandings when teachers and students misinterpret each other.
Gay (2010) describes professional development activities that include video analysis of teacher practices to identify patterns in pedagogy and examine the messages potentially communicated through their behaviors. She describes the value of analyzing patterns of referencing ethnically and culturally diverse examples in various learning situations and creating a collection of diverse instructional ideas to use as alternatives to traditional, Eurocentric methods. Improvements in class management can be achieved by re-framing resistant behavior. By interpreting misbehavior as a protective response or a protest against injustices in the system, schools can more effectively address underlying systemic issues and work to re-engage students rather than by simply labeling or punishing them (Leistyna, 2001). School leaders need to plan professional development that illustrates how historical practices involving power and privilege influence the current state of schools and, specifically, how these dynamics continue to operate to limit access to groups of students (Blackmore, 2006).

Training in culturally responsive pedagogy must also take place so that teachers have the technical skills to implement the necessary changes. In terms of altering curriculum and instruction for improved achievement by students of color, Boykin and Noguera (2014) describe the need for leaders to take a two-step approach to reducing achievement gaps. The first step involves insuring that all students achieve the basic competencies as measured by standardized testing. The second step involves the development of higher-order ability such as the 21st century skills deemed necessary to successfully integrate into the modern global economic and social environment. Harris, et al. (2004) studied the use of a four-tier rubric designed to help schools analyze the levels of curricular integration of multicultural content and rigor to insure higher order, complex opportunities for all learners. However, school leaders must insure that staff are competent to enact the curricular changes identified through such analysis.
The National Education Association (2005) published a document called the Cultural Abilities Resilience Efforts which includes teacher inventories, pedagogical information, reflective exercises, lesson plans, links to videos and ideas for partnering with communities for teachers to use in addressing the achievement gap. In regard to authentic curriculum and instruction, teachers need to understand and capitalize on differences in students’ “funds of knowledge”, the background knowledge that students carry that helps them to be understood and valued by their own families and communities (Macintyre, Roseberry & Gonzalez, 2001). For example, a student who may not own many books at home may have developed a strong ability to memorize stories or other creative means of capturing knowledge. Meeting students where they are and building upon their previous knowledge is a highly effective way of instructing all students (Dantas, 2009).

Such professional development forms the basis for the broad mission and culture changes that are critical to large-scale transformation. However, this process requires intentional planning and appropriate facilitation such that participants can begin to understand how schools as institutions reflect the inequitable values and beliefs of the larger social order (Singleton & Linton, 2005; Leistyna, 2001). Leaders must incorporate adult learning theory and principles of CRT into their professional development planning and avoid expedient, one-shot programs that simply raise awareness or intellectualize issues of race, power and achievement. Training must lead participants to respect the experiences of others and reflect on how personal experiences of privilege and race have come to shape their lives. By understanding the realities and complexities in their classrooms, faculty can develop a sense of urgency to make change and avoid superficial solutions to addressing institutional racism that fail to reduce achievement gaps (Leistyna, 2001). Leaders must understand that transforming mission and culture in schools
requires an ongoing, collaborative and comprehensive approach that develops urgency, engages staff in serious reflection on values and beliefs and imparts new skills in staff (Boykin & Noguera, 2011).

**Barriers to Success in Transforming Schools**

Schools are rarely transformed without a powerful leader and support team; in the majority of cases, changes in leadership are often required to turn underperforming schools around (Rhim, 2012; Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004) Research indicates that the following conditions can greatly decrease the likelihood of success in improving equity in their schools:

**Inadequate Leader Skill.** Most leadership preparation revolves around management of organizations and rarely addresses skills needed to insure equity in diverse environments (Rivera-McCutcheon, 2014). As a result, many school administrators are insufficiently equipped to embark on transformational efforts towards social justice in their schools (Holme et al., 2014; Rivera-McCutcheon, 2014). A clear understanding of organizational dynamics is critical to the process. For example, without the creation by leadership of a clear mission and a culture of respect and high expectations for learning in the school, achievement gap efforts will likely fail (Sheppard, 2013). In addition, school leaders need technical skills involving the use of achievement data to target and monitor instruction and select effective professional development to transform pedagogy. Group management skills are also critical including the ability to facilitate teamwork, manage conflict and resistance from stakeholders, and provide ongoing instructional supervision and support (Shields, 2010). Finally, as race and achievement continue to be highly political issues, leaders must be prepared to manage the political landscape as they delve into the complexities of eliminating inequity (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Theoharis, 2007).
Leaders need to understand that, particularly in affluent suburban districts, the attitudes and beliefs of significant segments of the school community around race, privilege and ability appear to be at the heart of the problem (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Rivera-McCutcheon, 2014). These include the pervasive fear that focusing efforts on the lowest achieving students will hurt high-achieving students (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). Leadership must make efforts to address such misconceptions and convince stakeholders that raising the achievement of minority students benefits everyone (Ladson-Billings, 1999).

**Lack of Leader Commitment.** Leaders who do not embrace cultural responsiveness themselves may struggle to succeed at addressing issues of equity in their schools. One study suggests that leaders who personally hold a strong commitment to social justice may find it easier to handle the complex work of confronting prejudice more easily (Rivera-McCutcheon, 2014). “Diversity resistance” is a term used to describe employee discomfort with changing organizational demographics that may result in social distancing, discrimination and sabotage (Thomas & Plaut, 2008). To prevent resistance from becoming a barrier to improvement, leaders working to create responsive environments must possess the ability to revamp unconstructive belief systems of staff and reduce negative perceptions about embracing diversity in their schools (Madsen & Maboleka, 2014). However, prior to doing so, many leaders must reflect on and revise their own belief systems in preparation for leading substantive change (Evans, 2007). In a study of three suburban schools that had experienced significant increases in minority enrollment, equity efforts failed due to a lack of reflection on and a perpetuation of deficit thinking by leadership. One of the biggest barriers identified in these schools was “color-blind” behavior by leaders- an overall disregard for the role that race, power and privilege played in their schools (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Evans, 2007). Color-blind educators presuppose that all
students come to the table with equal assets and similar experiences; while many school leaders conceptually agree with the importance of caring, tolerance and inclusion in their buildings, their failure to confront differences in the experiences and needs of children often leads to the use of limited, superficial approaches to equity such as emphasizing multicultural celebrations (Bustamante & Nelson, 2009).

**Underestimating Readiness and the Impact of Change on Staff.** A significant cause of the failure of organizations to change is a lack of understanding by leadership of human systems (Szabla, 2007). When job changes have a significant impact on the professional and personal lives of individuals, it may lead to uncertainty and anxiety. Failure to address these factors is highly correlated with lack of success in making long-term change in organizations (Herold, Fedor, Caldwell & Yiu, 2008). Conversely, efforts to create open dialogue and a more democratic process for learning and decision-making have been shown to be highly successful in promoting sustainable school change (Spicer, 2011; Hargreaves, 2009). Professional learning communities and peer observation of instruction, for example, have been deemed successful strategies in building readiness for change, productive relationships and peer support (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Hoffman, Dahlman & Ziertdt, 2009).

**Delegating leadership to others.** Research indicates that leader confidence in their management skills and their ability to address conflict is critical to their willingness to take on transformative work (Madsen & Mabokela, 2014). In spite of this finding, most school leaders receive minimal diversity training and, thus, are largely unprepared to examine inequities, manage tensions or change systems or practices (Young, Madsen & Young, 2010). A study by Madsen and Maboleka (2014) observed the results of a lack of preparation by a group of white principals to lead social justice changes involving race. Though the administrators viewed
themselves as committed to social justice, their ignorance about how to implement responsive climates led them to abdicate the work to minority teachers in their buildings. This relinquishment of the leadership role in the transformative process prevented widespread change from occurring by preventing the development of cohesiveness, trust and consensus in staff (Madsen & Maboleka, 2014).

Principals impact the allocation of power by insuring or ignoring whose voices are heard and through their decision-making processes (Madsen & Maboleka, 2014). As the balance of diversity shifts, the competition between various stakeholders increases and requires active management (Holme, et al., 2014) Leaders may receive negative feedback from some parents or experience staff disputes over instruction, discipline, changes in longstanding policies and other practices. Isolation of minority teachers may also occur in schools staffed with predominantly white faculty when steps are not taken to insure collaboration (Madsen & Mabokela, 2014). Leaders need to be able to anticipate areas of potential conflict between groups of stakeholders who may vie to restore previous power dynamics or dominate the process; diversity self-efficacy training can help to bolster confidence and help leaders to be better prepared for anticipated challenges of transformation by imparting skills in handling conflict amongst competing constituencies and managing resistant behavior (Young et al., 2010.)

**Fear of reprisal and lack of support.** The majority of substantive organizational initiatives in schools occur as a result of external influences including federal and state mandates or concerns from parent or community groups (Boykin & Noguera, 2014). However, attempts to change power and disturb the status quo, especially in regard to race, can be risky to the careers of administrators (Skrla & Skeuritch, 2001). “Elites” and powerful interest groups sometimes attack leaders attempting to change practices that have been beneficial to them. Yet, in many
cases, principals charged with implementing mandates do not receive enough support from their school boards or superintendents. In one study, the failure of the district’s top leadership to create an organizational plan, clarify roles and responsibilities, define diversity or stay engaged in the process led to a failure to implement changes at the building level (Young, et al., 2010). Without the assurance provided by the backing of top leadership, building leaders are unlikely to risk potential political consequences from dominant groups resulting from implementing transformational plans from (Starr, 2011; Skrla & Skeuritch, 2001).

**Feelings of Isolation.** The emotional aspects of the leadership role can be intense and often result in ambivalent feelings as leaders confront day-to-day struggles and successes (Zembylas, 2010). Positive relationships with parents, students and community members as well as engaging in conversations with empathetic colleagues can help support the emotional resiliency needed by leaders to persist and function effectively while orchestrating social justice work (Zembylas, 2010).

Inter-district collaboration that incorporates action research can also be helpful to leaders and their teams as they work to develop urgency and commit to changing their schools’ practices (Grossman & Ancess, 2004). In 1998, the Regional Minority Network formed to examine and support the work of eleven affluent suburban districts in the New York, Pennsylvania and New Jersey area. Each member district agreed to do action research, collect data and study how the achievement gap manifested itself in its community. The members of each team met regularly to share challenges and lessons learned (Grossman & Ancess, 2004).

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this literature review is to provide an array of research that addresses how school leaders successfully effect transformational change to insure equity in their schools. The
literature clearly indicates that achievement gaps do exist in high-performing schools and are more likely the result of the quality of instruction and the messages students receive in their classrooms than income, culture or ethnicity of students (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). This literature review illustrates how the transformation of inequitable learning environments often requires substantial changes in both systemic and individual practices, the magnitude of which necessitates the authority and oversight of strong school leadership. It also describes a process for re-educating staff to impart the attitudes and skills needed to improve achievement for marginalized students. It explores two theoretical frameworks that can guide leaders in choosing high-leverage practices and designing professional development that takes into account how adults learn and develop cultural competence. It describes how leaders of high-performing suburban schools can be challenged by the dynamics of a shift in the status quo and examines the barriers commonly experienced when attempting a change process. Finally, it offers descriptions of how a group of leaders perceive the rigor of the process and how they maintain their stamina as change agents.
Chapter III: Methodology

Addressing issues of race and equity in schools is a formidable task for even the most experienced of school leaders (Zembylas, 2010). Consequently, levels of leader self-efficacy and commitment to social justice are significant factors in determining whether or not they will take on the challenges of social justice efforts in their schools (Zembylas, 2010). Action research, mentoring and ongoing dialogue about problems of practice with other leaders have proven to be useful in developing urgency and providing moral support to cope with the isolation and stress that can be common in leadership positions (Zembylas, 2010; Grossman & Ancess, 2004). In addition, incorporating case studies into these activities has been found to be an effective method of building the self-efficacy needed by leaders to undertake transformational initiatives (Grossman & Ancess, 2004).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to offer perspectives from the leadership of a high-performing suburban school district that has successfully led a transformation resulting in a reduction of its achievement gap. Its purpose is to provide insight into the thoughts and actions of these individuals through accounts of their experiences as they worked to create a more equitable learning environment for their students. Through interviews and examination of key data, the researcher will explore how they planned for pedagogical change, created effective professional development and managed potential barriers to their initiatives. It is anticipated that this case study will offer practical insights into practices that could be useful to other administrators and school improvement teams planning similar initiatives in their high-performing suburban districts.
The Research Question

This single case study addresses the question:

How is the leadership of a high-performing suburban district experiencing an ongoing process of transformation as it works to eliminate its achievement gap?

Research Paradigm and the Role of the Researcher

Qualitative research methods are appropriate when the researcher wishes to delve deeply into an issue through the perspectives of the participant (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative methodology is inductive; it does not attempt to test a hypothesis but, instead, looks for themes or patterns that emerge as data is collected (Yin, 1994). While it is expected that evidence of the influence of change management theory, adult learning theory and Critical Race Theory (CRT) on equity planning and implementation may emerge through the data, the study is not founded on a specific hypothesis or prediction.

Case study was selected as a qualitative methodology for this research as it is well-suited to the examination of issues from a participant perspective. Though other inductive methods such as ethnography or narrative were initially considered, it was determined that these approaches would offer too narrow a lens for this study which attempts to examine a set of dynamics and actions of a district’s leadership (Creswell, 2013).

Case studies are intended to offer practical learning that occurs when the attributes of a case are recognizable by the reader and deemed useful to the reader’s own context (Merriam, 1998). It lends itself to the practitioner looking for real-world experience. Such studies are situated within bounded systems, or contexts identified as best suited in which to study an issue (Creswell, 2013). This case study's bounded system is a K-12 public school district in a high-performing suburban school district in the Southern U.S. Its student body is comprised of fewer
than forty percent black and Hispanic students. This demographic was intentionally chosen as the setting for the study (versus an urban or rural school community) to expand the practical literature on reducing achievement gaps in this less-studied context. It is anticipated that this research will offer guidance to leaders of schools situated in demographically similar districts.

This study involves semi-structured interviews of eleven school district leaders charged with leading the achievement gap reduction initiatives in this school district. Unlike the larger number of participants required for grounded theory research, the inductive nature of case study research allows for the drawing of data from a smaller sampling of participants (Eisenhardt, 1989). Data was collected through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews that took place over two days in May 2015 and two phone interviews with individuals who were unavailable on the two dates selected. Several follow-up calls were made to verify information and gather updated data on achievement for the 2014-15 school year. This format was chosen over written surveys to allow for direct observation by the researcher and to allow the free flow of thoughts by participants as they relayed their experiences. Interview questions explored how participants experienced certain phenomena and why they made specific decisions - the explanatory nature of such questioning is typical of case study methodology (Easton, 2010). Flexibility is a key advantage of this methodology as it permits the researcher to change direction during the study as needed (Eisenhardt, 1989). If an unexpected pattern or piece of data emerges, the researcher can further explore it, modify the questions and even reconsider the study’s direction based on the emerging data (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1994).

In addition to interviewing participants, case studies also commonly include an examination of other sources of related data such as archived information pertaining to the issue (Eisenhardt, 1989). In this study, supporting documents including brochures describing student
support programs and the district’s school improvement plan were collected to offer additional insights into leadership practices and district dynamics. In addition, the district’s website included demographic statistics as well as detailed information regarding the district’s equity programs.

Finally, the writing style of a case study analysis includes common, richly descriptive language rather than technical terminology to convey the essence of a situation to a broad base of readers (Kenny & Grotelueschen, 1980, as cited by Merriam, 1998). Participant quotes were integrated extensively for greater accuracy and to allow the reader to get a sense of the emotional dimension of their reactions to the interview questions. It is the intention of the researcher to offer practical information that can be easily interpreted by school leaders and school improvement teams. It is expected that this study will add to the literature a concrete example of a successful initiative including some possible best practices for reducing achievement gaps in high-performing suburban school districts.

**Participants and Sampling Strategy**

In selecting cases to be explored, researchers consider their typicality and variation (Gerring, 2007). Case study research generally involves the analysis of fewer than ten cases due to the volume and complexity of detail that must be examined during the interview and analysis processes (Eisenhardt, 1989). In this study, the researcher chose to focus on one district that demonstrated success in addressing its achievement gap. This occurred for two reasons: 1) to limit the interview data and process to a volume that could be reasonably processed in a specific time frame (three months), and 2) due to the scarcity of districts available in the target demographic known to have completed large-scale equity transformations.
**Recruitment of participants.** The study participants include a superintendent, assistant superintendent, an equity director, a building-based leader of student groups, two principals (elementary and high school) and five other leaders who are situated at the central office level of the district. Each participant is in some way responsible for leading school improvement initiatives aimed at reducing achievement gaps in their schools or district-wide. To find this district, the researcher used purposeful, selective sampling in consultation with professional organizations that focus on school improvement as it relates to achievement gap reduction, namely the CT Association of Schools and the Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN).

Participation in such a study involves the commitment of several hours of time to be interviewed. The research of Rubin and Rubin (1985) indicates that the motivation of participants to cooperate may be strongly impacted by the researcher’s ability to communicate both personal interest and the potential value of sharing the potential participant's work with the professional field. Given the enormous responsibilities involved in leading schools, any distraction from their work could be viewed as a sacrifice by these leaders. After an initial telephone call with the Superintendent in which the potential value of sharing his district’s experiences with other leaders through the professional literature was discussed, the Superintendent agreed to allow the district to participate in the case study. Email was used to obtain consent from the Superintendent to study this district. IRB documents were requested and sent to the district to insure official approval of the study by Northeastern University.

Timing proved to be challenging for the district’s involvement since the school year was about to close within the month. The Superintendent initially identified thirteen representative school leaders who might be available to be interviewed. Through mutual discussion, interview
dates were selected. Potential participants were then recruited through an email describing the role of the participant, the purpose and scope of the study. A copy of the consent form that explained the details of the process was attached to the email for their review. Preliminary email consent was obtained from twelve of them. Additionally, written consent was obtained at the time of the interviews. Upon arrival for the interviews, the researcher found that nine of the thirteen scheduled participants attended their interview dates; two of the three missing participants completed interviews by phone within the next month. Thus the study group was comprised of eleven participants in total.

**Data Collection**

The researcher conducted individual, semi-structured interviews with each participant. Nine interviews took place in person and lasted between thirty-five minutes and one hour. The other two interviews took place by phone several weeks later due to the extensive distance between the participants’ and the interviewer’s residences. Semi-structured questions allowed for in-situ exploration and clarification of responses by participants. Notes were taken by the researcher to aid understanding. Interviews focused on the main research questions and included clarifying questions that arose as a result of initial responses (see Appendix A). Clarifying questions were asked of two participants by phone approximately six weeks later; results of testing and other data collected at the end of the school year were provided by the district to the extent possible at the conclusion of the school year, several weeks after the interviews took place. In total, the interview and validation process was completed in six weeks. Each interview was audio-recorded on the researcher’s iPhone and a backup digital recorder. Electronic recordings of the interviews were transcribed by a commercial electronic transcription service.
Data Analysis

According to Eisenhardt (1989), the overall idea of case study is "to become intimately familiar with each case as a stand-alone entity". Thus, tabulation of data does not occur in case study methodology due to its removal of “the characteristic from the context" (Yin, 1978). In case study analysis, the researcher ultimately looks for connections in the data and generates themes. This is done by a coding process in which raw data is repeatedly analyzed for linkages and is then re-organized by ideas (Creswell, 2013). The coding cycle is repeated until clear themes emerge from the data (Saldana, 2013). In this study, transcripts of interviews were analyzed using in vivo coding, or short phrases or words used by the participants (Saldana, 2013). Topics selected prior to analysis of data are referred to as "a priori" (Creswell, 2013). Initially, data was organized by the following a priori topics: Manifestations of resistance, Building constituency, Definitions of the achievement gap, Creating urgency, Leader preparation, Professional development, and Barriers. After the first round of coding, additional themes including Mission and Culture were added as headings. Transcripts were loaded into Nvivo computer software so that queries could be run to help the investigator to further organize data and easily access key information. After this step, themes were finally reorganized to include Importance of Leadership, Establishing Mission/Creating Urgency, Changing Culture, Building Constituency, Increasing Instructional Competence of Staff, Incorporating Equity Efforts into Instruction, Managing Resistance, Potential Barriers, Professional Development, Establishing an Achievement -Focused Approach to Teaching & Learning, Maintaining Continual Focus on Race and Sustaining Efforts.
Validity and Trustworthiness

Since individual recollections and perceptions may not always be accurate, the use of additional documents that provide further corroboration is a common and useful research practice (Creswell, 2013; Eisenhardt, 1989). This practice of triangulation also adds to the volume of data collected and helps to achieve the "saturation" needed to make accurate conclusions based on the data (Eisenhardt, 1989). Supporting resources used in this study included the district website information on achievement and district programs, brochures outlining students support programs (AVID and Blue Ribbon Mentor-Advocate Program) and a hard copy of the district’s school improvement plan. However, these documents are not attached to this paper to maintain the anonymity of the district.

The trustworthiness and validity of a study is further dependent on the researcher's understanding of self as well as steps to insure that data is interpreted accurately. Creswell (2013) refers to this as "substantive validation". Due to the closeness of the researcher to the participants, there is a co-creation of experience which can lead to a risk of skewing the data to align with the researcher's own biases. The main validity concern in this study was potential researcher bias, or personal views that could impact the kinds of questions posed or interpretation of the material. According to Creswell (2013), "researchers have a personal history that situates them as inquirers". As a high school administrator working in a school having similar demographics to the study group and struggling with the issue of achievement gap, this researcher has a vested interest in learning from the study outcomes. Thus, a description of the researcher’s positionality is included in Chapter One of this dissertation. Finally, the interview questions were reviewed by the Principal Investigator and the researcher’s second reader prior to implementation of the study.
Protection of Human Subjects

This study posed minimal risks to the participants. As participants were asked to recall staff and school community reactions to transformation initiatives and included discussions regarding resistance to achievement gap initiatives (personal or political), there was a slight chance of potential emotional discomfort. Participants were informed that they could decline from answering a question if they felt uncomfortable responding. They were also told both verbally and in the Consent Form that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. None of the participants declined to answer any questions.

Maintaining confidentiality is an important aspect of protecting participants who are discussing sensitive matters pertaining to their job sites. Information regarding confidentiality was shared in this study with all participants prior to the interview process through the Consent Form and verbally by the researcher. Participant names and materials that could lead to identification of the district were omitted and titles or roles were referred to only when it would be useful to the reader to understand the perspective from that individual’s unique position in the district.
Chapter IV: Report of Research Findings

This single case study addresses the question: How has the leadership of a high-performing suburban school district experienced an ongoing transformation of its district’s practices to eliminate its achievement gap?

It includes the results of interviews with eleven school leaders of a high-performing suburban school district in the southern U.S. Their district tenure, in one role or another, ranges from one to more than twenty years. Thus, participants present a variety of perspectives on the district’s past and recent history of addressing equity. The responses chronicle the district’s struggles and successes in using a variety of approaches including professional development, revised hiring practices, instructional and curricular initiatives, equity coaching, school climate initiatives, targeted student supports and community involvement in its efforts to place equity at the forefront of its work. Most importantly, the interviews offer from a leadership perspective insight into the perceived effectiveness of past and current practices as well as lessons learned from these experiences.

Providing Context: Characteristics and History of the Participant School District

What made this district of more than a dozen schools especially worthy of study is not the presence of an achievement gap but its relatively long history of active efforts to improve equity for its students of color. According to participants and confirmed by documents, equity work was begun by this district in the late 1990s, long before high-performing districts were held accountable by state and federal laws for making improvements in their sub-group performances. Historically, the district has demonstrated high levels of achievement including a one percent dropout rate; more than ninety percent of its graduates attend two or four-year colleges. At the same time, a disproportionately low number of students of color went on to college following
graduation. The district recognized that these students were often assigned a program of study that was much less rigorous than the one received by their white peers. Gifted programs, honors and Advanced Placement (AP) classes in the district contained virtually no students of color. Though passing their courses in many instances, these students were not making proficiency on state standardized tests. In fact, while the district has been frequently praised for its high SAT scores and for having the state’s highest average standardized achievement scores, scores for its students of color have, at times, ranked below those reported by the state’s poorest districts.

Discipline rates were also disproportionately high.

While the district’s schools were de-segregated in the mid-1960s and its white and black high schools combined, the disparities in opportunity and achievement by students of color versus white students remained. According to the district’s current Superintendent, the district has since become more ethnically and socioeconomically diverse since the 1990s. Most recently, a significant population of Burmese and Karen refugees has settled in the area, adding to the district’s challenge of serving a culturally and socioeconomically diverse population of students. The district website indicates that, in 2014, the student body was reported as 52% White, 11% Black, 15% Hispanic, 15% Asian, 6% Multiracial, 0.40% American Indian and 0.01% Hawaiian Pacific.

The current Superintendent explained that another challenge is the large number of families who move in from other states due to employment opportunities afforded by several, local large universities, some major research facilities and a large medical center. Most of these families are upper middle-class, well-educated professionals who hold high expectations for their children’s education. The transience of these families and their lack of historical reference or community ties have an impact on their support of long-term district initiatives. A further change
in the district’s demographics in the past five years is the significant leap from seven percent to almost 30 percent in the number of students receiving Free and Reduced Lunch. A significant number of these students come from black and Hispanic families as well as Asian refugee families.

The community contains a well-established black community. Many of the local parents and grandparents of color attended the segregated black high school in the town prior to the 1960s and had themselves been subject to inferior instruction, curriculum, facilities and other forms of discrimination. Many of these families have expressed anger and frustration over the past twenty years at the perceived slow pace of improvement for their children in the district’s schools. As recently as 2010, a press conference was held on the district’s campus by the local chapter of the NAACP to demand greater attention to the disparities amongst opportunities for students of color, specifically student enrollment in honors-level and Advanced Placement (AP) courses. In addition, a controversial incident perceived as racially biased by some community members re-ignited the debate and renewed pressure on the district to address what they see as inequity and racism within the district.

**Thematic Analysis of the Data**

The following table indicates the main themes discussed most frequently by the eleven school leaders interviewed for this study. These themes were isolated after repeated analysis of the interview transcripts by the researcher and organized in the table by their relationship to the corresponding theoretical framework.
In this section of the chapter, quotes by the participants provide a vehicle for revealing the perceptions of the school leaders as they relate to these themes. The evidence presented was verified by public documents and data provided by the district’s website, newspaper articles and printed district materials available to the public. Participant quotes emphasize the significant challenges of creating urgency and developing constituency in addressing issues of race, power and opportunity over the past twenty years. They describe the early resistance to professional development and the district’s attempts to disrupt the status quo. Critical considerations regarding professional development are discussed by many of the interviews. The theme of resistance is also figural in the conversations including how it manifested itself and how it might have been mitigated through leadership actions. The value of using disaggregated data to raise consciousness of staff and combat resistance was mentioned numerous times. Participants also
described the importance of providing practical professional development in the application of new strategies in the classroom. The need to plan for sustainability of equity efforts over the long haul was also raised.

**Themes of developing urgency and constituency.** Efforts to address the achievement gap in the district began approximately over twenty years ago when the former Superintendent determined that eliminating the disparity in achievement between its white students and its students of color should be a major priority. A theme that presented itself in the interviews was the turmoil experienced by the school community as the district began to come to grips with its exclusionary practices and lack of opportunity for its students of color. Approximately twenty years ago, a task force was convened and was charged by the former Superintendent with planning this initiative; a community meeting was held in 2002 to discuss the concern publicly. Responses were mixed – some community members of color expressed outrage, claiming that little change had occurred for black children in the district since the desegregation era. Some white community members expressed concern regarding a potential shift in focus and attention off of their children. One respondent who attended this meeting explained:

I think a big ‘aha’ moment was a board meeting in the early 2000's where [during public comment] African Americans went up to the microphone to say ‘We are not going to take this anymore- our children are not learning what we send them to school to learn! They're not achieving at the level that we expect them to achieve and we are not going to take it anymore!’ It was *emotional*. It was *hard* to listen to... you're thinking, ‘how can we respond to this’... I can remember at the buildings we all had to show clips of that board meeting at a faculty meeting and have a conversation about that.
She went on to describe her feelings of shock when the disaggregated data pointed out the significance of the gap:

The one I remember is when we looked at end-of-course tests at the high school, the state and the course tests. I saw the proficiency of the black children in this district was lower than the proficiency of black children in other poor, rural, majority minority districts in the state - that we were doing worse than they were! I was really – ashamed - is the word that comes to mind, that we had that situation here. I came here from a district where it wasn't an abnormal thing to have a student of color be valedictorian. We never had a valedictorian of color in [this district] at the time... I came from a district where students of color won scholarships- but that wasn't happening here. You had to wonder, ‘what's happening?'

As the interviewee described, every school in the district was required to use the videotape of the community meeting as part of their building professional development so that staff would better understand the community’s history of racial tension and inequity. While some equity training took place in the 1990s, intensive district-wide training began in earnest in 2003 when the district decided to hire a nationally-renowned facilitator and use *Courageous Conversations About Race* as the basis for professional development in their schools; all staff members were required to participate in this two-day training on discussing race. Reactions by respondents who were present for the early professional development and follow up activities were mixed in regard to its effectiveness in developing urgency and constituency in their buildings. Some respondents reported the training approach as highly motivating and useful to their understanding of race in
education and expressed positive perceptions of these workshops. One participant described the value of the discussions that occurred as a result of the trainings:

I think that [the conversations] set our district apart from other districts because, other districts, they won't talk about equity. They won't talk about gaps. They don't want to talk about institutionalized racism. They don't really want to tackle what white privilege is all about. This is very different. We really worked hard with leadership. Principals had to come up with an equity vision for their schools...I went to the first equity training in the district... I walked away from it thinking, ‘I've never had an experience like this before’... I really haven't had an experience like that since.

Another respondent remarked on her positive experience of the early trainings:

... I think having training in that [discussing race] helped me to be able to assist my equity team and my teachers to have conversations with students. It's very timely that we're talking about this because there are issues going on [now] within the district. We're going to have these conversations whether we're prepared to or not. I think one thing that has helped us is that we do have those ‘courageous conversations’. I know learning what other people are doing and helping faculty to be able to be honest about their visceral reactions, their biases, their adherence to stereotypes sometimes - we all are guilty of that - and having it be a judgment-free zone, speaking your own truth - realizing that it's a problem solving process.

Some responses indicated a perception that staff resistance was exacerbated by a lack of foresight by administration and insufficient planning in helping staff to handle the controversial information presented to them in early trainings. For example, several respondents believed that they had not been adequately prepared for the emotionally-charged content of the early equity
trainings. Two respondents recounted being taken aback by the workshop’s intensity. Instead, they felt attacked and defensive rather than empowered:

‘This is how it is and it’s your fault.’ That’s how I heard it in my mid-20s…[Name of facilitator] comes on pretty strong. Again, you’re a 25-year-old white girl from [a northern location]...you may as well just have thrown her in the shark tank. It turns a lot of people off...

She went on to describe her own resistance to equity initiatives in the early years: It was also very easy, though, for me as a white woman to just sit back and say ‘this too shall pass’. Then I went to grad school and the approach that was taken in my social justice class was very different than what I had experienced as a professional. I had the opportunity to talk to people from other school districts and other places … and reading the history of education in America- that’s when I really began to see the achievement gap as a social construct that has been in the works for 200 plus years. That’s when I began to feel less personally defensive ... I also became aware of other achievement gaps. We did some work studying Ruby Payne and her work on poverty. That spoke to me too. Again, not taking race off the table but understanding there are other variables and it’s a really, really sticky and messy subject...

Another respondent described feeling overwhelmed by the early trainings:

For me, I carried a lot of guilt... that's part of our training... guilt for white folks. They leave and they're crying, they're upset. They think, ‘Oh, my God! How do I change this?’ It was daunting…

A third respondent recalled the intense controversy caused by the early trainings throughout the district:
It was tough. It was very, very hard for a lot of people. I can remember in the trainings people would get mad and cry. White males especially... we would always have that one really angry white male in there. Over the years, I think people have come to see this as something to face up to, to talk about.

**Themes of professional development:** Increasing cultural competence and addressing overall quality of instruction. Another topic that arose was the lack of practical implementation strategies offered by the early professional development programs. Though participants reported that the discussions raised awareness and underscored the need to conduct conversations about equity in their buildings, professional development offered little direction as to how to make improvements where they were most needed: the classroom. Thus, the need to equip staff with practical skills to implement equity initiatives was a clear theme of the respondents. A principal described the early implementation challenges:

...there were no strategies for how to change. ‘It’s all about awareness’, they said. I think it was a bunch of people doing the very best work they could do with the information and the training they had at the time. Unfortunately, now that I’ve learned and researched and done so much more with this, I think we fell into a very common trap of ‘this group is going to be on high and tell everyone else what they’re doing wrong’...

Another participant shared a similar perspective:

There were a lot of workshops and things to talk about and things to be aware of about understanding white privilege ... What we were missing was, we weren't implementing a lot of things. Obviously working in the schools and being friends with teachers, I think there was a frustration years ago that, ‘okay, we have identified the problem, and identified the issue’, but we really weren't putting things into place to work with the kids.
A third participant talked about the lack of accountability for implementation following the equity trainings:

For me, any professional development that's any good is more than a training event. There's follow-up, there's expectation - you measure learning. You go back and look to see how practices are being implemented in a classroom. That was probably the biggest weakness of our whole equity training…

A follow-up to professional development was the establishment of equity teams in each building. While some respondents reported confusion over their purpose and a lack of skill in implementing them effectively, others found them to be useful in promoting continued conversations about race:

Each building had a [Name of equity team]. The district provided the set of readings for school teams to engage in and school set up their facilitators for small groups. At the time, I was an assistant principal…The [name of equity team] divided the faculty up into smaller groups. We had our own small group conversations about race. We all used [Name of Facilitator]’s conditions and agreements for creating this conversation. That was just a language that we had all over the district. We had common readings. It was a very powerful thing. Every staff member was expected to engage in that conversation.

However, an absence of guidelines for these teams in some buildings sometimes caused divisiveness amongst staff. A principal described why she shut down her equity team until it could be redesigned with a more constructive approach:

I felt at my school that our personal equity team … was really this unhealthy, ‘we hold the equity, we talk at you, we tell you everything you’re doing wrong. We don’t necessarily tell you what to do to fix it’…
This response indicates that a perceived barrier to the effectiveness for some of the early equity teams was a lack of clear objectives and protocols and insufficient facilitator training. It aligns with a recurring theme amongst the participants of the need for appropriate professional development to implement equity initiatives.

**Themes of sustainability and climate.** While extensive equity plans were required of each school in the early years, the plans were often lengthy and complicated to implement. Building leaders reported feeling overwhelmed by the changes they were expected to enact in the early days. The issue of manageability was brought up in regard to unrealistic expectations of the district. A participant commented:

... Each school had to do a massive equity plan, so that might have been a mistake. It was too detailed. I think Doug Reeves and others say if you have more than three or four areas of focus, then you don't have *any* focus. I think we tried to focus on too many things. To be overwhelmed with an ocean of data, how do you pick the one piece that you really want to make sure that you work on? We spent as much time *reporting* on the plan and *planning* the plan than we did *doing* the plan!

On the positive side, a comprehensive mentor-advocate support program was established in 1995 to address long-term needs of students. It matched elementary-aged students of color who were at high risk for school disengagement to mentors. The program promoted the development of academic practices, achievement-oriented attitudes and emotional-social skills needed for success in higher education and employment. Mentoring continued through grade twelve for each student participant and assisted families in navigating educational decisions with the goal of college readiness and attendance at post-secondary institutions. Resources were also put into place to support students of color and their families by connecting them to AVID, a national non-
profit organization that encourages high achievement and provides support to traditionally underrepresented students beginning in middle school (http://www.avid.org/about.ashx, 2015). Both of these programs still exist today and service large numbers of students annually.

In the early years, a central office administrator was placed in charge of the district’s equity work in addition to managing other district responsibilities. In addition to providing training and academic supports for students of color, the district’s policies were revised to address opportunity gaps between children of color and their white peers. One of the participants recalled:

... I was at the building at the time that we were looking at how students were placed in honors and advanced courses and AP courses. So we had to open the door and not make it like ‘There's no way if you've not been in honors before - there's no way you can get into an honors course’, for example. We had to break down some barriers in that regard.

Approximately six years ago, the district also began addressing school climate concerns by phasing in Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS) teams (https://www.pbis.org, 2015). PBIS sets expectations for behavior so that students have clear guidelines for appropriate behavior and adults provide appropriate, predictable outcomes when rules are breached. It encourages positive relationships between students and adults. The district implemented PBIS to address disproportionate discipline between white students and students of color. However, it is now being used additionally to address classroom climate as it relates to teaching and learning. A respondent currently assigned to lead the PBIS implementation commented:

I'm very much included in the Instructional Service Department, so I try to look at ways in which instruction and PBIS go hand in hand. That's been my major role. In the last two years, equity has become much more a piece of that since we have seen just dramatic
drops in discipline referrals across the district. But we still are disproportionate in terms of our kids of color.

**Themes of professional development and support for administrators.** Still, despite significant investments of time and resources to raise awareness, revise unfair policies and develop resources for students of color, minimal gains in achievement were experienced in the first ten years of implementation by the district of its original equity plan. Some staff and community members expressed their ongoing frustration with the lack of results:

... I think the Board was very clear in its expectations...we had some Board members of color at the time who were *never* happy with our progress. Our progress was too little, too slow and we were *pushed*. We were *really* pushed.

In the final years of the former administration, equity coaching was secured for three hours per buildings to assist principals in implementing equity plans in their schools. However, some of the respondents explained that they were unsure as to how to use this resource to improve practice in their buildings. Furthermore, some of the coaches lived in other parts of the country and were not easily accessible to the schools. One participant commented on the lack of inclusion of building principals in the decision-making regarding hiring equity coaches:

...everyone does their very best and makes the best decisions with the information they have, but our equity director, at the time, was not an educator. He said, ‘I’ll give you all 3 hours.’ *Now* what? What does that mean?

Another respondent commented that the equity coaching was helpful in spite of its limitations:

I do think that the *idea* of having these coaches, which I think were set up by the previous equity director, has been very helpful to some people who had coaches that were very responsive or local, and that really helped. For example, if you're not a person of color
and you're talking about racial equity, it can be very difficult just because of a variety of dynamics.

Overall, participants recounted a top-down, disjointed approach to equity and a lack of clear strategies presented to staff during the earlier years of equity work. One respondent summarized the experience:

A person comes out, shares his or her expertise, tells you what to do and then you just go. That’s what equity was…It wasn’t really about ‘what is it that your individual schools’ need’, it was ‘every principal needs to find six hours for staff development this year…go!’ … Everyone was coming to us and saying, ‘We just need to fit this in somewhere in your schedule.’ There was no centralized communication… That was the big picture of all of our PD and all of our different coordinators of different areas. There wasn’t a whole lot of integration. Equity had become at [name of school], this stand-alone. We have these discussions about equity and then the very last question before you leave, your exit ticket would be, ‘what are you going to do in your classroom when you get back as a result of what you learned’. It wasn’t ever tied in…We had these equity stand-alones and then we had these instructional PDs. We never fused them. In our district what we had been told for years and years was ‘isolate race, talk about race, talk about’ … There were no strategies. We were all just going to be uncomfortable and sit in a circle. It was just this very nebulous and strange thing…

The District Revises Its Approach to Addressing its Achievement Gap

The following section describes how the participants experienced the creation and implementation of the current district’s equity plan revised in 2011 under the leadership of the
district’s new Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent. While the plan builds on previous efforts, it is significantly more comprehensive than the plan created by the prior administration.

On the theme of using data effectively to build constituency. When participants were asked to describe the current achievement gap in the district, several of the participants described it in broader terms that encompassed not only academic achievement but the lack of opportunity for students of color. Their insight suggests that they may have developed a greater capacity to interpret data critically through a more complex lens of equity than in the early years. For example, one of the themes raised was the importance of differentiating between academic proficiency and mere growth in students of color. This is important to establishing high expectations for students. One participant described this difference and why growth alone is not sufficient as a district target for students of color:

... I don't think our district is any different than any other one in the state, or even in the nation. If you look at the data, and then look at the achievement data of all of our students, your black and brown students typically are what you would consider your gap. They're the ones that actually fall below...they're not actually performing at the high levels that you want them to. You may see these students experience growth, but you may not actually see them experience growth to the point that they are actually on a proficient level, or even taking it to the next level. In addition to that, there is a lack of minority presence in your honors and AP classes. Again, not just at [Name of school], but in the school district as a whole... you see students that are not only not achieving this but they're not being pushed to be able to actually reach the potential that they need to be ready and successful in those classes...
Other participants described how they view the district’s current disparity from the perspective of disparate participation in rigorous, advanced level classes and access to technology in the home:

...So you have very racially predictable classes…You will not see many minority students in your honors and AP classes because they don't get the feeling that they belong here.

... People say, ‘well, parents can find out their kid's grade on PowerSchool’. Then when you go to a housing development... they probably don't have a laptop. They probably don't have access to the Internet, and so, then, that's inequitable.

An interviewee explained her belief that the achievement gap in the district should be defined using broader terms:

I mean, it’s obvious that there’s an achievement gap between our white kids and our black kids, our white kids and our brown kids…there’s a racial achievement gap. There’s a socioeconomic achievement gap. There’s an achievement gap for kids who have special needs. My feeling is that, the work that we’re doing - we want to isolate race - but we also need to remember that there are other variables on the table that contribute. Historically, in our district, we have not validated that. I believe we are at a point where we are shifting to not remove race from the table but to add back in socioeconomics and some other variables. That’s a difficult shift for us…

The current Superintendent explained how he framed the discussion with the school board as he began to transform the district’s equity plan. He used disaggregated data that indicated that students of color were being overlooked for the district’s most rigorous programs:

...One of the things I said to the school board was I believed they were over-identifying gifted kids: thirty-eight percent gifted. That being, we do have the universities- we have a
high number of [Name of college] professors that live here… I looked at the gifted programs … all white and Asian kids. ‘So basically you’re saying your gifted program is about demographics.’ What I know about gifted kids is giftedness does not know what color your skin is. There should be gifted kids in that program to a much higher extent than there are...That’s when we really got into the conversation about Growth Mindset. I said, ‘We have to have some sort of a belief system that gets us away from thinking that only those kids [white and Asian] can achieve at higher levels...’

**On the themes of focusing on race, providing instructional support and teacher accountability.** A fundamental shift in the focus of equity efforts occurred when the district’s equity efforts were shifted towards improving instruction as a means of addressing inequities. While discussing race and equity continues to be a part of the equity work of the district, the emphasis over the past four years has been on identifying areas of instructional deficit and offering targeted support to staff and students. A participant commented:

> We've been really working on, first of all, establishing a culture of planning, lesson planning specifically, backward design planning, because evidence-based research says that that is the number one factor that helps to address an achievement gap. We've partnered with the [Name of college institute] to help us with, first of all, getting the Common Core implemented appropriately in our district, but also to address the issue of academic rigor.

The new Superintendent immediately hired an Assistant Superintendent for Instructional Services who had a reputation for developing strong curriculum and effective instruction in other high-performing suburban districts. This position was charged with overseeing all academic departments at all levels. The new leadership communicated significant changes in expectations
around instruction. A big cultural change in district expectations was the requirement that teacher implement *intentional* lesson planning and the use of approved district curriculum. The Assistant Superintendent commented on the need to change the culture of isolated teaching that existed when she arrived in the district several years ago:

…Teachers did not plan lessons in [Name of district]... if they *were* planning, it was more day-to-day planning, so, ‘I'm going to do this’... There's no connection to, or not an *intentional* planned connection with, what they were doing. There was an inconsistency across the schools in terms of what was happening... teachers were working in silos... I know that, just bottom line, you need to have a *culture* of lesson planning. I knew that they needed a clear, coherent kind of curriculum across schools.

A lack of rigor accompanied the lack of planning in regard to instruction and curriculum in both non-honors and AP/honors courses at the high schools:

...That was another big issue. You had a lot of coverage… a lack of rigor in classrooms in terms of what teachers were asking students to do, and so then a lack of high expectations for those who are not in the AP and honors classes. And those who are in honors classes, they still didn't have high-level rigorous work...or there was not any appropriate scaffolding to help support learning... a lot of just making assumptions of the learner.

The Assistant Superintendent explained:

...the equity piece comes in where there is low teacher efficacy for children of color. There is not *expecting* them to do well…giving them very watered-down, diluted work and having low-quality work because we don't expect very much of them. That's for the children of color, and when you think about children who can do well ... when you think of those who are not coming in with any reading issues and are *still* doing below grade
level expectations … parents were constantly saying ‘my kid is bored, my kid is gifted. They don't belong here...they need to be in a gifted class because they're zipping through the work that's being assigned to them’…you're giving them below grade-level assignments to begin with.

The new Superintendent also introduced the concept of a growth mindset that is based on the idea that all students can learn regardless of race or socioeconomic challenges. The importance of this cultural shift in the staff’s teaching and learning paradigm is a theme that is weaved throughout participants’ discussions of their current work. The growth mindset derives from the work of Dweck (2007) who identified student effort and persistence as well as quality instruction and support as the keys to achievement for students of color. The Superintendent explained his reasoning behind introducing these changes:

What we’ve found is that, over time, the gap hasn’t closed and it hasn’t widened- until recently. We’re starting to see some results because we found that we had to be more intentional about our actions. It changed our district focus to try to get the work down to the classroom level. A lot of work was being done around conversations with adults and understanding race and other issues that go along with race, but we didn’t see in our classrooms that a lot of the kinds of things you can do to close the gap were taking place at the level we needed it to.

On the themes of developing leadership capacity and accountability systems. As a result of the data collected from instructional observations, extensive professional development was implemented for staff several years ago. A private organization was contracted to provide training in writing instruction and lesson design. In addition, professional development in research-based instructional techniques led by [Name of a college institute] was undertaken.
Teachers were trained in backwards-design planning using Understanding By Design (UBD) to assist them in developing cohesive units of instruction based in common curriculum (Authentic Education, 2015). A set of skilled teacher trainers was developed in each building to help their colleagues to implement these instructional improvements. Principals were also trained in the district’s new expectations for lesson design and were required to create implementation plans to build staff skills and insure their use of high-yield instructional strategies. Learning walks, data teams and other activities were instituted to provide feedback and accountability. A participant described how learning walks have become an integral part of the building culture to insure that high-yield instructional practices are occurring in classrooms:

… the school chooses the focus of what we're going to observe, and we use the evidence-based reasoning pool to make statements about what we've observed…what we're wondering about… There are walkers who are part of the process that go into the classroom. We observe for ten minutes, we come out, do five minutes of debriefing, then go to another classroom. We take notes about what we saw, and then we have a conversation about the learning walk ... and provide the school with feedback based on what the school asked us to observe.

Another participant credited the implementation learning walks into their practice as a particularly useful form of ongoing professional development for staff:

… I think that's something we're getting better at…Professional development gets so spread out and everybody is doing what they call PD, but PD just might be a thirty-minute information session. That's not really professional learning for me. That's just... you got some information and you take it back. ‘What do you implement that makes an impact on students?’ For me, that's what professional learning is...
Other trainings presented by the [Name of institute] are targeted at improving teachers’ abilities to conduct classroom conversations that develop critical thinking and reasoning skills, align with Common Core and better prepare students for the rigors of college-level work. In addition to addressing instruction, district curriculum was created and aligned with the Common Core. A respondent commented on the positive outcomes of the district’s professional development and its importance to reducing the achievement gap:

We're trying to incorporate all of those things to really beef up the instructional practices and the instruction period that is going on within the district. The instruction, the execution of the instruction, the instructional planning, the PLC meeting, all of those things should really create a culture of learning in the district, and that is collegial and that everyone is basically on the same page doing the same thing, and that, in essence - when you can talk about UBD - we're talking about teachers using the same [instructional] units so that way you can really have enriching conversations about the instruction, the data that comes out of those assessments, so that you can really start to have conversations about your gap students. Because your gap students don't necessarily have to be students of color, they typically tend to be - but if you are really teaching and really analyzing data, you're going to be looking at all of your students because you're trying to accelerate students, and you're also trying to remediate students at the same time...when we're talking about doing racial equity work or doing equity work in the district, we're going to start instructionally first, and then once you have that instruction, that's when you can start having conversations about ‘how do we then put practices process in place to make sure that students are actually seeing themselves in those [instructional] units’...
Another participant explained:

We do observations… I always love to see where the teacher has been explicit with considering issues of race where opportunities for the teacher to insert conversations that break down stereotypes… Is the teacher taking the opportunity to infuse different view points and different materials into the study… we monitor it and we talk about it… we ask them to present and share and we try to highlight those things that people are always doing … then we ask for feedback. ‘Where do you guys need help? What issues are you having?’ As a result of that work, quite a few of our teachers explicitly put it on their professional development plans.

On the theme of building sustainability. As professional can be costly and time-consuming, a principal described how the current teacher choice model and the integration of technology into her school’s professional development has increased their capacity to provide ongoing professional development in an economical, efficient manner:

Last year, I did something that I think has probably been most effective and that I hope to improve on this year… we started doing this thing called A-Camp where the people have choice… there are some basic competencies that you're going to have to have. During the course of the year or at the beginning of the year you must attend these things. Then there are other items that we will offer that will enhance your ability to be equitable in your practice or help you to be a better teacher or help you write better assessments or help you understand our safety plan. Then there will be a menu of items you could choose from… and equity was one of them… we flip some stuff too. We have people online. I will send things to people to read and do … I use Screencast-O-Matic a little bit…
This principal also described optional lunchtime professional development opportunities and PLCs involving delayed openings. These sessions are split between building and district needs. Teachers may also attend ‘lunch and learns’ to receive shorter, targeted professional development.

In addition to informal, more ongoing professional development based in teacher choice, formalized, mandatory professional development still exists in the district when needed. A participant explained:

… We do pull people off the line, hire a sub, and we train them. We give them practice work to do with their PLC. We provide a coach and they come back and they do some more learning. I've never seen anything really work other than that kind of model. That's what we go for. We've had summer institutes but the thing about summer institutes is that they're voluntary.

To insure that equity remains in the forefront of their work, the district created a new position, Director of Equity, a year ago and placed the position under the Department of Instructional Services. While equity work had formerly been an add-on to a central office administrator’s job description and was perceived as a separate entity from instruction, the district’s academic support programs and mentoring are now within the purview of the new Director of Equity. Recently, this individual created an Equity Task Force to engage a variety of stakeholders in the district’s equity planning. The Director of Equity described the rationale behind involving representatives from all areas of the school community in the Equity Task Force:

... it is a group decision-making process that is not just coming from me...I have a social worker, I have counselors, I have assistant principals, principals, and some central office
folks...I actually have two community people that I meet with on a regular basis; they're members of various advocacy groups that are out there in the community. I've also pulled two of those individuals into this as well so, that way, we are actually crafting a district equity plan ... I've done that in a way to make it... something that the district wants to do...

The need for the district to own its equity plan and to build capacity to continue the plan was discussed:

...if I decided tomorrow to leave the district, I want the work to be able to stay and move on. I don't want it to be such that everything leaves with me... I'm trying to empower. I'm trying to basically build a culture of leaders and build capacity from within, so that way, there's no need to contract out with anyone...

**On the theme of sustaining ongoing discussions about race between staff.** The district seeks ways to continue ongoing discussions regarding issues of equity and institutional racism. For example, all new employees receive equity training and equity workshops are offered to all staff throughout the year to promote the skills and information needed to have these conversations. A new institutional racism training has replaced the old training program and appears to be well-received by staff. A black participant shared her perceptions of its impact on staff and hopes that more frequent discussion will occur in the district:

... I think we are shifting. I think we are creating warriors, people that will stand up and who care - who want to be agents for change and say, ‘okay, this is a little bit uncomfortable, but that's okay...’ I think people need validation... What I love about it [the training program] is there is a white caucus and there is a black caucus. Then we come together and then we talk, because white people need to talk about their stuff and
black people need to talk about their stuff, and then you can come together and talk about stuff, but I wish we would do more of that in this district...

A white participant described how this equity workshop helped her to become aware of how her personal biases have been influenced by distorted media images and helped her get rid of some of the guilt left by the earlier training:

... I think the biggest thing for me is that I went through a training in December from the [Name of institute]. What it helped me do was to think a little bit about how implicit bias plays a role…Our history has set us up for this situation. Where we look at TV… we see a lot of the crime that's being committed is by African Americans. We start to compartmentalize in our brains to say…when that child walks in, we put them in that scenario. We can't help that. We have to fight that, but that's happening in our brain…it's been better for me. This training talks about how, historically…the things we have put in place over time have caused blacks to be in more poverty and be in situations where they're not equal in terms of the type of opportunities. When I started to see that historically, I got to get rid of a little bit of the guilt because I didn't have a lot of control over that. I didn't even grow up in the South...

Consistent with Critical Race Theory, having staff of color share their experiences with white participants helps to create a greater understanding of institutional racism and its impact. The Director of Equity commented on the importance of shared narratives to understanding white privilege:

...so if you are hearing it from a white male, it's almost like you're still reading an article. Even though you're reading it and you're getting it, you can't actually reach out and touch it, but then when you’re seeing someone in front of you that lives it every single day that is then talking to you about it - then it becomes something totally different because you
actually have to face it… A white male can still make you feel okay in your whiteness and not make you feel uncomfortable talking about race, but a black male coming in and talking about race is something totally different because you have to then face it...you have to face it.

He added that involving the target population in problem solving is critical as well:

So when you're having conversations about black and brown students - what black and brown students need…or what may keep black and brown parents out of schools… what they may be apprehensive about… How can you have that conversation honestly unless you have that population represented at the table? You just can't. It just doesn't make any sense.

**On the theme of building constituency.** The Superintendent explained how the new paradigm is helping students to change their own beliefs about themselves and their potential to achieve:

…It [Growth Mindset] was uniformly accepted throughout the district, parents, school board… the notion that intelligence is not stagnant, that all kids can learn at much higher levels.... that IQ is an American phenomenon … a measure at a point in time and that number can change... that with effort and the right kind of instruction all kids can grow at higher levels. That’s something we’ve been promoting throughout the district. We’re doing work with students, so they understand what a Growth Mindset is, especially our minority students, so that they understand that they need to believe in themselves and their abilities and teachers need to believe that all students can learn at higher levels...

In building constituency, the district also included incorporated the perspectives and voices of minority students into the district’s instructional initiatives. [Name of program] was created in
following a PD based on the research of Reeves (2004) who identified amongst other things specific high-yield instructional techniques associated with an increase in achievement in schools comprised of low-income, minority schools. A group of students of color in the district were asked to review a list of research-based instructional practices linked to increasing achievement and identify the top six that they felt made a positive difference in their own educational experiences. The six practices they identified include Visibility (feeling acknowledged and valued in the classroom), Proximity (the teacher physically stays close to students in the classroom), Connecting to Your Lives (making links between new learning and students’ lives), Cultural Connections, Addressing Race, and Connections to Students’ Future Selves. These practices have formed the basis for professional development in the district in terms of training teachers to provide culturally competent instruction to students of color.

Involving the community in the district’s decision-making has been an important way to engage cooperation and support for resources as well as prevent the resistance that can serve as a barrier to the district’s efforts to reduce its achievement gap. One participant who had been in the district in the early years of equity work pointed to insufficient communication with the school community as one reason why the district’s equity work was not as effective in the early years:

...I just wish we could have had a broader conversation with the community. I know our town has a human relations commission. I wish we had found more institutional allies across [Name of town] and [Name] to be in this with us. And maybe the faith community… things like that. We reached out to the faith community and the faith community reached out to us but I don't think we ever really got the partnership right. That's something I would change...
In the past four years, the district has actively recruited the input of staff, parents, students and large numbers of community members and local educational resources in creating a five-year action plan. In 2015, the district hosted an invitation-only community event in which several hundred representatives from the greater school community people gathered to discuss education and prioritize the goals of the school district. The Superintendent explained how the school community collectively created a common language and a single vision for improvement:

...we initiated a long range planning initiative where there were dozens and dozens of community conversations. There were meetings at every school in the district, really looking at what we do well and what we’re proud of as a district and then what kinds of things that needed attention. We brought all of this information from these dialogues to a large gathering of about 270 individuals that we call [Name of project]. Our hope was from that was to walk away with some common understandings about what should be the items that are placed of highest value as we create our long range plan.

Two participants described the importance of keeping discussions about race at the forefront of school community discussions to dispel fears that equity work will detract from the experiences of high-achieving students:

... It needs to be a message pervasively, constantly, *constantly* to the community, ‘Yes, we're doing well but we have lot of work to do’…Engage people, pull them in to say ‘we have a group of students that are not performing like our white students. How can we change that”? It's twofold. It's getting the community to understand that there is a real problem. It's engaging the community of color to make sure their voices are being heard … I think our Superintendent does an amazing job of that.
The second respondent commented on misconceptions equity efforts will negatively impact gifted students:

People in the gifted program think when you focus more on equity and race, you forget about the gifted program. No one really can grasp the concept that when you raise kids that are lacking, you raise all kids. You are not leaving these kids at the same level, that everybody's growing... you know, that's how you close the gap, really. I would say race is at the forefront of everything... that your professional training should be extended to everybody...not just administrators, principals, APs, but secretaries, custodians, bus ... everybody should be talking the same language. Because think about it: if a kid gets on a school bus, then they see the bus driver the first time in the morning. They go to the cafeteria and then they go to the classroom... everybody should be talking the same language...

A principal explained the messages they use to combat parents’ misperceptions about equity work:

Often times you hear parents say that ‘everything is for the poor kids’ or the kids who are not doing well. Summer school opportunities and those types of things, resources- they tend to think and talk about our resources that go to students who are outside of their immediate families. I have had to answer those types of questions and I just keep focused on our work … you have to look at it like a ladder … you're moving everybody. It's like going up rungs of the ladder. If you move the students who are performing at the lowest level, what you're actually doing is pushing the rigor for everyone. Now, it's harder to move once the students are at a certain level but there are still ways for them to grow...

In addition to communicating with members of the school community, the district has ongoing
discussions with the local NAACP chapter, the Chamber of Commerce and the local universities to develop support for their efforts. They are planning to collaborate on professional development with local technical colleges in the future.

**On the theme of sustainability through connections with the greater professional community.** Aside from consulting with a local group of superintendents, the district has made valuable connections by maintaining its membership in a national professional equity organization for many years. This organization brings together superintendents of high-performing suburban districts throughout the country to discuss and share ideas regularly on how to improve the performances of their students of color. The network also offers a student component Consequently, the district assembled its own student group focused on encouraging students of color to enroll in rigorous courses. Students attend national conferences, create a district plan and are required to report the groups’ equity activities to the district’s Board of Education annually. A study participant who leads this student group in the district explained:

... Our focus of course is the achievement gap. Last year, students decided that students of color when they transition to high school didn't have the wealth or the resources of how to really be successful... You have counselors that make recommendations, but for example, we had an African-American male that was high performing in middle school and no one thought to encourage him to take honor classes. If you have your peers that can talk with you at an after-school program or [Name of academic support program] class, and say ‘look, if you are doing well in these classes, you should consider going into an honors class’. A lot of times, students of color have a perception that honors or AP classes are so hard or they are so much work. And, for whatever reason, they are put off by that. One of our action plans after that year ... That was a couple of years ago ... Was
to go around to middle school after-school programs and talk to students of color about schools, talk about the benefit of getting involved in [Names of student groups], extracurricular activities, not just focusing on sports, but the value of being actively involved and engaged in clubs and activities outside of sports.

Through this professional connection, the district also became involved in a large research study that is exploring ways to support capable students of color who have never been identified for or enrolled in high level classes to be successful in these courses:

...they’ve created several identifiers for kids who have potential to do well in upper level classes. We take a look at all of our underserved kids, kids who have never been in an honors or an AP level class…we look at test scores, we look at grades and other indicators. There are five indicators…There must be something there, some potential…We take a look at that and identify kids who have not been enrolled in upper level classes…Even within the two high schools that got involved this year there’s a significant difference… besides just putting the kids into AP, they gave them a seminar class that went right along with it so that there’s a teacher that works with them an extra period with regards to what’s going in in their AP level class. Their teachers in the AP classes will oftentimes come into this seminar and work with the kids. What we found is, of the seventeen kids that initially were enrolled… I think fifteen or sixteen are still in and maintaining a C average. At (Name of the control group school), of the eighteen students they had, only two students are left.

The district continues to offer two longstanding community-supported programs to promote confidence, leadership and high academic expectations in students of color. The staff leader of one the high school programs explained the holistic, strength-based orientation of its program:
Our program is a strength-based program, so we don't identify the neediest kids in the district, but kids that are just in between. So that you know with some support they can achieve their potential...they could go either way - kids that are just on the fence.

Students are referred to our program by social workers, but also a teacher or a parent can make a referral to the social worker to nominate their child to be in the program. And, since it’s strength-based, we look for ways that we can help kids just reach their full potential. It's holistic. We look at the emotional, the social, the academic, and the physical. It's part of our mission of what we want to do in terms of helping a student.

Students stay in our program through middle school and high school and I work with high school students. Once students get to middle school, we have realized that there are some things that they go through around racial identity, so we offer a summer camp and a year-long program for them called [Name of program]. That's just around beginning to explore your identity. We have a lot of students that are not from here... a lot of Hispanic students. Even for African-American students, just about honoring your culture and naming that and it being okay.

A participant explained how the mentoring program addresses student leadership as a means of building college readiness and builds capacity amongst youth to support each other through civic activities and activities designed to develop student voice:

...we focus more on servant leadership and just leadership overall, and really helping students get to college. A lot of our students are still first generation going to college, so that's a big focus of what we do, not only for students, but for parents as well because they don't understand the process. They don't understand about FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid), so really being intentional with that and providing tutoring in SAT. And lately, really pushing
students of color to enroll in more AP and honor classes.

The director of the program explained that it has expanded to offer a summer camp that develops leadership skills in minority students:

...initially it started out as a club that was designed to help students gain some leadership skills because students of color weren't participating in like debate or French club or really student government. Many years ago, they felt that if students gained some leadership skills, they would feel more comfortable seeking roles in those clubs and student government.

The respondent described how they work with students of color to build confidence to step out and share their voices:

Student government is pretty much all Caucasian. It might be all Caucasian male. Trying to teach kids that they have value, and more often, when we challenge them, they say, ‘Well, no one will vote for me,’ so how to get past that to say that ‘you have a lot to offer. You need to be represented. There needs to be diversity. There needs to be different perspectives’...really encouraging kids to say, ‘you know, you are absolutely right. I can make a difference. I am willing to do that’.

An additional academic support program also continues to provide support and encouragement to students of color to enroll in the most rigorous courses. Following an application process, participants in grades six through eleven are required to sign a contract and strive towards college acceptance. They must maintain a 2.5 GPA throughout enrollment in the program. Parents are required to actively promote their students’ achievement and attend program meetings. Students enrolled in honor and advanced classes attend a companion support class that reinforces attitudes, skills and content needed to be successful in these high level classes. The program continues to serve the district. According to the Director of Equity,
hundreds of students in the district participate in this program annually. A parent university and a large volunteer mentoring/tutoring program are also available.

To continue to build capacity amongst principals to address equity issues, the district has built upon and extended the equity coaching model that was begun by the previous administration. One principal wrote a grant to continue the services of her building’s equity coach. A native of the area, this coach is a community member who lived locally since the desegregation era. They have maintained a working relationship for several years. The principal began using the coach in conversations with staff:

She’ll come and she’ll meet with us. We’ll do some chatting and some preplanning. Then we’ll have our equity team meeting and then we’ll debrief that...She’s at that place in her career where she can spend time with us. I hope to continue this as long as it’s mutually agreeable. She’s been very helpful because again I bring my perspective but she’s done this work for so long that she can very often help me anticipate the questions that will be ask or specific language when I do hear things if I’m not sure. I think a lot of times institutional racism at our school happens simply because people don’t know how to respond to something that they’ve heard or to a conversation that people are having. She has helped me learn language that is not argumentative and finger pointing but just helps me ask people questions that would allow them to perhaps reflect, as opposed to just pointing a finger and saying, ‘Wow, what you just said there is really racist’.

... One of the things we have been working on is, when you hear somebody say something like, ‘Well, I don’t see color.’ How do you respond to that? My angry response would be like, ‘What do you mean, you don’t see color? How do you not see color? Of course you do. This person is black’. Instead I just say, ‘Well, talk to me more about that. You don’t see color.
Have you ever thought that people don’t want you to not see color?’ She’ll help with that language of asking these reflective questions like, ‘Well, do you think people don’t want you to see color?’ Really probing further as opposed to being confrontational - and that’s been really helpful.

The coach also helped the school to create a more focused set of equity goals to work on rather than the large, unmanageable plan that had been required by the previous administration. The participant described her coach’s response to the school’s previous equity plan:

‘This is huge... We need to narrow some things down. Why don’t we just write some equity goals? Why doesn’t that become our work?’ …For two years now, as a school, we have come up with four equity goals. Everything that we are doing falls into one of those goals. We are very deliberate to work it out, referencing our goals, talking about the action items, saying ‘we’re having this professional development and we’re not specifically going to talk about race but while we’re learning today, I want you to think about the different kids in your classroom and how they may each respond to this strategy’ or this strategy or this activity or whatever it is. She has really helped our staff.

Our staff is more willing, I think, to hear from her that equity should be embedded throughout and that equity is everything that we’re doing, as opposed to this stand-alone.

The principal reported that her leadership skills grew as a result of her professional relationship with her equity coach:

My history is coming from a place of defensiveness now to be in a place where I’m much more confident that I know what I’m talking about, that if I misspeak (because I do...this isn’t a natural discussion for me) that I can very quickly recover from that with, ‘Oh my
gosh, I can’t believe I just said that’ or ‘wow, I hadn’t thought about that perspective’. I feel like the level of trust is a little higher.

Another participant in a different building commented on how her building’s equity coach was helpful in improving rigor in the classroom:

...our equity coach, actually, has worked more closely with leadership on the rigor, on having the conversations, on building the PD, on ‘what are you thinking, what are you feeling, what are you seeing’, on how do you prepare your staff. It has been helpful in that sense. It's been another person - an impartial person - who has trained in this work, who can just talk you through problems, issues, direction...wherever you want to go.

In-district instructional coaches are also considered a critical component of the new administration’s sustainability model. Math and literacy coaches exist at both primary and secondary levels and additional interventionists are provided by Human Resources to offer support to struggling teachers. A participant explained:

... Coaching is our go-to model for the professional learning…you have someone modeling for you, then someone observing you, and then someone teaching with you. So that's our model for professional learning…what we've learned is that it has to be very interactive.

The Superintendent described the value of the coaching approach and its key role in sustaining change over time:

...Part of our problem is that we don’t have the internal capacity to sustain good work and then, because we rely often times on outside consultants; we can’t keep paying that cost. Eventually that goes away. In this district we have 150 new people coming in every year. They weren’t trained and there’s no system to support that. These coaches go through
significant training to work with staff … especially with the Common Core and the kind of instruction that’s required - really with an emphasis on how we're reaching all the kids in our classrooms. That’s been, I think, beneficial because the training has been with teachers…we’re moving to the trainer model so that we have the capacity to sustain this effort.

Participants Emphasize Some Key Findings From Their Work

When participants were directly asked for key recommendations that they might share with school leaders embarking on equity efforts, they made suggestions regarding managing resistance, addressing the school culture, hiring the right people, and planning for long-term sustainability. These recommendations are consistent with the themes that surfaced earlier in this chapter:

Managing resistance to change through accountability. Administrators in this district have had to learn how to effectively manage opposition to change. The Assistant Superintendent commented on the importance of holding all staff accountable for data and implementation of effective pedagogy as a means of managing resistance at the administrative and teacher levels:

We definitely have experienced resistance, and the only way that you can address it is through accountability… You have conversations with principals about how things are going in your school... You have to have an accountability piece. We have had resistance, but now we're looking at a skills and knowledge-based kind of model where we can get additional money for implementing appropriately, so we tie it into everything that we do. But how do you deal with resistance? It reflects in the evaluation. We've talked to principals about doing that with teachers who are not moving the work, and we've talked to principals in terms of their responsibility about moving the work. And it's not perfect. I don't say that like that's the end of the story - that's
all pie in the sky. I mean, it's constant work on it. It's constant conversations about expectations and accountability at the district. We have learning walks as a district, and we've learned from the Institute for Learning. We do our district learning walks, and we visit classrooms, and we look and we see that it doesn't look like anything is happening here. No principal wants to be on the spot even in front of their colleagues, not just central office, to see that nothing is moving in your school.

A participant commented on staying problem-focused when confronting resistance:

The resistance comes of course as ‘logic’ and ‘practicality’ and even ‘facts’: ‘Well, that all sounds well and good but the truth of the matter is...They can't do this and how am I supposed to get them to...’ The pushback will come in the form of focusing on the negatives. And as the leader, you always have to keep things in context and you always have to try to push people towards the problem solving. I mean you don't have to say to someone who's pushing back, ‘I know you just don't want to do this because you really have some implicit bias and you don't think that black kids are as smart as other kids no matter what you do, or, ‘you don't think poor kids are as smart as other kids no matter what we do....’ I'm constantly trying to keep people focused on positive problem solving and not focusing on our current situation. You have to know your current situation but don't focus on it and be willing to take a chance.

She described how she encourages staff to see the importance of focusing on the achievement gap:

...I have this thing I share with my faculty – it’s called ‘staying sober’...it's all about what happens to students who don't get a good high school education or don't graduate from high school at all. It tells in every way how lives are negatively impacted, including
shortened. Students who don't get their high school diploma typically tend to die ten years sooner than high school graduates. Of course, that could be related to access to health care and ability to purchase more nourishing meals and a host of reasons. But, if there is any one thing, that is the thing - I went, ‘Wow, kids die if they don't learn’!

Another participant described how to recognize resistance. She remarked on its subtlety and how it often takes the form of blaming students for their lack of achievement:

It wouldn't happen out in the open where somebody's like, ‘I don't think that this is important.’ That's never going to happen. In the subtle ways it would show up. In ways like, ‘I think I'm doing all that I can do. I am doing the best that I can do.’ It comes out in, ‘these kids are just challenging’...that kind of thing.

Several interviewees commented on witnessing occasional staff resistance to equity training, particularly by white male staff. One participant expressed disappointment that some colleagues simply comply with required equity training (REI), viewing it as a one-time event rather than a process of ongoing introspection and growth:

...the way the workshop works is you go to the initial workshop and then after that, you become part of the organization. You can go back to learn more. It's interesting that they never go back. They are like, ‘We got the training; we understand.’ They never go back to get more. Race, equity work takes time. It's continuous. We go all the time, every time. We might pop in for half a day, because maybe you missed something or you are growing and you are evolving and there is more that you need...

The respondent continued:

Sometimes I'm encouraged by the direction we're moving, but then I'm discouraged because people are afraid to talk about race. It's very uncomfortable and I experienced
that this week...we just had an incident- I don't know if you heard about it? A guy asked, ‘Well, what happened? What's being done?’ I was in a meeting with upper-level district personnel and they just got quiet. They were white males. I could tell that they were getting very uncomfortable about that. People need to understand that race is what it is, but if we don't begin to have a conversation, even for them to have said, ‘that makes me feel uncomfortable’ or whatever, then you can't make any progress because people, they have their own values, their own ideas, and there's nothing wrong with that, but maybe we can shift some things. You can't shift if people don't have a conversation.

**Improving school climate.** Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) has been instituted in all of the district’s schools to improve staff and student relations, address inequitable disciplinary practices and better support instruction; sixteen of the schools in the district have been recognized by the state for their high implementation levels. A new Code of Conduct for the district will be created shortly with student input that will set consistent and appropriate behavioral expectations for all of the students and staff.

A participant commented on how the equity training combined with PBIS works to impact learning in the classroom:

It kind of freed me a little bit. It also has changed my conversation with adults. I use a lot more of the type of things saying, ‘Just look at your data and see’. That's where data is so important. ‘Do you feel like you are teaching reading to this African American student as much as you are to the white quiet student who's not making trouble? Monitor how often you're interacting with them to teach something.’ We've done some of those things with our behavior kids. We've even said, ‘Let's not count how many times he's off task, let's count how many times you've interacted with him in a positive way to teach something to
him.’ It's been pretty powerful when they start to say, ‘Yeah, because of his behavior, I stay away. I should be over there more. I should actually be working with him more’.

The importance of equity-focused hiring practices. Currently, the proportion of the district’s black staff approximates the percent of black students in the student population. A participant from Human Resources explained the importance of recruiting minority teachers and of having recruitment practices designed to find individuals whose philosophies and practices align with the district’s vision and goals:

There are two major focus areas for me. I think the number one goal for me is to have a consistent selection process that is very high quality. That seeks to look for those specific things. We have worked very hard for the past three years because schools do their own individual selections here... there tends to be a lack of consistency. One of the things that has been my primary purpose here, like I said, is ensuring consistency and a high quality selection process. Every year we do a training for principals. Two and a half years ago we undertook a big project where we wanted to make sure that our interview questions are all behavioral based interview questions for first round. Our process is consistent. What we did was we met with principals and assistant principals to say ‘what are the ideal characteristics of teachers that have been really high quality, gap closing teachers, teachers who really can make a difference in the classroom’. We took those ideal characteristics and developed interview questions around. We have an interview question bank of about forty, fifty questions so that principals can have some flexibility. We made a mandatory process where the first round interviews will be ten to twelve behavioral interview questions, depending on the needs of your school but they're all scenario based, they seek to get to the core of who that individual is rather than asking questions like
‘what is your philosophy of education’ which will not get to the core ... We ask questions like, ‘tell us about a mistake you've made and how you handled it’ because that draws upon their own experience. The whole design of the process... we seek to get to the core of who they are. What that person's core beliefs are. Those individuals, we feel, are going to help to close the achievement gap.

This respondent also described how a performance task has been added to the recruitment process:

The second thing is there's a mandatory practical task of second round for finalists and so you can further. It's kind of like peeling the layers to an onion. The second round is designed to, they would have to do some kind of practice test, whether it's looking at a video, critiquing that video and seeing what they saw or presenting a lesson plan as if they're presenting it to their PLC…We feel it has helped to glean, to make it more consistent but also yield the type of candidates that we need in our classrooms.

Another respondent explained what he recommends when applicants ask him about applying to the district:

... I say, ‘If you don't know anything about equity... if you don't look at our data...if you don't understand the gap…Let's assume they are white: ‘If you don't know that you are white...if you don't know about privilege...it doesn't really matter who you are...If you don't know that, you need to study it or you need to avoid trying to talk about it at all. But I can tell you this: it's going to be one of the first three questions that you get. We're going to ask you.’ When I'm on an interview, I want to know that. Not to put them on the spot, necessarily. I don't care if they don't know anything…They’ve just got to be willing to learn...
Cautious Optimism: Looking Ahead

The following portion of the report examines the reactions of the leadership to recent data that indicate that students of color are faring better in some areas, likely due to their equity efforts. It also includes their views on the challenges that remain for the district if it is to continue to increase and sustain its success in improving the achievement of its students of color.

The new focus on instruction appears to gradually be making an impact. For example, the district’s growth indicators point to improvements in Office Disciplinary Referral (ODR) risk ratios (the risk by a group of students in comparison to another group of experiencing an office referral) between black and white students in two-thirds of the district’s schools. The Superintendent has indicated a 38% decrease overall in disciplinary events in the district since implementing the new equity plan and an even more dramatic drop of 83% in its middle schools.

In terms of growth in reading for students of color, end of grade proficiency almost doubled between 1995 until 2008 when a new test edition resulted in a significant drop in their scores. (Though not nearly as dramatic, scores for white and Asian students dropped as well that year.) Scores for students of color then increased every year until 2013 (recovering by about two-thirds) until another test edition using college-ready standards resulted in another drop. While, scores for black students continue to rise since 2013, scores for Hispanic students (though higher in comparison to their black peers) have remained relatively flat.

Despite early reports that indicate improvement in some areas, the interviewees prefer to evaluate these results conservatively and describe them as “works in progress”. The Assistant Superintendent described some positive changes observed in instruction but emphasized the difference between achieving proficiency versus growth for underperforming students:
We've seen that teachers are attempting to create their own units... so the instructional practices are changing in terms of what's considered good teaching. We've seen some growth in the performance of our students. We've seen student growth in terms of how they're reading and writing. Not where we wanted to be yet, but we've seen the children are growing. Again, to me, the next step is... okay, so students are making growth, but all of these students are not necessarily proficient yet. How do we get them to where we're seeing that they're proficient and that they're meeting grade level expectations? Because you can grow, you can grow a year-and-a-half, you can grow two years and still be below grade level.

Another leader explained that many of its initiatives are still in the relatively early implementation stages and that more time is needed to evaluate their success:

When we talk about how our kids perform and what they do and how they do it, we look at it from the lens of equity. We still haven't arrived. These are things that we've put in place, and I'm looking to hopefully reap the fruits of my labor within another two years, but these are things we have put in place in the hopes of addressing the racial predictability and low performance of our students of color. I'm careful to say that because not every single child of color in our district is performing low.

One participant credited the creation and unwavering implementation of the current Superintendent’s five-year plan (begun in 2013) as one of the reasons why the district is seeing more success now after many years of trying to make improvements:

It's kind of been since day one... since the Superintendent got here. He's kind of outlined exactly what he's wanted. It's a five-year plan... It's been kind of, ‘this is where we are. I know that it works. We are going to go through it. There's going to be some pains. There's
going to be a lot of stuff to learn or re-learn and this is how we are going to do it here.’ I see that as a benefit.

**Challenges facing the district.** Despite some positive results, participants describe a number of challenges that remain for the district that will need to be overcome in order to maintain an upward trajectory for their equity work. Throughout the eleven interviews, the following areas were repeatedly identified as needing future attention. Participants are aware that sustaining change efforts will be a challenge and that, in order to insure continued implementation, the design of its equity plan must be both practical and affordable.

**Continuing to build capacity to sustain initiatives.** An issue raised by the Superintendent as well as several of the more senior staff has been the challenge of sustaining equity initiatives. Annual staff turnover results in considerable numbers of new staff, all of who must be trained in a variety of skills needed to meet the district’s expectations. In addition, the significant cost of providing ongoing professional development to maintain and upgrade the skills of existing staff creates challenges from a financial perspective. One respondent explained:

That's always the trick. It's how they sustain something over time because over the years ... we still have [Equity teams]. We still have a district equity leadership team. We still have the two-day required training for new administrators. In the past year or two, the leadership at Central Office shifted quite a bit as well. This year and the year before, I don't think we had cohort groups. So when our new Superintendent came, he was part of a cohort group and engaged in the cohort conversation. But over the last couple of years, I think we're going to renew some of that...

**Providing accountability and incentives to teachers.** A new model for providing professional development that offers incentives for participation as well as leadership has been
developed. It creates levels of career advancement based on a staff member’s ability to demonstrate leadership, impact, professional growth and competency. The Superintendent explained:

Our new model that we’re proposing to the school board would be a model where there would be, maybe, a two week summer academy that all new teachers have to go through and there would be ongoing training for new teachers throughout the course of the year - more similar to what we see in other professions.

He added:

We are also talking about changing the salary structure; in (Name of state) there’s a state salary structure which we don’t have any control over. What we do control is the local supplement. Our district has … probably it’s the highest local supplement in the state of (Name)… What we’re doing is changing that local supplement so that when you’re hired here, you would go to what we’re calling a ‘learning phase’ where you would have to demonstrate certain skills in order to move to the next levels. You would get points for professional development, as I said before. There would be different career paths. There might be a career path to become an instructional coach, so that we could build our own cadre of coaches in house so that we would have people ready to take the place of other coaches… Then in order to move up in the levels we do significant work with learning walks and walkthroughs… the things we’re looking for in terms of really getting to the higher levels of the salary schedule. There’s ‘learn, grow, impact and lead’. And to get to those higher levels, you have to not only demonstrate your skills as teacher, but you have to then demonstrate to us how you have impacted the students of color, the minority, socioeconomically disadvantaged kids to become an impact level teacher with a salary
that’s significantly higher. We’ve cut down the time, so it wouldn’t take you twenty-five years, so someone who’s really good could get to the top of the scale in fifteen to sixteen years.

The Superintendent explained how this proposed system raises accountability:

...I see it in terms of equity, really, and the achievement gap...now we’ve got a system that holds people accountable for doing the work, but also isn’t just - there’s carrots and sticks, it isn’t just the stick’s end. You must do this because then people usually figure out a way around it. It’s ‘this is important, we think we need to do this and you get something for it and there's a way’… I think, with teachers - it’s rarely just about the money. It’s as much about ‘do you want to be an impact level teacher or a lead level teacher’ which means you’re going to take on other kinds of responsibilities. I think teachers have a lot of pride in what they do. Those teachers who choose not to grow and get stuck in whatever level we determine is okay to live in, I think they just make decisions to leave.

*Continuing to integrate equity into the daily work.* A respondent emphasized the importance of maintaining an emphasis on both instruction and institutional racism:

...We had one administration that focused on Beyond Diversity, our heart, our mind, white privilege, anti-racism, no focus on instruction. Then it kind of shifted to all about instruction and we may have *not* put the same emphasis on the other piece in the past three years or so. Now there's some current events that may push that a little more up to the front...
Despite all of the professional development and ongoing conversations, a respondent commented on the need to continually communicate to staff that equity work must be embedded in *daily practice*:

I think that what has been very difficult in our district is that we need to move beyond Beyond Diversity- that was 2003... there’s some resistance to that. A lot of people still think that the equity work is that ninety-minute isolated PD, that it’s not what you do ... a lot of people are like, When are we having equity PD?’ I’m like, ‘Well, we just had PD in rigorous read-alouds. Remember we talked about how that will raise the achievement for all children?’ I’ve realized now that I *have* to slip that word in...I *have* to use the word equity or people don’t realize it.

**Attracting and retaining diverse staff.** A respondent from Human Resources commented on the district’s efforts to increase its staff diversity. In addition, this participant discussed the importance of taking measures to *retain* staff of color by acknowledging the unique challenges for them of working in a majority district. Upon noticing that credentials of teachers of color were more often being challenged by white parents in the district than other teachers, it was determined that a support group for minority staff would be created to offer a safe place to share experiences:

...We came together as a group and said ‘what are we going to do about this? This is not fair. This is not equitable that our teachers of color have a different experience than white teachers’. We decided a couple of years ago to start this group and it's grown and grown. It really functions as a support group so that teachers can talk about their experiences and strategize on ways that we can help support them and make sure that they stay in the district. That's one of the things that I'm really proud of.

This support group is now moving towards a more teacher-facilitated model:
...It has evolved...one of the planning members in the group suggested that we have a five member facilitative panel so that the teachers *themselves* could be the leaders. We're transitioning to that and making sure that the teachers, when we have identified the five member facilitative panel... they can set the agenda items and determine what works best for them.

**Sustaining the stamina of leadership over the long haul.** When asked about the rigor of promoting equity in their schools as compared to the many other responsibilities of school leaders, most of the respondents agreed that the work is much more rigorous than other aspects of their jobs. A participant explained:

> It is *very* taxing, and there are days where it's just like 'why should I bother'? Because you feel like you're knocking your head against a wall! But, honestly, I'd have to say I'm surrounded by a strong team and [Name of Superintendent]. In my previous position … I was the only one talking about curriculum instruction and rigor and everything else because the Superintendent... he just wasn't talking the talk I was. And he would say ‘yeah, do what she said’, but it wasn't coming from him as the top person. But in this district, [Name of Superintendent] is an instructional leader, believes in instruction, believes that the children can learn. We believe in the growth mindset, so it's not just me talking the talk. He supports the work. He puts the message out there, as well. I'm not out there by myself. I do have an integral team that I rely on and that I can bounce ideas off of. So it is very lonely at the top, but I have also had a chance to hire believers that support me with the work...

A principal commented:
It's lonely…I told someone the other day that no one ever asks me to have lunch with them! I don't get invited...It's a position where it can be lonely. Sometimes you're isolated but understanding why that is and fully accepting the responsibility of that… And I have colleagues. I mean, I do have other principals, particularly my PLC here... we're constantly talking about ‘what are you doing’ and we're constantly trying to figure out ways to sustain ourselves and to sustain the work because we know that we have to be happy and healthy before we can ever make real difference in other people's lives because we're not going to be at our best...I work out and spend lots of time with family and actually disconnect from the work. There are times when I say ‘for this 24 hour period, I'm just not working’.

Several participants commented on how they maintain their stamina:

Well, I think about the injustices to our kids - that's what drives me. Or when we go to a college and then a kid comes back and says, ‘[Name of respondent], I'm going to apply to that college. I really liked it.’ So lately I have been focusing on exposure and enrichment because I think ... there's a gap there. There's a gap to exposure. A lot of our kids have never been to the beach. We are two hours from the beach. I'm grateful that the school district supports the work that we do and can provide the resources for us to go on the college tour to [Name of location] to take kids to the beach. At the end of the day, they probably don't even look at it like that, but there is value in that. That drives my work. I think about the opportunity gap and that drives my work. I think about the lack of resources, and so that motivates me. I believe that this work is my life's work. This is what I was put on earth to do and so I'm always very humbled. I take this work very seriously. I'm always grateful that I have the opportunity to work with high school
students to be able to take them on college tours ... I took a group of thirty kids to France and Spain. I've been reflecting on my role in my work, and I think the one thing that I love the most is that I can experience ‘firsts’ with kids...

A principal described her personal motivation:

I think some of it has to do with my personal reality as an African-American parent to small children, elementary-aged children. I’m constantly aware of issues of equity and particularly education so that's a part of it. Also, just professionally, always seeking to grow and taking what I do so seriously, but not myself so seriously, but taking what I do as a matter of life and death - that sounds really serious but I'm rejuvenated when I learn something new or I keep working at a problem and I finally think we have some daylight. Even if it doesn't solve it, if we're making any little bit of progress I tend to focus on those things and understanding being upfront, setting realistic expectations for myself and my faculty…’I don't have all the answers but this is what we're going to do.’…Success builds upon itself and so the 'theory of small winds'... If we could get just a little bit here, a little bit here, a little bit here, eventually you have the wind at your back.

Similarly, another respondent also connected her motivation to being a parent of children of color:

It is hard work. For me, it's a personal thing because my children are African American. My spouse is African American. For me, I want my kids - I have a 3rd grader and a 9th grader - I think about my own kids, who are in a different school system...I wouldn't want anyone to look at them to say, ‘look at the color of their skin’ and say, ‘they can't achieve or they can't do X, Y and Z’. For me, it's a personal thing. I look at our own teachers. If my daughter decides to be a teacher I wouldn't want her to be treated differently than
anybody else. For me, it's personal, it's easy to keep the stamina up when you have a personal experience like that.

A principal described the importance of celebrating small victories along the way:

In any kind of leadership you need to celebrate success. We have had some successes. You have to look at every little victory ... Just like as a teacher, there's no immediate gratification for anything but down the road when those kids come back and they see you in the street and they're like, ‘Hi! I remember your class’. You get that kind of thing down the road but it's not immediate... we could have done a better job of celebrating... most organizations can do a better job of celebrating.

This participant also described the importance of staying focused as a means of avoiding the pressure to default to old, familiar practices:

If we can remain focused on what the goal is and really try to minimize the distractions.. that sounds easy to do but it is not and sometimes... you have to take some knocks to be able to do good work, particularly when it comes to equity work. Because at some point in time both sides are going to … be displeased with what you do but you've got to be well-informed, well-educated on what has been proven to be effective. And stay focused on what or how those effective practices will look in your district or in your school and stay at the work...You got to stay in it. I mean you just got to ... You can't stop; you can't say, ‘okay, we've been doing this for ten years and nothing has happened’. When you think about doing public education and how long we've been integrating systems, we’re talking about what, thirty years maybe? Maybe forty?!
Summary

The comments of the participants in this study indicate that the district has invested a great deal of time and resources over the years in addressing its achievement gap. It has refused to be complacent based on the exceptional performances of its high achievers; its commitment to serving all of its students has driven its work and has led to many experiments aimed at making improvements. Over its twenty years of equity work, the district has developed a more targeted, research-based approach that is beginning to show results through continuous examination of data, professional development, strong hiring staff practices and expanded relationships with the school community. Its leaders continue to work relentlessly to make progress and improve access to quality education for a population of its students that has been marginalized by a historically unjust educational system. Participants commented on the fact that the process of transforming practices can be arduous - leaders embarking on this work must be committed for the long haul. One respondent summarized the district’s sentiments that, though the current administration has made many changes to improve equity in the district, the district’s work has only just begun: Every time I make a statement, I say, ‘we haven't arrived yet...we're not there yet’…We are definitely a work in progress, and it's not something that we will ever feel like we've arrived. There will always be something that we can do better, and there will always be students that we are looking at to make sure that we are meeting their needs... so it's absolutely a process. I think that, if anything, that's the thing to share with any leaders, that as you're going through this, you have to recognize that it is a process. You've never really fully arrived.
Chapter V: Discussion of the Research Findings

This research emerged as a result of the researcher’s interest in helping leaders of high-performing suburban districts to increase their knowledge and, subsequently, their willingness, to undergo the significant challenges of transforming their schools to address the needs of an often at-risk, historically marginalized population of students.

The single-case study answered the question: How is the leadership of a high-performing suburban district experiencing the process of transforming the practice of its district to address its achievement gap?

To address this question, eleven leaders of a high-performing suburban district were asked to share their perspectives on their involvement in their district’s efforts to reduce its achievement gaps. These participants agreed to participate in this study with the intent of offering to leaders from similar districts valuable perspectives that may help them to more successfully plan and implement effective equity initiatives.

They recounted their personal perspectives on leading equity efforts as members of a large leadership team through participation in one-to-one, open-ended interviews with the researcher. In these discussions, they described their experiences of equity work, how the district developed a plan of action and commitment from the school community, how they addressed barriers to the work and how they maintained their own stamina throughout the process. Through the use of direct quotes, the thoughts and feelings of the participants were explored. These individuals also candidly shared their perspectives on the degree of impact that a variety of practices had on their district’s goal of increased equity for students of color.

These leaders come from diverse backgrounds; almost one-third of the participants are educators of color. While many of these participants had worked in the district for numerous
years through the tenure of two administrations, others had been employed there for shorter periods of time. Though individuals experienced some things differently, they drew many similar conclusions as they reflected on the equity work of the district. A key question that was asked repeatedly of each participant throughout the interviews was, ‘what would you want leaders of similar districts to know if you could give them advice about this’. The following findings are based on the accounts of these participants as they recalled their experiences of the district’s extensive work in improving achievement outcomes for their students of color.

**Summary of Key Findings**

The findings of this study are based on themes that emerged from participant interviews; these themes are discussed in detail in Chapter IV. The respondents identified the following understandings as most critical for leaders to anticipate as they plan to eliminate achievement gaps in similar high-performing suburban districts. It is to be noted that titles and roles of participants were intentionally kept as vague as possible to avoid identifying them or their district to the readers of this report.

**Finding #1 Leader establishment of mission: Coherence, collaboration and communication.** Many of the respondents emphasized the importance of a coherent, collaboratively developed action plan and the need for clear, consistent communication throughout the school community. While participants credited the prior administration with beginning the process of bringing the district’s inequities to light, they agreed that decisions in the early years were largely made in a top-down manner by central office without inclusion of building leadership. This led to confusion and incomplete implementation of equity efforts. In addition, staff was not adequately prepared to integrate new learning in a practical way into their daily work with students. During the previous administration, equity was typically addressed as
a separate topic from instruction. Professional development did not offer a model for integrating
theory into day-to-day classroom practice. Building-based leaders who worked for the district
during the previous administration also reported being unsure of the district’s expectations for
equity teams in their schools; in some buildings, equity teams appeared to offer a forum for
important discussions about institutional racism, while in other locations the teams were
perceived as judgmental and divisive.

The new administration improved the momentum of equity efforts through a
comprehensive school improvement plan based on a clear theoretical framework that led to a
revised mission and improved culture for teaching and learning. Priorities were then set for
enacting the improvement process. These priorities were communicated clearly and transparently
through professional development, meetings with local stakeholders (parents, community
groups) and media. The Superintendent took a lead role in beginning these conversations and
reached out to the greater school community to promote understanding and engage their support.
A key finding of this study is the importance of establishing a mission by leadership that is
clearly accepted and understood by the school community and equipping staff with both the
theoretical and practical knowledge to enact it.

Finding #2 Assessing and insuring staff readiness to implement change. While all
participants reported that raising awareness of racism was important to their ability to enact
change, they agreed that this step in itself did not ultimately lead to the academic gains by
students of color anticipated by the previous administration. Participants explained that it was
incorrectly assumed in the past that principals and teachers simply needed an awareness of racial
injustice in schools in order to implement change and that they possessed the skills needed to
improve the academic performance of their students of color. In actuality, the participants

admitted that critical changes around instruction, curriculum and accountability were also needed. However, they discussed the benefits of required professional development as well as opportunities for more self-directed professional learning in which teachers reflected on feedback from team observations and created their own professional development plans.

In terms of implementation, one significant difference between the old and new administration was the latter’s active appraisal of the readiness of the district to implement theory in the classroom. In doing so, the critical need for extensive professional development and additional resources became apparent. Consequently, the district aligned its professional development with its new improvement plan. It has invested significantly over the past four years in increasing teachers’ skill in lesson planning, the use of research-based instructional techniques, the teaching of approved curriculum, the use of common assessments, improving cultural competence and improving classroom climate. Teachers have been recruited as trainers of trainers to build capacity amongst staff; achievement data and classroom observations are used to identify deficient teachers who subsequently receive remedial assistance and are held accountable for improvement. In addition, a required district curriculum has been created and aligned with the Common Core to improve rigor and relevance. Action research is helping the district to gain an understanding of the conditions needed to increase enrollment and retention of students of color in high-level programs such as Advanced Placement courses. Thus, an accurate appraisal of the readiness of staff by leaders to implement change followed by targeted professional development and support were identified as critical actions.

**Finding #3 Establishing a long-term culture of equitable practice.** The leadership addressed the district’s culture in a variety of ways. As discussed previously in this chapter, the adoption of a new paradigm of high learning expectations for all students provided a critical
foundation for instructional change. This shift was followed by extensive professional
development and an accountability system for implementation. In addition, buildings are
implementing district-wide a behavioral framework that sets standards for addressing
misbehavior and promoting healthy relationships between staff and students. Equity training that
promotes in all staff an understanding of the effects of institutional racism on students of color
remains an important priority of the district.

Though the participants in this study were leaders with diverse personal and professional
backgrounds, none of them reported receiving much exposure to the theory or skills needed for
equity work in their leader preparation programs except for those who had recently attended
local doctoral programs. Participants generally credited the bulk of their equity training to the
district’s required professional development. They reported that this ongoing training helped
them to develop an understanding of institutional racism and contributed to their resolve to
address inequities in their buildings. Despite differing opinions about the two kinds of equity
trainings provided over the years, they all valued the critical awareness that resulted and credited
the trainings with helping them to prioritize equity as a major focus of their work.

In fact, participants discussed the ongoing challenge of keeping race in the forefront of
their work given competing demands on their time and attention; though participants
commended the willingness of this district to discuss race, some observed that professional
development and conversations about race can still be avoided at times by some staff. These
observations align with research which indicates that, especially in majority schools in high-
performing districts, a focus on high-performing students and deficit thinking about students of
color can easily distract staff from focusing on marginalized students and reflecting on their own
practices (Ferguson, 2002). Thus, this study underscores the need for leaders to persistently work
to maintain a culture of awareness of race in which race and injustice are considered in all types of decision-making ranging from instruction to communication to discipline. Leaders need to be careful not to default back to the tendency to overlook the needs of the minority and must mandate professional development and regular discussions of race and social justice.

**Finding #4 Building culture through selectivity in hiring.** Literature indicates that student-teacher relationships are the number one predictor of student achievement and that certain personalities are more amenable to the kind of flexible thinking needed by culturally responsive staff (Pantic & Wubbels, 2012; Boykin & Noguera, 2011). The participants described a need for hiring practices that carefully screen candidates to insure alignment with a district’s philosophy and practices around equity. One of the key pieces of advice given by participants is hiring the right people through careful examination of attitudes and practices and clarification of expectations starting with the interview process. The district’s hiring practices now include a selection process that contains questions and tasks that help determine candidates’ beliefs and interest in social justice prior to hiring. In addition, many of the leaders in this study are personally engaged in the interviewing of potential candidates for their buildings. This close involvement of leadership in the hiring process is noted in the research as a characteristic of high-performing schools (Rivera-McCutcheon, 2014). Thus, another finding of this study is the importance of insuring that leaders create hiring protocols that vet candidates carefully for their alignment with a social justice mindset and stay closely involved in this process to insure the development of equity-minded teams.

**Finding #5 Implementing accountability measures for all staff.** In this study, participants describe new accountability measures that have been put in place to insure that new practices are implemented. Participants agree that classroom observations in which supervisors
and teacher teams collaborate and look for evidence of the use of effective instructional practices and adherence to district curricula are key to insuring fidelity of implementation. Through this system, teachers must show that they are practicing new knowledge and skills through their instruction and in their relationships with students. However, also principals described the need for supervisors to create an atmosphere of trust and emotional safety so that teachers feel comfortable asking for assistance with their challenges. They described a climate of collaboration between administrators and teachers around classroom observations and support of risk-taking for teachers as they experimented with new, unfamiliar pedagogy. Also, the district relies on data as the basis for discussions about performance and planning as it provides an objective rationale for changing practices; several of these leaders commented that this practice is especially effective when working with resistant staff.

In addition to holding teachers accountable for improvement, principals were trained in the new district expectations for planning and instruction expected of teachers. Equity coaches act as consultants to improve principals’ abilities to conduct equity discussions with staff. With these supports in place, principals are also held accountable for improved achievement of students and are required to review the performance of their staff members with the Director of Human Resources twice annually to identify individuals who need additional support to meet the district’s expectations. Thus these findings suggest that clear accountability structures are needed at all levels to insure fidelity of implementation across the district.

**Finding # 6 Sustaining change over time: “Good is the enemy of great”**. The literature identifies staff complacency with the accomplishments of the majority as a reason why high-performing schools are often reluctant to make changes to address the performance of their minority student populations. When asked about possible barriers to success in the future, a
participant in this study referred to the phrase “good is the enemy of great” to describe how the district’s overall high performance always has the potential to obscure the needs of marginalized students. The participants believe that the ongoing review of disaggregated student performance data is one way critical to maintain a focus on the needs of the students who are underperforming.

The literature on school principal retention describes leader isolation as a common cause of burnout (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004). While some of the participants in this study described a sense of isolation experienced at times due to their leadership role, they also described the benefit of the support they received from their leader colleagues. Some participants described professional connections with consultants from other learning organizations including those who had provided professional development to the district. In addition, some principals felt that their equity coaches provided critical support. Several of the participants mentioned the need to make sure that the work did not overtake their lives and the need to actively work to maintain a balanced lifestyle. Several of the participants discussed their habit of “unplugging” after work and making sure that they spent time with family and in activities unrelated to their jobs; one participant relaxed by keeping up with the professional literature in her spare time. As the literature suggests, the process requires close personal involvement by leaders in the monitoring and continual adjustment of practice (Theoharis, 2007). As such, the level of intensity of the work can be exhausting and take a toll personally on principals and other leaders responsible for leading the change (Theoharis, 2007). When asked to compare the intensity of this work to other areas of their leader responsibilities, most of the participants in this study described the work as very taxing and shared the perception that it requires tenacity and a laser focus to stay engaged. When asked what motivated them to remain committed to this work despite its challenges, most
of the respondents stated that their resilience came from a personal sense of fairness and concern for the future potential of their students. In addition, several of the participants of color in this study engaged in social justice work due to their own lived experiences and as a result of more global concerns for the future of their own children. While they all managed to maintain their stamina through a variety of ways, they generally agreed that the demanding nature of the work requires that leaders take action to mitigate the stress on their professional and personal lives.

**A Review of the Findings Through the Lens of the Theoretical Framework**

The following section discusses how the findings relate to the theoretical framework proposed at the start of the study. The framework was based on two theories, the Burke-Litwin Organizational Change Theory and Critical Race Theory (CRT).

**Examining the findings through the lens of Critical Race Theory.** Critical Race Theory (CRT) as applied to the school context maintains that white staff cannot address racial injustices without first developing an awareness created by ongoing dialogue between the races and reflection on one’s own practices (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billing, 1998). Unlike more intellectual topics for which educators typically receive professional development, staff training in cultural competency involves a process of introspection and, sometimes, a re-education regarding effective pedagogy and the impact of teacher expectations on the students they teach. The respondents in this study generally agreed that continued discussions and professional development about race and privilege remain critical to their district’s ongoing work to reduce its achievement gap. A respondent commented on the uniqueness and importance of ongoing dialogue and training:

We really tackle the big issues. There is a part of racism that is causing the achievement gap. We lay it on the table and have that conversation. It's not just about instruction and
instructional initiatives; we have to take a look at how institutional racism is a cause for closing the achievement gap. Helping our teachers understand that - it is going to be beneficial.

Participants’ reactions to their professional development experiences generally align with the tenets of CRT. Consequently, a finding of this study is that an understanding of CRT can help school leaders to understand the complexity of making change and resist the temptation to offer expedient approaches to professional development such as one-shot workshops that simply intellectualize the topic of social justice in schools. It can guide them as to the kinds of activities that are required in order for staff to engage in transformational work.

Finally, it implies the importance of providing time, resources and ongoing support needed by staff during this complex process of change (Howard, 2006; Chamberlain, 2005). This district has invested a great deal of its resources promoting its social justice agenda through its selective hiring and induction of new employees, its professional development requirements, its accountability practices and through its support of staff and student achievement using a growth mindset (Dweck, 2007) as its guiding philosophy.

Examining findings through the lens of the Burke-Litwin organizational change theory. The Burke-Litwin model’s hierarchy identifies mission and culture as two of the most important influences on organizational behavior. The district in this study described the most impactful change as being the new administration’s establishment four years ago of a clear mission and priorities throughout the district. Though social justice work had been a focus for many years, they also continued the work of changing culture begun by the prior administration by establishing a new theoretical framework that set high expectations for learning for students and staff, providing appropriate professional development in both equity theory and pedagogy,
improving hiring protocols, using data-based decision-making and providing ongoing teacher and leader support. This change in culture was promoted extensively throughout the school community. Consequently, this study found that the decisions of the new leadership to prioritize changing the mission and culture of the organization align with Burke-Litwin’s organizational change theory. Though many of the district’s initiatives are have been implemented relatively recently, participants report that the early indicators appear to show positive results for students in a variety of areas. Thus, leaders seeking to plan out a strategy for making broad organizational changes aimed at improving their achievement gaps may obtain guidance from this theory as they seek to determine high-yield strategies for creating transformation.

**Connections to the Literature**

*Transforming mission and culture in the change process.* As discussed earlier in this paper, this district’s experiences are consistent with the research on organizational change theory which identifies the establishment of mission and culture by leadership as critical to changing the behavior of staff (Burke & Litwin, 1992). In respect to school leadership and the achievement gap, the “normalization of failure” by students of color by administrators and staff has been recognized as a major underpinning of the achievement gap (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). Boykin and Noguera (2011) discuss the importance of replacing a deficit paradigm with high expectations in order to move students ahead. In the past four years, the district in this study has worked to replace low expectations with an achievement oriented paradigm and has provided extensive professional development to help staff to understand how to apply this model to instruction. The role of leadership in setting the values of the district has been found to be critical to long-term change in organizations (Johnson & Ullne, 2005; Herold, et al.; 2008).
The literature indicates that major transformation cannot occur in organizations unless leaders cultivate the sense of urgency needed to implement key changes (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997). In regard to addressing achievement gaps, research indicates that the beliefs of superintendents and other administrators charged with leading improvement efforts set the expectations for the rest of the staff (Skrla & Skeuritch, 2001; Heifetz & Laurie, 1997). In this study, both of the school superintendents who had led the district were instrumental in helping staff perceive that reducing the achievement gap is a moral imperative and a priority. However, the current Superintendent addressed issues of readiness far more extensively by providing to staff important professional development in both theory and implementation. Furthermore, the current Superintendent did not assume that staff already possessed the knowledge and skill to implement such change. Instead, all staff in this district were expected to participate in ongoing training. In addition, a new teacher evaluation system rewards faculty for pursuing professional development and assuming leadership roles in the district.

In addition, the district’s extensive implementation of PBIS to help improve student-staff relationships and promote a positive school climate is consistent with the literature on motivation and student engagement which indicates that students are more likely to engage in learning when they perceive that their teachers have high expectations, care about them and treat them fairly (Johnson & Ullne, 2005; Ferguson, 2002; Kunjufu, 2002). The integration of students’ perceptions into professional development on culturally competent instruction through the use of Student Six also aligns with both Critical Race Theory which emphasizes the importance of hearing the voices of the “other” to gain a greater understanding of the perceptions of minority students (Ladson-Billings, 1998, 1995).
Another contribution to the culture of the district was the ongoing implementation of professional development (Beyond Diversity and the Racial Equity Institute) that required staff at all levels to reflect on their own biases and beliefs about race, privilege and achievement. It also included opportunities for staff to dialogue with diverse individuals. The professional development targeted deficit thinking and other belief systems of staff that might discourage achievement and access to opportunities by students of color. These training activities are identified in the research as critical to helping white educators in particular to begin to understand white privilege, identify institutional racism in their schools and examine their own cultural competence (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Howard, 2006)

**Insuring accountability for implementation.** A lack of persistence and close involvement by organizational leaders in the process are two of the main reasons why social justice transformation efforts fail over the long-term (Holme et al., 2014; Theoharis, 2007; Skrla & Skeuritch, 2001). Change research indicates that holding staff accountable and managing resistance are critical to the success of transformational efforts (Theoharis, 2007; Skrla & Skeuritch, 2001). However, many leaders lack the essential knowledge and skill to manage conflict and anticipate resistance that is common in social justice work (Starr, 2011; Theoharis, 2007). In some cases, these leaders delegate the work to other staff members who may not have the knowledge, political clout or authority to make transformational changes (Skrla & Skeuritch, 2001). In this study, the participants underwent professional development and assumed responsibility for keeping staff focused on the goal of improving the achievement of students of color in the district.

Research indicates that it is common for high-performing suburban schools to focus on the high performances of the majority (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). Leaders in this study
persistently collected and used data with staff to analyze the achievement of students of color and adjust their practices. However, they reported the importance of continually disaggregating data to make apparent disparities in minority student achievement and opportunity to avoid defaulting to a focus on the high performance of the majority. Accountability measures at the classroom and leadership levels were also instituted to insure that teachers were implementing the strategies learned in professional development and that principals were properly supervising these efforts.

**Establishing effective hiring practices.** The use of effective hiring practices has been identified in the literature as extremely important to building the staff cohesiveness needed to implement widespread change (Rivera-McCutcheon, 2014; Johnson & Ullne, 2005). In this district, hiring practices were refined to discover in candidates their perceptions about social justice and their philosophical alignment with the district’s values. New staff then participated in induction programs that conveyed values and expectations of the district in terms of its focus on reducing the achievement gap. In its efforts to hire a more diverse staff, the district established support groups for faculty of color to help promote their transition and address their experiences of being minority teachers in a predominantly white district. Overall, the actions taken by this district to reduce their achievement gaps are extensive and align with the research on both organizational change and social justice change in schools.

**Study Limitations**

This section explores the limitations of this study’s design in terms of its applicability to other districts. It further suggests areas of study that might be useful in future research on the design of effective achievement gap reduction plans in high-performing suburban districts.
This case study explored the experiences of leaders attempting to create a
transformational social justice change in their district. While short-term results are promising in
certain areas, the length of time that the new initiatives (i.e. instructional changes) were in place
may not be substantial enough to predict their long-term impact at this time. Thus, a revisit of
this district in five to ten years would undoubtedly provide a clearer picture of the impact of this
comprehensive equity plan on the achievement of its students of color.

Another limitation of the study is the absence of teacher or student perceptions in regard
to the equity work of the district. This research is limited to the perspectives of district and
building administrators for the purposes of helping other leaders in similar districts to increase
their potential for planning and implementing successful achievement gap efforts. However, this
in no way disaffirms the contributions and key leadership roles that teachers and students assume
in the district’s social justice leadership. In fact, the inclusion of the perceptions of staff that hold
informal leadership roles could provide a multi-dimensional perspective of the experiences in the
district.

Finally, this case study chronicles the experiences of a single district located in the
southern United States. Historically, experiences of race and its political impact on school
communities have differed widely from region to region, state to state. This study took place in
the Southern U.S. at a time in history concurrent with a highly publicized racial event that
occurred in another southern state. According to the participants, the impact of this event
certainly influenced local events and the climate of their school community in regard to
perceived racial inequity in the schools over the past year. Thus, while this participant’s plan for
district improvement is based in research and may offer some ideas to other high-performing
suburban districts, the researcher is aware that all decisions of a school district are situated in a
unique context. As such, every district has its own challenges and unique circumstances and leaders of other districts may not find all of the experiences in this study to be practical for their own school improvement plans.

**Future Areas of Study**

This study focused on the experiences and perceptions of the leaders of a high-performing suburban school district. All were administrators of some type; only one interviewee directly supervised students. Thus, an area that was not examined by this study was the perception of teachers in regard to their administrators’ actions in helping them to promote equity in their schools including the most effective formats for professional development. In addition, students’ perceptions of adult actions were also not included and could provide critical perspectives for future studies. For example, student responses to classes created to support their enrollment in AP and honors courses could provide useful insight into such interventions for other districts. Perceptions of changes in school climate by students might also provide helpful information on efforts to increase cultural competence, revise school discipline practices and create inclusive school environments.

**Conclusion**

A defining characteristic of social justice school leaders is their active and deliberate creation of environments in which equity is the desired standard (Rivera-McCutcheon, 2014). These leaders view equity as an ongoing process, not an event. They understand the pervasiveness of racism and the potential to default to practices that favor the majority if the focus is taken off of equity. In high-performing suburban schools where students generally perform well, leaders often have to work strategically and intentionally to focus appropriate attention on the needs of low-performing students. In addition to possessing technical ability and
knowledge in improving cultural competence and instruction, they often need political skill and a strong constituency to withstand pressure to refocus resources on the high achievers.

Organizational change theory indicates that leaders have the greatest potential for making widespread change in their organizations when they work to impact mission and culture. In the context of K-12 schools, principals and other administrators are situated to have broad influence over mission and culture. In addition, they have direct access to key resources to improve instruction and climate. Though many school leaders may feel initially unprepared to take on this challenge, they greatly diminish their schools’ chances for success when they relinquish this responsibility to others who have less authority and influence. Less experienced leaders of high-performing suburban districts can find professional development and guidance through networking with more experienced leaders in other successful districts and national equity organizations that bring together superintendents from demographically similar districts.

This study indicates that the importance of the school leader in inspiring and managing transformational change for equity cannot be underestimated. Both the literature and the accounts of the district discussed in this study indicate that, without the direct involvement of leadership starting from the top, schools are unlikely to make lasting improvements for students of color in majority schools. It is hoped that the experiences shared by the leaders in this study will serve to motivate and guide administrators to embrace their roles in leading their teams to improve equity in their schools. According to one of the principals in this study, this responsibility is not one that can be handed off to other staff members. Consequently, when asked what key advice she wanted to share with other school administrators regarding the role of school leadership in creating socially just schools, she responded with confidence: “…Make sure that the leadership understands that this work begins and ends with them.”
A Reflection on My Doctoral Experience

My four years as a doctoral student have been a time of great reflection on my role as an educational leader. In studying the achievement gap, I now see with greater clarity how widely disparate educational experiences are for students of color in comparison to their white peers and how often their voices go unheard even in some of our nation’s highest performing districts. Such marginalization often takes a heavy toll on these students’ physical, mental and social development and threatens their future security. These practices in a society founded in “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” are, in my view, immoral and unacceptable.

The impetus for my research originates from my work in secondary public school education for the past 31 years where I have been a teacher and an administrator. My career focus has largely involved supporting young people in finding their voices and making constructive choices. While in the classroom, I taught about disease prevention and lifestyle change. My training and my experiences taught me that transformation is neither an easy nor a simple process - we do not change simply from attending lectures or from scare tactics. Transformation occurs when we perceive the relevance of new ideas to our lives and acquire new skills to enact such change with confidence. This notion was reinforced when I studied family systems in an MFT graduate program. I learned that all individual behaviors, healthy or not, serve a purpose in maintaining the family system. I began to think about applying this concept to schools while attending an organizational leadership course during my doctoral studies where I learned that a significant disruption of balance is needed in order for a system to change in a substantial way. It is through this lens that I approached this research.

Schools, like families, are systems - they cling to old ways until the benefits of a new approach appear to outweigh the perceived discomforts of a change. Achievement gaps continue to exist as a result of inequitable systems held in place by and, often for the benefit of, certain
stakeholders. Though they have the authority and access to uphold or alter these inequitable arrangements, many school administrators lack the theory and skill needed to enact changes in equity in their districts. I intentionally chose a case study design for this research to provide a practical resource for school leaders to acquire some of this knowledge from those who have undergone such transformation. My study highlights the extraordinary work of the leadership of a high-performing suburban school district that has courageously implemented a systemic approach to addressing its achievement gap. Over a twenty-year period, this district has moved from simply raising awareness to dismantling an entire system that has maintained the unequal treatment of its students of color for many years.

Through this research and from discussions with people of color about equity, I have learned some key lessons. Achievement gaps are a result of a systemic failure of a school community to value the needs of all students equally. They reflect who and what a school community honors and, as such, cannot be eliminated without an approach that changes the beliefs fundamental to unjust practices. This is why simple, isolated actions like “celebrations of differences” and one-shot assemblies are ineffective. These actions, though they may eventually play a role in promoting multiculturalism in a systemic plan, do not get to the essence of the elitism and sorting practices that have existed since the advent of compulsory schooling. In fact, poverty and a lack of resources alone cannot explain the existence of achievement gaps. Their presence in high-performing, suburban schools is evidence of carefully designed practices operating to uphold privilege and access for some while overlooking the needs of others.

However, school leaders must understand that the costs paid by those who act to disturb these entrenched practices in their school communities can be painful. It is not surprising that administrators, given all of their responsibilities and pressures, often cave to the desires of the
majority and seek to “keep the peace” personally and professionally by maintaining the status quo. Those courageous leaders who do choose to take on their schools’ achievement gaps must proceed cautiously and build constituency along the way. They need to be wary of “top down” approaches that fail to involve all stakeholders in the plan. White school leaders in particular need to be careful of paternalistic approaches that further disempower the very students they seek to benefit. During my doctoral defense, I was asked by one of my advisors to speak to this issue. I discussed my experience of a two-day racial equity training at which several people of color discussed the psychological and practical problems that paternalistic behavior by whites had caused in their communities. This training prompted me to reflect on the fact that, as a white school administrator with significant influence in my school community, I must be mindful of my own intent and be sure that my actions promote the empowerment of my students and their families. As such, I plan to continue to attend equity trainings to further enhance my awareness and skill in making meaningful changes in practice and policy.

I am so grateful for the privilege of having had access to this level of graduate study. Though I am but one person, I hope that my work will make a positive contribution to future generations of young people of color and other students who may lack equal access due to their minority status in their schools. I hope that, in the end, my efforts will help their school leaders to make the critical changes needed to enable these students to feel secure in following their dreams and forging destinies of their own choosing.
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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. Can you each state your name and title or role and tell me a little about your history with the district?

2. Can you describe the achievement gap in your district prior to the onset of your planned equity initiatives. How did the initial concern arise and who was involved in bringing the issue to light? How was data used (either hard data or other examples of inequity) to illustrate that there was concern in your district? Can you describe the circumstances or “aha” moment in which you committed to making it a priority?

3. How did you personally get involved in the process of planning for a change? What role did you play? Is your role the same currently?

4. Can you tell me about any resources that may have helped you to prepare (this might include reading research, tapping professional organizations, PLCs, reading books, networking, speaking with other districts, attending training or workshops, etc.) Were there any education experts or programs that may have influenced your district’s work?

5. How did your district begin the planning process? Can you tell me how the communication with your district leadership team occurred at the onset of planning this initiative? Can you walk me through the decision-making process? Was any experience or piece of data or information particularly helpful in promoting your understanding? Can you describe your reactions in terms of the level of consensus or apprehension?

6. How did you go about identifying which individuals or groups should be involved in the next steps? To what degree were teachers, parents, students, parent groups and other members of the school community involved? How about individuals or agencies outside of your district?

7. Can you walk me through the process of communicating your plan to these individuals and groups? Were there any unanticipated reactions? Can you describe anything you may have learned in retrospect that would help you to communicate a future change plan?

8. How did you work with staff at the building level to implement a plan? How would you describe the level of consensus in your buildings for making the reduction of the achievement gap a priority? In looking back on this process, did you learn anything about working with staff on this initiative that could be applied to leading changes in the future?
9. Can you describe the key changes your district planned to address its achievement gap (ie. instructional, curricular, establishment of new building task force, weekly data meetings, PLC, community outreach, student groups)? Were any new positions/roles created for this purpose?

10. At the onset, how prepared did you feel to implement the changes you proposed? Can you describe any prior experiences or training that proved valuable in preparing you with knowledge or skills? Can you describe any training that you received to equip you to implement the plan (i.e. workshops, PLCs, trainings at the department level)? Was it mandatory? How helpful did you find the professional development to your actual equity work? In retrospect, is there anything you would have done differently to prepare yourself for implementing such a plan?

11. How well prepared do you feel your building staff was prior to implement the changes you were proposing (teachers, support staff)? Can you describe their reactions to the changes they were being asked to make?

12. Can you describe any training that they received to prepare them to implement the plan? Please describe any professional development plan that may have been offered (i.e. workshops, PLCs, trainings at the department level). Who attended and was it mandatory? How did attendees respond to the professional development? Can you describe anything you learned about planning or implementing professional development that will help you execute professional development for the future?

13. How did the district go about selecting the best professional development options for this initiative? Can you describe the key objectives of the professional development?

14. Can you describe any concerns that may have arisen from any individuals or groups during the PD phase? Can you describe any actual resistance from any individuals or groups to any aspect of the work? How did you respond? In retrospect, can you describe anything you may have learned about managing resistance?

15. Can you describe the impact of the professional development in the district? What changes resulted? In retrospect, was there anything you would have done differently in terms of how you prepared the district to implement your initiatives?

16. What would you want another district to know or consider as they plan for professional development when approaching similar equity work?
17. What were the key changes you proposed to reduce the achievement gaps at the building level? How would you describe the engagement of the staff in your building for this work? How fully would you say that your building’s school community has embraced these equity initiatives? Can you provide an example? Can you describe any issues that continue to be a challenge?

18. Can you describe any potential barriers you experienced along the way (i.e. from staff, parents, students, budgetary, political, practical)?

19. How fully would you say that your school community has embraced the district’s equity initiatives? Describe how you developed the support of people outside of your building for this work? Can you describe any issues that continue to be a challenge? Is there anything you learned from this experience in terms of working with the school community that can help you to approach future changes in your district?

20. To what degree were the district’s plans implemented? Can you describe the effect on the district’s practices? Can you give some examples? How has this impacted the achievement gap in your district? How did you measure this impact? Can you describe any issues that still remain a challenge?

21. How do you plan to insure that implementation continues to your district’s expectations? Can you describe the components of your plan going forward?

22. Prior to getting the plan underway, how prepared did you feel to manage an equity change process? Can you describe any prior leadership experiences that may have informed your practice?

23. Can you describe any instances in which the group shared its feelings about undertaking this change, either informally or as part of a training process? If so, how helpful was this to maintaining your stamina as a leader?

24. Can you describe any formal or informal group preparation you underwent to lead this kind of equity work, if any?

25. Can you describe the biggest management challenges once the plan was underway? Was there ever a time when you feared that this initiative might not move forward as planned? Can you describe any actions that you backed off from because you didn’t feel you had
enough resources or support? Can you describe what you may have learned about these decisions in retrospect?

26. Can you describe your experience of the rigor of this equity work in comparison to other initiatives you have led in your district? How did this initiative impact your job responsibilities (time, relationships, etc.)? Can you describe how it impacted you personally and how you maintained your commitment and stamina during this process? What might be helpful for a leader of another district to know or think about before beginning this kind of work in terms of maintaining stamina for this kind of work?

27. How would you advise other districts embarking on similar work?

28. Is there anything else you would like me to know about your experience?