District Superintendents as Instructional Leaders:

An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis of School Superintendents

as the Primary Instructional Leaders in a Group of Massachusetts Districts

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Joyce Susan Edwards

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the role of the public school superintendent as the primary instructional leader in a district, one who is charged with the responsibility of creating the conditions for excellence in teaching and learning. The primary research question was: What are the perceptions of a group of suburban superintendents in the Metrowest area of Massachusetts with regard to their role as the primary instructional leader in a district in creating and setting the conditions that promote excellence in the teaching and learning process?

This qualitative study used an interpretive phenomenological analysis approach. The six study participants were all superintendents. Data were collected through face to face interviews conducted in the professional offices of each participant. The study identified themes including: the beliefs of the participants about teaching and learning; the connection and impact of these beliefs on the teaching and learning practices; the beliefs that influence decision-making; the superintendent as the responsible party for creating the conditions for excellence in teaching and learning; the successes and challenges in creating the conditions for excellence in teaching and learning; the desired changes in teaching and learning process; the desired changes to the role as the primary instructional leader in a district; and the structures, strategies, and practices used to effect success. Obstacles faced in the quest for excellence in teaching and learning were also noted.

The study’s findings suggest that the role of the superintendent is multi-faceted and must be driven by a clear vision for excellence and teaching. The superintendent must be able to build effective relationships with all stakeholders in order to advocate for the needs of students and the district. Implications for practice include the creation of a clear vision as a tool for school
improvement efforts. A singular focus on the belief that all students can achieve is essential, and
the many obstacles encountered must be addressed so that their achievement becomes a reality.
Many of the obstacles cited come from sources outside of the schools and encompass the
demographic, economic, political, and financial realities of each community. These factors come
to bear on the superintendent’s ability to create the conditions for excellence in teaching and
learning.

*Keywords:* superintendent, core beliefs, teaching and learning, learning leader,

instructional leader
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The greatest challenge in any school district is for its leaders to strengthen teaching and learning in their communities (Honig, 2008). School district superintendents are expected to design and nurture the appropriate conditions for improvements in all curricular, instructional, and assessment matters because they drive student learning and outcomes (Bredeson & Kose, 2007). Teachers and school administrators are charged with accountability for student outcomes in classrooms and schools, as is the school superintendent. As the primary learning leader in the district, the superintendent is responsible for hiring and retaining high quality principals and teachers who will drive student outcomes in individual classrooms.

Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2008) stated that indirect leadership, demonstrated through the direct impact on staff performance, increases student achievement. It is therefore critical to understand how a superintendent’s behaviors increase efficacy through setting appropriate conditions and priorities for teaching and learning in a district. Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) addressed this district lens and posited that building administrators will be more effective as learning leaders when their work is aligned with and supported by the work and vision of the school district and the superintendent. This shared vision develops, contributes, and sustains the work of all stakeholders, creating opportunities that further excellence in teaching and learning.

The behavior of school district superintendents should lead to the development and implementation of a shared vision and the conditions that create and support excellence in teaching and learning. The purpose of this doctoral thesis is to explore the perceptions of a group of suburban Massachusetts superintendents in the Metrowest area with regard to their role, as the primary instructional leaders in their districts, in creating the optimal conditions for excellence in teaching and learning. Its primary audience is current and future superintendents, as well as other
school leaders who are seeking to achieve greater levels of excellence in teaching and learning in their districts. Its wider audience includes those with a general interest in school improvement, those interested in educational policies and reform, and other stakeholders in districts such as school committee members or others in the community.

**Significance of the Problem**

King (2002) provided a detailed description of the shift towards superintendents being learning leaders rather than daily managers in school buildings and districts. King (2002) recognized that student achievement needed to drive all activities within school buildings and in a school district. The hallmark of this change includes the charge that principals and central office administrators must be also be learning leaders. Therefore, the focus of the superintendent, and others, must be on teaching and learning to help teachers improve instructional practices, with student outcomes at the heart of all priorities. Jones and Howley (2009) explored the idea that the amount of time a superintendent spends on a task determines the superintendent’s priorities. While they ultimately found that a superintendent’s time on specific tasks is not easily correlated with the performance of the district, it would seem that setting priorities and vision for the district should include the efficacy of teachers and administrators and their impact on the achievement of students. This connection would stem from appropriate vision setting and subsequent follow through with actions that create the conditions and behaviors that value teaching and learning in classrooms. This may include the development of a strategic plan and other tools to enhance the creation, articulation, and communication of a district mission and a vision for the educational program for all teachers and students.

Fink and Resnick (2001) explored the concept that schools are often “bifurcated” entities in which two, or sometimes more, parts of the school system have goals that are not similar. In
other words, teachers tend to focus on the teaching and learning process, yet sometimes administrators focus on compliance with legal and regulatory mandates. This situation can result in a lack of shared vision, focused goals, and planned outcomes among teachers and students. Honig (2009) noted that school district offices, led by the superintendent, will meet the demands for continuous improvement if they operate as a “learning organization” (p. 23) with a shared vision and clear definition of excellence in teaching and learning.

The superintendent’s creation of the conditions for excellence in teaching and learning would greatly influence students and families, teachers, principals, other administrators, and all stakeholders in the educational process (Honig, 2012). The behaviors and conditions modeled by a superintendent could have wide-ranging impacts, not just at the local level, but also at the state and national levels. Best teaching practices, when implemented consistently, yield high quality results. Hess (2013) posited that the role of leadership encompasses that of coach and mentor. Hess further elaborated that there is another and equally important role, which is that of the “cage buster.” Leaders can and must find ways to shortcut through rules, regulations, and bureaucracy to elicit real change in schools and create the conditions of leadership desired by the individual, in this case the superintendent. An essential role of the superintendent is to develop building principals who have a significant impact on the success of all teachers and students. Drago-Severson (2007) stated that developing the capabilities of principals to become “learning leaders” is potentially a powerful tool for success in schools. If the vision is set by the superintendent, with follow through and consistency by the building principals as learning leaders, teacher efficacy and student achievement can flourish.

The work directed by the superintendent frequently is within a policy, compliance, legalistic, and mandate framework that ignores the actual work of teaching and learning in
classrooms (Cuban, 1984). Placing more emphasis on excellence in teaching and learning would help refocus the important vision of successful student achievement in all classrooms (Honig, 2009). Grove (2002) pointed out that the most highly effective central office leaders, including the superintendent, are effective because they are invisible. However, Grove further explained that certain behaviors, beliefs, and actions create a shared understanding of the expectations, values, and vision of a district. These include setting high expectations for all students, teaching the district’s curriculum, using of best teaching practices, using assessment to inform instruction, and recognizing and valuing diversity (Grove, 2002). This is pivotal to understanding how effective superintendent behaviors lead to the creation of conditions that can promote excellence in teaching and learning in all classrooms.

This approach to the prioritization of teaching and learning would have an immediate impact in local districts and could be foundational in spurring new ways of thinking about teaching and learning in districts across the state and nationally. It would also seem to transcend the K-12 school environment and could filter upward to higher education as well, potentially having international educational application and implications. Additionally, this work would fill a gap in our knowledge about how the actions and behaviors of a district superintendent are related to setting conditions that promote excellence in teaching and learning.

**Positionality Statement**

In my school district, the lack of a written strategic plan has daily impacts on both administrators and principals. This particularly affects me in my role as the assistant superintendent for teaching and learning as I try to advance excellence in teaching and learning in the district. A significant part of my job is to be forward thinking and ahead of the next curve in education, whatever it may be. This approach is hampered by a lack of methodical and
intentional strategic planning for desired outcomes. This type of strategic planning should provide a roadmap for all stakeholders with an embedded definition of success for all.

I have worked for six superintendents during my career and have had the opportunity to observe many others in that role. The approaches that a district can take systemically with regard to the pursuit of excellence in teaching and learning vary considerably depending on personnel, school committee support, community values, financial resources, and the demographics of a community. While I feel supported in my work by the superintendent and the district, working for excellence in teaching and learning is not adequately supported by our infrastructure and budget. Budget shortfalls are further complicated by the lack of a strategic planning process, which limits opportunities for defining and executing the future work of the district.

**Researcher background and bias.** I grew up believing that education was the key to all the future would hold. My parents were both first generation Americans, born to Jewish immigrants from Russia and Poland. Attending college was not an expected outcome for people of their circumstances and generation: I was the first in my family to graduate college. My father deeply believed that his life would have been far different, and his ability to provide for his family would have been far different, if he had benefited from a college education. He was determined that his two daughters would have every advantage in accomplishing this goal. He was equally uncompromising in his insistence that education for girls was critical, which was not a common belief when I attended high school in the 1970s.

My sister and I both grew up understanding that the debate was not about attending college, but rather was about the selection of an appropriate college or university. Long before it was fashionable, we engaged in activities that would help craft the ideal college application and resume. This emphasis on education and the innate value of being an educated person, in
addition to being well-read, well-traveled, and well-rounded, influenced me deeply. I therefore place a high value on the quality of education that is provided in public schools. The hopes and dreams of students and their families are at risk when the educational system fails and students aren’t adequately prepared for colleges or careers. Carlton Parsons (2008) explored the idea of positionality and bias in terms of the African American experience and science education research. She elaborated that the “deficit perspective” implies that access for all individuals from all “spheres of life” in the United States should be the same, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, and other differences (p. 1128). This has clear implications for administrators, educators and students as we strive to provide equitable and accessible education for all, regardless of background.

As Briscoe (2005) stated, “positionality affects one’s perceptions” (p. 25). Each of us comes to the dissertation process with a host of experiences and deeply held beliefs. With education as a second career for me, I approached this field with a level of maturity, parenting experience, and a multitude of other varied perspectives. My background in business allowed me to study first-hand the myriad of ways that corporate America rewards successes and punishes failures. While there is much to be learned in applying some central tenets from the business world to education, the key distinction is that we do not deal in widgets: we deal in children. This means that we must embrace shades of gray as we strive for excellence and improved student achievement.

The business world significantly affected my thinking and actions as an administrator. Neglect or inferior execution of one’s job responsibilities is not tolerated in the corporate environment. Achievement is pinned to successes embedded within the work. In education we cannot tolerate the inferior execution of the most important job in our field: classroom teachers
must be professionals with expertise in both content and pedagogy. To be supported in this
endeavor, all administrators in buildings and central offices, including the school superintendent,
must function as learning leaders with a clear vision and planned outcomes.

**Challenges related to my positionality.** In examining my problem of practice, I
recognize that my bias includes a deeply held belief in excellence for all. I believe in excellence
for its own sake in all that I do. It is a high bar of expectations and I do not always meet my own
standard. I do believe that I have accomplished a great deal more in life than I would have
without this philosophical underpinning. In turn, I expect all teachers, administrators, and
families to be completely dedicated to the task of educating all students. Unfortunately, this is
not always the situation. Fennell and Arnot (2008) discussed being “fluent in each other’s
culture” (p. 536). Educators must know their students well and district administrators, including
the superintendent, must know their constituents well. This “fluency of culture” allows for a
deeper understanding of the involved parties and creates a pathway for open and honest
discourse. It is only with this discourse that a superintendent can develop and implement a
culture of excellence, beginning with a shared vision and the implementation of conditions that
support high quality teaching and learning. Business models have limited effectiveness in
education due to the nature of the work. However, the importance of placing a high value on
effective teaching and learning in our classrooms cannot be understated or underrated.

A vision put forth by the superintendent and lived by all stakeholders is critical. This
unified approach would support the long term initiatives underway to provide appropriate teacher
professional development designed to improve student outcomes. A greater emphasis by all
administrators, beginning with the superintendent, on a district’s teaching and learning needs
would validate and further the work in our classrooms. I believe that a superintendent’s behavior
and ability to create the conditions for excellence in teaching and learning can set the tone for what is construed as mission critical. Failure to do so allows other tasks to take priority, distracting effort from what should be the uniform goal of all employees, families, and students: a high level of student success.

As a result of the value I place on the ideal of excellence in teaching and learning in my own work, I decided to examine and research which superintendent practices, behaviors, and conditions lead to setting the conditions for effective teaching and learning. I hope that the research will yield information as to what these practices, behaviors, and conditions can or should be. More specifically, I will be looking for ways to use these elements to be more effective at my current job, and possibly in a superintendency in the future.

**Research Question**

The primary research question is: What are the perceptions of a group of suburban superintendents in the Metrowest area of Massachusetts with regard to their role, as the primary instructional leader in a district, in creating and setting the conditions that promote excellence in the teaching and learning process?

This study will investigate how superintendents perceive their role as instructional leaders in their district and how they attempt to implement specific behaviors that can contribute to setting the conditions for excellence in teaching and learning for all. The study will be qualitative, using an interpretive phenomenological analysis approach.

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework of instructional leadership (IL) will be the foundation for understanding how superintendents further excellence in teaching and learning in their districts.
This section will discuss the instructional leadership framework, including its historical background and significance.

**Instructional leadership as a conceptual framework.**

**Historical background of instructional leadership.** The instructional leadership framework evolved from the work of many researchers and practitioners: no single individual can be credited with its creation. Cuban (1984) described the impact of top-down district leadership on schools and their leaders. This approach may create a situation in which the principal is in an uncomfortable space between the district administration and the teachers. The superintendent and other central office personnel often determine the need to implement directives and mandates within a school; this has potentially far reaching results. The directives and mandates frequently stem from other federal, state, or local requirements. Cuban (1985) addressed the conflict that can occur between teachers and administration as a result of the principal’s accountability to the district. The superintendent can set the leadership direction and vision for the district with clear and specific statements of goals, vision, and policies.

Instructional leadership is multi-faceted, and has undergone a process of evolution. Hallinger (1992) explored the progression of the role of the educational leader since the 1980s through three phases. The first phase placed the administrator in a managerial role, while the second made the administrator an instructional leader. In the current third phase, the administrator is a transformational leader, thought of as the “head learner,” and as such participates with staff in the professional growth and development process. Hallinger (1992) presented the three phases as sequential and evolutionary and did not directly address any overlap between and among these elements of leadership.
While Hallinger’s (1992) stages were progressive and evolutionary, Fink and Resnick (2001) noted that schools are often “bifurcated” into the operations of a school and its curriculum and instruction sector. The two primary sub-entities often have dissimilar goals, which can create strained relationships with a lack of focus and planned outcomes. Educators looking to advance into the ranks of leadership have traditionally had to choose the school and operations line of leadership rather than the curriculum, teaching, and learning line of leadership. They depicted an approach that developed and sustained a culture of learning among administrators across one school district and impacted teachers without losing the primary focus on student achievement results. Fink and Resnick (2001) described a cultural shift in the priorities of administrators toward learning leadership that demonstrated the impact of both adult and student learning in a district. This approach unites the bifurcated systems within a school setting and furthers a shared goal with commonly understood practices to yield intended results.

In another iteration of instructional leadership, a seminal work by Drago-Severson (2007) explored how school leaders can promote teacher learning within schools. Teacher learning is one aspect and outcome of instructional leadership. The study included a diverse sample of school leaders and asked how administrators utilized leadership to impact adult learning and what specific practices supported transformational learning. Drago-Severson (2007) outlined four pillar practices that support teacher learning, professional development, and adult learning theory. These four pillars serve as a foundation for transforming school administrators into learning leaders because they are developmentally based. The pillars are teaming, providing leadership roles, collegial inquiry, and mentoring.

Research on principals as developmentally robust learning leaders depicts the evolution of the principal beyond the role of a school manager. Drago-Severson (2007) portrayed
“learning-oriented leadership” as a means for the principal to focus on the ways in which a teacher can grow and learn. This assumes that professional learning will ultimately impact the quality of education for children and their associated expected learning outcomes. This would also apply to superintendents in the role of learning leaders as well.

As critical as teacher learning is, Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008) addressed the impact of leadership on student outcomes and found that instructional leadership and learning leadership have more significant impacts on student learning than transactional leadership. They determined that leadership directly affects teacher learning and development, and indirectly affects student outcomes. Robinson et al. (2008) focused on the types of leadership, noting that there is often a period of transactional leadership during the shift towards a learning leadership framework within a school. Connecting leadership with the primary purpose of school is critical to creating and maintaining appropriate student outcomes. They noted that in high performing schools, the leaders and staff work together to improve teaching and learning, which is the essence of the instructional leadership framework.

**Significance of instructional leadership.** Blase and Blase (1999) discussed viewing schools as communities of learners. The administrator as instructional leader is central to this concept. They noted direct and indirect impacts of the principal on teacher behaviors. The essential element is that teachers must reflect to show growth; the learning leadership model encourages this reflection as a means of improving teaching and learning. Blase and Blase (1999) provided data that informs practice. The impact of the administrator’s behavior as an instructional leader had a significant effect on teachers. This suggests that effective approaches to instructional leadership must encompass a variety of strategies, such as reflective conversation, collaboration, modeling, and coaching.
Leithwood et al. (2008) addressed seven claims about effective school leadership. Chief among these is the concept that school leadership is central to student learning. This is a major tenet of the instructional leadership framework. Leaders have the opportunity to improve the teaching and learning process indirectly by working with the adults in a school and by using a pattern of distributed leadership, thereby increasing understanding and contributing to the goals of the school. It is essential to link research with effective practice in the field. Leithwood et al. (2008) made the point that indirect leadership, demonstrated through its direct impact on staff performance, increases student achievement.

The role of a school district superintendent is complex, multi-faceted, and requires multiple skill sets. It is a “one-of-a-kind job” (Antonucci, 2012) because one of the most important roles of a school superintendent is to serve as the primary instructional leader in a school district. School leaders today must ensure that high standards for teaching and learning are developed and maintained so that positive student outcomes are achieved academically, socially, emotionally, artistically, and athletically.

King (2002) provided a detailed description of the shift from managerial leaders to learning leaders in schools, recognizing the need for student achievement to drive all activities of both the principal and teachers. Because principals and central office administrators must be the primary learning leaders in the district, the focus of the superintendent, among others, must be on teaching and learning in order to help teachers improve instructional practices, with student outcomes as the top priority. The superintendent is the primary instructional leader in a district; by modeling and living this value, he or she sets the conditions for effective teaching and learning.
Huber (2004) addressed the need for school leaders to be seen in context with the school and district in which they are operating, placing the situation as a determinant of effectiveness. A school administrator or district leader, such as a superintendent, must balance many roles; the most important focus, however must be on teaching and learning. He referred to school administrators as “multifunctional miracle beings,” but to be effective, they must use distributed leadership or some method of sharing the responsibility for all of the required tasks. The implication is that learning leadership places more value on teaching and learning than on the managerial roles that can easily become compelling for administrators on any given day. By extension, this focus on teaching and learning must begin with all of the work done in the district by the administrators and, specifically, the superintendent.

**Alignment of conceptual framework and research question.** The alignment of the school district superintendent with the conceptual framework of instructional leadership is a natural fit because teaching and learning is inherent in the work of all school and district administrators. These efforts require leadership by the superintendent. The lens of the instructional leadership conceptual framework frames all decisions and outcomes from the standpoint of what is best for students. Instructional leadership places the focus of all that superintendents do in schools where it is most necessary: on the education of the students in the district.

The researcher is interested in learning how superintendents perceive their role as instructional leaders in their district and what specific behaviors can contribute to setting the conditions for excellence in teaching and learning for all. It will be necessary to focus tightly on the superintendent’s role as an instructional leader, distinct from the myriad of other responsibilities they have and the tasks that must be completed. Therefore, the primary research
question is: What are the perceptions of a group of suburban superintendents in the Metrowest area of Massachusetts with regard to their role, as the primary instructional leader in a district, in creating and setting the conditions that promote excellence in the teaching and learning process? Instructional leadership is the essence of the most critical role in superintendency, and therefore the research question is designed to pursue greater understanding of the superintendent’s role with regard to this one area. There are a multitude of tasks that must be completed each day by a superintendent, and many other important overall goals that must be accomplished in the longer term. The purpose of schools is to educate, to provide instruction. Superintendent leadership is needed so that the instructional goals of a district become the realized outcomes.

Conclusion

The essential elements of instructional leadership as a conceptual framework include the idea that the school district superintendent and all other administrators are responsible for the teaching and learning activities in a district and its schools. Instructional leadership has evolved over time (Hallinger, 1992), with many definitions and incarnations. The choice of instructional leadership as the conceptual framework allows this study to focus on the superintendent’s work of educating children as an educational leader. While there is an abundance of literature pertaining to the instructional leadership conceptual framework for principals, teachers as leaders, and other administrators, there is a noticeable gap in the research with regard to school district superintendents. This work seeks to provide more insight into the role of the superintendent within this framework.

This problem of practice is significant for all practitioners and students in a district because strong instructional leadership sets the optimal conditions for teaching and learning. Examination of the role of the school superintendent as an instructional leader can help inform
both current and aspiring superintendents in their quest to drive teaching and learning in their district. Instructional leadership and the role of the school district superintendent are inextricably intertwined. This is true based on the job description of a superintendent, who is accountable for student outcomes, as well as the philosophical belief that the most important elements of a school system pertain to the teaching and learning within. This extends and applies directly to the school superintendent and all stakeholders of the district.

In order to research this problem of practice within the instructional leadership conceptual framework, it will be necessary to incorporate the views of some individuals currently in that role. This interpretive phenomenological analysis will conduct interviews, gather and analyze data, and determine findings. It is hoped that a determination of how best to create the optimal conditions for effective teaching and learning will emerge from this research, so that the needs of all students within a school district can be met.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Orr (2006) noted that superintendents face daily challenges that have traditionally been identified as falling into three areas: managerial, political, and educational. Superintendents’ work is at the “nexus” of these domains, as they negotiate the various demands and interests of stakeholders in public education. The superintendency is rich in history, with evolving roles, but today it includes the role of the superintendent as an instructional leader. A superintendent must be guided by a strong and coherent vision, with a focus on student achievement as the final outcome of all work (Lashway, 2002b; Lewis, Rice, & Rice, 2007).

This literature review delves into concepts of instructional leadership as they pertain to the role of the superintendent. The review is organized around these questions, which will be addressed in the sections that follow:

1. What is the historical background of instructional leadership and the superintendency?
2. What is the contemporary context of instructional leadership for a school district superintendent?
3. What district structures support the superintendent as the primary instructional leader?
4. Why is the role of the superintendent as the primary instructional leader important?

Historical Background of Instructional Leadership and the Role of the Superintendent

Antonucci (2012) noted that the role of the superintendent has evolved over time. Kowalski (2006) determined that during the 1800s and into the 1900s, the most significant role of the superintendent was overseeing classroom instruction. Later in the 20th century, the role of the superintendent changed to encompass a business manager function as well. The role of the superintendent became that of an inclusive manager, similar to the chief operating officer of an organization. In that model, the role of the superintendent as the primary instructional leader...
became a lesser focus. By the latter part of the 1900s, the superintendent once again emerged as the primary instructional leader in a district (Bjork, 1993; Cuban, 1984).

Hallinger (1992) detailed the evolution of the role of the superintendent since the 1980s through three distinct phases. The first phase continued placing the administrator or superintendent in a managerial role. This was followed by the concept of the superintendent as an educational and instructional leader. The last idea was the superintendent as a transformational leader. In this phase of school leadership, the administrator or superintendent is thought of as the “head learner,” participating with all staff in the professional growth of all educators. Hallinger (1992) presented these three stages as sequential, without overlap between and among the elements of leadership.

Cuban (1984) stated that little attention has been paid to the role of district leaders as it pertains to implementing effective programs and developing positive change. While superintendents remain pivotal in determining how the resources of a district are deployed, among other important tasks, perspectives on the multi-faceted roles of the superintendent have not been captured in previous research (Antonucci, 2012). Cuban (1984) stated that superintendents play a role in the development and execution of the district’s education policies and vision. This occurs when the superintendent establishes instructional goals, to be measured by student outcomes, revises policies to drive rigorous outcomes, mandates the planning process in schools, and reviews curriculum and materials.

Real leadership by a superintendent is identified by Cuban (1985) as including three primary roles; he said they must occur simultaneously, differing from Hallinger (1992), who defined them as occurring in a more linear manner. Cuban identified the roles of superintendent as politician, manager, and teacher. He noted that the role of the politician is essential in
procuring the necessary resources for the district and that the role of the manager ensures stability within the school district. However, his conception of the superintendent as a teacher is meant both literally and metaphorically. Historically, superintendents typically taught in addition to their other job duties. This evolved into the idea that superintendents are instructional leaders, based on their own sound teaching experiences and practices.

Bjork (1993) noted that the educational reform movement that began in the 1980s urged improvement in classroom instruction and underlined the need for strong instructional leadership in schools and districts. He elaborated that improving education “requires” district level leadership and that superintendents who serve effectively as instructional leaders become pivotal to instructional success in their districts. Both Bjork (1993) and Hallinger (1992) discussed the impact of direct and indirect influence by the superintendent on curriculum and instruction. Bjork (1993) cited Murphy, Hallinger, and Peterson in stating that when districts have superintendents who are personally involved with these topics, they tend to have excellent student achievement outcomes.

Petersen (1999) detailed three important findings as drivers of success in districts. These include a superintendent who is able to hire and retain administrators who share a common vision with him or her, fiscally stable conditions and support of the local community, and the strict alignment of the curriculum and teaching strategies to the planned district outcomes. He elaborated that several important themes came from his data with regard to instructionally focused superintendents. These themes included “creation of a vision, increased visibility, modeling of academic expectations, developing rapport with the school board, and management of instructionally oriented programs” (p. 15). These themes were mirrored by Cuban (1985) and King (2002).
While the Hallinger’s (1992) stages were progressive and evolutionary, Fink and Resnick (2001) noted that schools are often simultaneously “bifurcated” among the operations of a school and its curriculum and instructional priorities. This discordance can lead to a lack of cohesive efforts, goals, and planned outcomes. The authors identified that the development of a culture of learning for adults across the district catalyzes a focus on student achievement.

Blase and Blase (1999), Drago-Severson (2007), and Honig (2012) noted that it is essential for instructional leaders to prioritize providing high quality professional development opportunities for faculty and staff. This is enhanced when the superintendent and building administrators engage and participate with teachers in professional development, and is further enriched when teachers collaborate with one another to study teaching, including visiting one another’s classrooms as a community of learners. Central to this concept of providing high quality professional development is the principal as the instructional leader of a building and the superintendent filling the same role for the district. Learning as the primary focus should permeate all aspects of the business of the district, seen in every classroom in each school building. Administrators facilitate this adult learning as instructional leaders. It falls to the superintendent to ensure that the focus of all operations and activities center on teaching and learning for adults and students (Pajak & Glickman, 2002).

King (2002) and Honig (2012) described the change in education towards principals and superintendents as learning leaders in schools, rather than taking a more managerial approach to running schools and districts. This recognized the need for student results to be the paramount impetus for all work and activities by administrators and teachers. The hallmark of this change is the conception that principals and central office administrators, the superintendent among them, must be learning leaders. With teaching and learning as district priorities, all administrators must
help teachers improve instructional practices, squarely placing student achievement as the central focus of the district.

Rorrer, Skrla, and Scheurich (2008) identified four essential roles for all school districts and, therefore, for school district superintendents. These roles are “providing instructional leadership, reorienting the organization, establishing policy coherence, and maintaining an equity focus” (pp. 313-314). They noted that a universal and accepted definition of instructional leadership does not permeate the field. Yet, they isolated two essential contributing factors, “generating will to reform and the capacity to do so” (p. 315). One key point that emerged from their research was that the district matters, as an organized collective led by the superintendent. The superintendent engages with principals and others within a network that links the district and the schools in their work. The district is an “institutional actor” (p. 333) that shapes how all individuals bring about positive change, creates greater capacity for change, and realizes results. The superintendent is foundational in this work by taking a learning leader approach to all tasks (Drago-Severson, 2007).

Contemporary Context of Instructional Leadership and the Superintendent

Vision of the superintendent. Lewis et al. (2011) put forth the concept that a school superintendent must create a vision for the district and must plan for all stakeholders to meet the goals that are part of that vision. In fact, identifying the vision and mission of a district and setting the necessary goals to achieve that vision and mission are among the most important aspects of a superintendent’s job (Dufour, 2007; Portis, Garcia, Postlewait, & Walsh, 2007; Townsend, Acker-Hocevar, Ballenger, & Place, 2013). This vision setting is the primary task of a superintendent, and it is within this framework that a focus on excellence on teaching and learning can and should be designed and implemented (Lewis et al., 2011).
Townsend, et al. (2013) defined a school’s mission in a three pronged manner: the identification of the focus of the school, the management of the instructional program, and the creation of a positive school learning climate. They argued that the focus on learning for all includes students, teachers, leaders, and the school system itself. The interactions between these components will lead to achievement of the goals and vision of an entire district. In other words, a focus on learning drives the goals and vision of both an individual school and its district. According to Townsend et al. (2013), this must begin at the top, with the superintendent, or it will be doomed to failure.

Lashway (2002a) and Drago-Severson (2007) noted that superintendents must create a vision that has instruction at the top of the district’s priorities. All work in the district must be geared towards continuous academic improvement for students, while managerial work and the other requirements for success continue as well. He noted that superintendents have the opportunity to create “powerful” communities of learners within their districts that are inclusive of both adults and children.

**Superintendent as primary instructional leader.** Forner, Bierlein-Palmer, and Reeves (2012) stated that there is a distinction between “leadership priorities and leadership practices” (p. 5). They defined leadership practices as the “actions, activities, and habits” used to carry out the identified leadership priorities (p. 5). They further specified that seven practices are the hallmarks of effective superintendents. These key elements include the setting of goals and expectations, supporting reform via personal connections, effectively intervening for needy students, removing under-performing professional staff, developing close working relationships at all levels, taking a tough stance in union negotiations, and making the financial commitments to match the district priorities. They added that effective superintendents must “provide
autonomy” to building administrators and that this is a leadership priority for the superintendent, along with having an effective teacher in each classroom. The combination of this autonomy and Drago-Severson’s (2007) “pillar practices” position schools to become effective entities.

Drago-Severson (2007) stated that developing the capabilities of principals to become “learning leaders” is potentially a powerful tool for success in schools. Drago-Severson (2007) suggested that four “pillar practices” support teaching and learning in schools by building administrators. “These pillar practices include teaming/partnering with colleagues within and outside of the school, providing teachers with opportunities to take on leadership roles, engaging in collegial inquiry, and mentoring” (p. 87). The superintendent must embed these practices in the ways in which schools in a district are run in order to provide the greatest opportunities for efficacy in teaching and learning.

Learning in the district can be nurtured and flourish only under the auspices of superintendents who value approaching the role as an instructional leader. All of these things take time. Natkin et al. (2002) determined that superintendents typically remain in place for more than six years. This is considered enough time for a superintendent to be an effective change agent who can develop, implement, and monitor change initiatives in a district.

Robinson et al. (2008) stated that there are specific instructional leadership practices that can positively affect student outcomes and contribute to success. These practices apply to superintendents, principals, and others on the leadership team. These leadership elements are: establishing goals and expectations; strategic resourcing; planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum; promoting and participating in teacher learning and development; and ensuring an orderly and supportive environment. High performing schools have district and building based leadership engaged in the implementation and oversight of each of these
dimensions. This falls under the jurisdiction of the superintendent and these actions succeed or fail as a result of the superintendent’s vision and priorities, or lack thereof (Bredeson & Kose, 2007).

In order to shift the culture of a building towards a culture of learning for all, a building administrator must view himself or herself as a learner as well (Brookhart & Moss, 2013). Brookhart and Moss put forth the premise that principals who see themselves as learners are able to promote a culture of learners in a school building. Principals who view themselves in a supervisory capacity promote an evaluative culture in a school, instead leading all learning. Similarly, superintendents have the opportunity to employ structures that support learning leaders, including themselves, as opposed to managerial or evaluative structures that promote an evaluative culture rather than a learning culture (Pajak & Glickman, 2002).

Wahlstrom and Louis (2008) addressed the need for building administrators to have an appropriate understanding of the curriculum so they can provide appropriate feedback to teachers. This feedback is required for the improvement of teaching and learning within the educator evaluation system. Building administrators can have a significant effect on instruction, albeit in an indirect fashion, which is why capacity-building aimed at school-based administrators is essential for driving student achievement. This capacity-building emanates from district initiatives and priorities, as set by the superintendent. Similarly, school district superintendents must also be fluent in the curriculum and best instructional practices in order to provide feedback to principals on the efficacy of recommendations for improvement they give teachers in these areas (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008).

**Superintendent as a change agent.** Change in school districts is inevitable, whether due to the imposition of state or federal mandates or implemented after a period of introspection
about strengths and needs. Bredeson and Kose (2007) presented the view that the imposition of mandates can also serve as a lever for needed change. External demands in the form of regulations or mandates can sometimes prompt stakeholders to accept the need for change. Lewis et al. (2011) contended that school superintendents in today’s educational setting must adapt quickly to frequent changes in order to be successful. These changes may stem from the external imposition of mandates and regulations or result from internal motivation to make positive change.

Dufour (2007) posited that the most critical duties of the school district leader, the superintendent, are to be clear about the current situation in a district and to identify both the strengths and challenges inherent in it. Then he or she must determine if there is a need for change and set coherent goals for the achievement of the identified change. Dufour (2007) elaborated that clarity requires the superintendent to articulate the indicators that will be used to monitor progress towards the identified change as well as to create ways in which all stakeholders can contribute to the planned outcomes. This action planning also requires that a timeline be used to monitor progress.

While change is often necessary to advance the reform effort of a school district, Danna and Spatt (2013) warned against a “change of the day” approach to the running of a school district. They elaborated that superintendents ensure that systems are in place so that the curriculum, instruction, and assessments in a district are aligned with the national and state mandates, which negates the need for daily reactions to imposed changes. They posited that it is the superintendent’s responsibility to safeguard the curricular and instructional processes in a district.
Similarly, Portis et al. (2007) and Dufour (2007) stated that a superintendent can lead a change effort only after the clear and deliberate expression of the district’s vision, as well as stating the need for and goals of a reform effort. Portis et al. (2007) further contended that the culture of a district stems from a “relentless commitment to results, ownership, equity, and continuous learning” (p. 20). This extends to articulating a vision with regard to the expected quality of teaching and learning in a district and the climate in which this focused effort takes place. The commitment to a vision and emphasis on excellence in continuous learning is the responsibility of the superintendent and, by extension, the rest of the organization (Portis et al., 2007).

Schechter (2011) and McFadden (2014) stated that change and the courage to enact change are difficult when the culture of a district is not geared for learning from past practice. Schechter found that superintendents were concerned that learning from successes in education would be negatively affected by the absence of reflective practices among educators and policy makers. Schechter also noted that superintendents did not create the opportunity to learn from success with the district’s principals and others because of the other urgent priorities facing them. McFadden (2014) noted that leading change in today’s world is not easy work and likely comes at a high price for educational leaders. He elaborated on the need for courage and suggested strategies for sustaining this courage. He noted that fear and anxiety are inherent in the work and that mistakes are opportunities for learning and growth. He urged leaders to be strategic in their work and to seek help when needed.

**District Structures that Support the Superintendent as the Primary Instructional Leader**

**Central office structures.** Sullivan and Shulman (2005) determined that the superintendent’s leadership drives a district. They identified three basic strategies as part of the
implementation of an education vision. These included modeling of professional practice, providing individual support as needed, and being directly involved in the hiring and retention of staff. They noted the connection between these superintendent functions and school-based administrative functions, evolving to implement the district mission as identified by the superintendent. Lease (2009) noted that accomplishing these goals requires superintendents to delegate some of the responsibilities for day to day work. He stated that development of a “balance” is necessary to maintain awareness and control of all functions of the organization while allowing trusted individuals to perform their responsibilities with some amount of autonomy.

Cuban (1984) stated that the adoption of specific district policies in the appropriate sequence yields important results in school districts. These policies include the establishment of instructional goals, the thoughtful revision of student promotion policies, a planning process for instruction, an aligned curriculum that spans Kindergarten through Grade 12, supervisory and evaluative processes, the creation of a district-wide assessment system, and a high quality staff development program. Cuban further noted that these policies, when implemented by the superintendent in a deliberate and planned manner, have been effective in raising student achievement. Therefore, the policies and support of the board can enhance or hamper the efforts of the district superintendent (Banks & Maloney, 2007).

Banks and Maloney (2007) discussed the pressure on a superintendent from a school board or other elected governing committee. It is this committee, often composed of non-educators, to whom the superintendent must answer. They pointed out that setting the instructional vision with a focus on student learning is the most important job of the school district superintendent and that these priorities must be protected from the political factions that
may come to bear in a community. Ultimately, the superintendent’s performance evaluation conducted by the school board should be based on the success of students and the planned learning outcomes of a district.

Waters and Marzano (2007) expanded on this concept by acknowledging that a superintendent who implements an effective goal setting process creates non-negotiable goals for learning that are supported by the school board or committee. Furthermore, they posited that board members who evaluate the superintendent reach their own judgments about the efficacy of a superintendent with feedback and input from their constituents. The voters and taxpayers do not always understand the vision and mission of the school district, especially in the current climate of constant changes in education, unless the superintendent has been clear in communicating that information to the community at large, beyond the school buildings (Dufour 2007). This clarity of communication is a key responsibility of a school district superintendent (Dufour, 2007; Waters & Marzano, 2007).

Equally important to the success of a school district, is the role of central office personnel (Honig, 2012). Grove (2002) identified the central office staff as “crucial” to the effectiveness of a school system. Grove further elaborated that the superintendent is the primary instructional leader for the district, therefore all activities within the district related to teacher efficacy connect back to the superintendent’s leadership. Grove held that central office personnel are “invisible,” contributing to their ability to be effective but also making it more difficult to isolate their effect on the district. The “invisible” impact applies most pointedly to the superintendent as well (Banks & Maloney, 2007; Honig, 2009; Waters & Marzano, 2007).

Grove (2002) further stated that the primary role of the superintendent, the central office directors, and support staff is to provide the schools with what they need to get the job done. This
includes vision setting, providing necessary managerial and operational services to the schools, and sharing expertise. In concrete terms, this includes heat, classroom furniture, learning materials, appropriate staffing, and a host of other elements. Removal of obstacles that impede learning contributes to the efficacy of the teacher in the classroom. Less concrete, but not less important, is the hiring, training, retention, and ongoing professional development of school based administrators and teachers (Grove, 2002; Cuban, 1984).

Honig (2009) addressed the concept of school district central offices as “learning organizations” involved in the “joint work” of the district. This work includes the improvement of student achievement, facilitation of best practices, provision of resources, and the implementation of professional development that challenges all individuals to reflect about their work at high levels. This concept of “joint work” extends to program coherence, as noted by Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, and Bryk (2001) and Firestone, Mangin, Martinez, and Polovsky (2005). Newmann et al. (2001) and Firestone et al. (2005) identified the importance of program coherence in effective schools and districts. Program coherence is defined as common understandings of expectations with regard to curriculum, instruction, assessment, and the learning climate. Instructional program coherence ensures that all stakeholders are provided with the tools to effectively implement the program framework and its components. This includes providing time, funding, materials, and direction to accomplish this task. Newmann et al. (2001) noted that the priority for this task stems from the superintendent, but it is implemented locally by school-based administrators and teachers.

**School-based structures.** Honig (2008) stated that for districts to support teaching and learning, they must build capacity at the school level. District offices must make decisions that
lead to the support of school level work in this area. This work is grounded in the concept that central offices are learning organizations that influence the schools in the district.

Cuban (1984) described the impact of top-down district leadership on schools and their leaders, the principals. This approach may create a situation in which the principal is in an uncomfortable space between the district administration (the superintendent) and the teachers. In addressing the impact of the district on the school principal, he noted that a principal can set the leadership direction and vision for the school, yet this must be in conjunction with the district’s goals, vision, and policies. This confirms statements by Youngs and King (2002), pertaining to the need for connections and linkages between and among all layers of a district’s administrative personnel.

Youngs and King (2002) put forth the idea that effective administrators create the structures that promote teacher learning, thereby improving student learning. A broad based view of administrators includes the superintendents, central office directors, and building administrators. Their findings also addressed the connections and linkages between the instructional leadership of the superintendent, the development of optimal school organizational conditions, and student achievement.

Ritchie (2013) stated that the only vision a building administrator needs is to:

Hire the best teachers you can find, support them in every way possible, help them grow, evaluate them fairly, set and exemplify high expectations for everyone, and create and insist on a climate and culture where students feel safe, known, and challenged. (p. 20)

Stronge and Hindman (2003) stated that the teacher is the “common denominator” in improving schools and individual student success, and that hiring the best teachers ensures a school staff comprised of effective teachers. Enacting these tasks is a much larger challenge than these few
words would indicate. Schools are a human resource enterprise and therefore time and attention must be paid to these human factors above all else (Drago-Severson, 2007; Stronge & Hindman, 2003).

Stronge and Hindman (2003) said the prerequisites of effective teachers must be identified during the hiring process. Through model lessons and interviews conducted by the principal, much can be learned by using a domain based framework. Superintendents are the final decision maker in hiring, therefore the responsibility for hiring a solid work force lands squarely in that office, even though some of the initial work is done by principals. Hiring teachers with the greatest potential for success with students is only one piece of the equation. It is also necessary to conduct subsequent evaluations to determine if expected best practices and content knowledge are being applied by teachers in the classroom (Blase and Blase, 1999; Drago-Severson, 2007; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). Superintendents set the priorities for educator evaluation and determine which new teachers are renewed for continued employment within a district, based on evidence of effective teaching and learning. While teacher competency is determined in accordance with the supervision and evaluation policies of the district, with the principal and assistant principals as primary teacher evaluators, ultimately the decision making in personnel matters does fall to the superintendent.

Hess (2013) discussed the idea that leadership is comprised of two parts or roles that the superintendent or principal must assume. The first role of a leader is that of coach and mentor. This role is central to those studying or who are part of the educational leadership team in a school or district. Hess (2013) posited that there is another role, the “cage buster,” a leader who finds ways to shortcut through rules, regulations, and bureaucracy to elicit change in schools and create the conditions desired by the individual. Hess (2013) maintained that a creative approach
to problem solving and a focus on solutions is critical to success in education. Cage busting complements instructional leadership in that it is up to administrators to create the conditions for building a vibrant culture of learning for all. Creative problem solving can allow administrators to spend more time doing the things that matter in terms of being a learning leader.

Huber (2004) addressed the need for the school leader to be seen in the context of the school in which he or she is operating, placing a value on the situation of leadership as a determinant of effectiveness. A school principal must balance a multitude of roles, including that of a building manager. However, the most important focus must be on teaching and learning. Huber referred to principals as “multifunctional miracle beings,” but to be effective, they must use distributed leadership or some method of sharing the responsibility for all of the required tasks to be done. The implication is that learning leadership places value on teaching and learning rather than on the managerial roles that can easily become compelling for principals on any given day.

Cudeiro (2005) stated that superintendents identified their first priority as supporting the principals as instructional leaders. Strategies to accomplish this included focusing on student learning in the district vision, setting clear expectations about the principals’ role as an instructional leader, and holding principals accountable for their performance in that role. Support in effective districts encompassed reorganization of the central office to include personnel who had been principals and were directly familiar with the demands of school based leadership. Providing the needed time and resources to principals also allowed them to become more effective instructional leaders. According to Cudeiro (2005), a singular focus on the results with regard to student achievement was the underlying theme in effective school districts.
Professional development structures. Honig (2012) stated that professional development by the central office, under the leadership of the superintendent, is critical for principals to be effective. Professional development should be geared to support the work of improving classroom instruction and becoming effective instructional leaders. Honig (2012) noted that the empowerment of principals as instructional leaders must stem from the beliefs of all central office personnel, not just the superintendent. Honig (2012) further observed that supporting the principals as instructional leaders must be valued as an “executive level” responsibility by the superintendent and central office staff.

The effectiveness of professional development varies (Corcoran, Fuhrman, & Becher, 2001; Drago-Severson, 2007; Honig, 2012). A lack of focus and coordination can occur for several reasons, including a lack of focus in the district itself. Additionally, effective professional development stems from evidence based work, and often this is not the culture of a district. Similarly, districts sometimes use this time to inform staff of various things, rather than to train them for possibly changing practices to improve student achievement. Corcoran et al. (2001) further noted that school and district professional development often does not acknowledge the content base of teachers and overemphasizes “process and procedure” as opposed to enhancing learning for both teachers and students by being discipline based.

According to Grove (2002) and Youngs and King (2002), districts and schools must also carefully train teachers to meet the expectations of the job. There are several important messages to send to new teachers to ensure that they are successful. These include “hold high expectations for all students, teach the district’s curriculum, use best practices, use assessment to inform instruction, recognize and value diversity, and the message that there is support available to new teachers” (Grove, p. 46). Providing explicit direction and support for new teachers is essential in
ensuring that they have every opportunity to be effective and successful in improving student achievement and outcomes. The hiring and training of new teachers falls under the larger realm of the superintendent, who along with other instructional leaders in the district, contributes to the success of the process.

Another aspect of the successful hiring and induction of teachers lies in creating the proper conditions for teaching and learning. Youngs and King (2002) noted that these conditions include such factors as the “establishing of trusting relationships, creation of structures that promote teacher learning, and promoting teachers to initiate change efforts” (p. 665). Darling-Hammond (2009) further noted that one prerequisite for teachers to be able to learn effectively is the allocation of an ample amount of time. A commitment to high quality induction programs helps new teachers become familiar with a district and its instructional expectations. Hiring and training new teachers falls under the overall responsibilities of a school district, and the design and implementation of an effective process and program begins with the school superintendent. Sometimes this is delegated to a designee of the superintendent, but the bottom line responsibility remains with the superintendent (Honig, 2012).

Another key component of teacher efficacy is the ability and willingness of the teacher to be an active learner within the school community. This entails expanding content and pedagogical knowledge and efficacy and holds for both new and veteran teachers. According to Youngs and King (2002), in order to enhance the practices of a teacher or improve student achievement, professional development activities must address “knowledge, skills, and dispositions; professional community; and program coherence” (p. 647). Youngs and King further elaborated that administrators create and mold the beliefs and culture within a school and district with regard to teaching practices as a result of the priority, or lack thereof, placed on
teacher professional development. Superintendents must support the ongoing growth of teachers towards this end for a district to be truly effective (Darling-Hammond, 2009; Honig, 2012). This is done by the superintendent in setting the vision, determining appropriate budget priorities, developing internal capacity for professional development, hiring experts when needed, and providing the correct structures and supports for growth (Honig, 2012).

Darling-Hammond (2009) and Drago-Severson (2007) posited that professional development is most effective when it is part of a larger coherent effort aimed at school and district reform or improvement. Time must be provided in order for adult learning to occur, and Darling-Hammond (2009) further noted that “sustained, job-embedded, and collaborative” strategies yield highly effective teacher professional development results (p. 3). According to Darling-Hammond (2009) and Drago-Severson (2007), professional development delivered in this manner results in teachers who can more readily understand how students will best learn specific content. Hiring, training, and continuing professional development of new and veteran teachers falls within the realm of the instructional leadership provided in a district, emanating from the superintendent and filtering throughout the organization. It is these managerial activities, stemming from a leadership perspective, which contribute to teacher efficacy, as demonstrated by improvements in student achievement. It is the school district superintendent who ensures that the appropriate professional development activities in a district are given the full support necessary for the growth of teachers and administrators. This support can take the form of budgetary or human resources.

Drago-Severson (2007) noted that support of teacher learning is directly tied to the improvement of teaching, and therefore also supports the development and achievement of students. Similarly, Brookhart and Moss (2013) posited that establishing a culture of learning in
a school improves student learning by empowering teachers to become learners as well. The sought after essence and result of high quality professional development is that teachers become life-long learners and are eager to learn more about their content areas and ways in which to hone their instructional craft (Robinson et al., 2008). Brookhart and Moss (2013) further noted that “teaching practices matter,” indicating the need to share best practices in support of furthering the development of the teaching staff and improving student achievement.

The greatest challenge and mission of all school districts is to raise and maintain high levels of student achievement (Cuban, 1984). There are many factors that contribute to the success of a school district, and varied opinions regarding which strategies and conditions are effective in creating successful students, classrooms, schools, and districts. Teachers are on the front lines in classrooms and therefore have a prominent role in creating effective learning outcomes for students (Brookhart & Moss, 2013; Stronge & Hindman, 2003). Yet teacher effectiveness depends on the coordination and implementation of conditions that create opportunities for students to demonstrate success, defined here as improved achievement. The conditions that contribute to this improvement in teaching and learning includes, but are not limited to: the hiring and training of new teachers, teacher experience, the content and skill expertise of faculty, the availability of ongoing professional development for all teachers and administrators with regard to high quality teaching practices, and effective instructional leadership by building principals (Drago-Severson, 2007). Another contribution to the potential success of learning within a district lies in the ability and willingness of the school superintendent to create the best possible conditions for teacher and student learning, stemming from his or her own beliefs about student learning, faculty expertise, and the operation of a school district (Robinson et al, 2008; Stronge & Hindman, 2003; Youngs & King, 2002).
Student achievement is the foundational underpinning for all schools and districts (Harris, 2002). Grove (2002) indicated that effective teachers teach for understanding. Youngs and King (2002) stated that a teacher must have skills in curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and classroom management. The definition of teacher effectiveness remains elusive, and there is no single formula that can be created and implemented to ensure success (Ding & Sherman, 2006; Stronge & Hindman, 2003). However, a school superintendent who conveys a clear vision of teaching and learning, with high expectations for all teachers and learners, will help create the conditions necessary for success.

Stronge and Hindman (2003) pointed out that teachers have a “strong and cumulative” influence on the achievement of students. They identified a number of domains in which effective teachers excel. They described these domains as “the prerequisites of effective teachers, the teacher as a person, classroom management and organization, organizing for instruction, implementing instruction, and monitoring student progress and potential” (p. 50). They noted that the teacher must be able to implement instruction, using varied methodologies to meet the needs of all learners in order to improve student achievement and move the learning process forward. These components can form the basis of a superintendent’s high expectations for teacher efficacy in the classrooms and school buildings within a district.

Graczewski, Knudson, and Holtzman (2009) identified a strong relationship between school leadership and professional development opportunities. When the entire leadership team, including the superintendent, is involved in professional development, instructional improvement can follow. They further noted that school-based professional development opportunities are effective only when the capacity of the principal to facilitate and direct those activities is ensured. They noted that a principal must be an instructional leader in order to do this, but not at
the expense of his or her other required tasks. They further elaborated that the principal is pivotal when the district views the professional development of teachers as critical to improving instruction, thereby increasing student achievement. Yet, as important as it is for principals to function as instructional leaders, they noted that it is equally important for teachers to function as leaders in the realm of instruction as well.

**Significance of the Superintendent**

**Impact of superintendent.** Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) addressed the district lens, which must be brought into focus as it bears on school leadership. They posited that the building principals will be more effective as learning leaders when their work is aligned and supported by the work and vision of the school district and superintendent. This shared vision develops, contributes, and sustains the work, with a direct impact on teachers. Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) identified a strong connection between the work of district leadership (the superintendent) and the organizational conditions within the district as it affects school leaders. The creation of these conditions in a district can nurture or impede the effectiveness of school leaders. They further stated that a district vision is not enough: school organizations must also develop capacity, foster a collaborative culture, and manage the instructional program of the district well. These actions begin with the vision and values of a school superintendent and extend throughout the district (Lewis et al., 2011).

A component of the solid structure that must be in place within a district is the process for recruitment, hiring, and retention of high quality administrators, specifically building principals. Rammer (2007) put forth the concept that a superintendent who wishes to drive student achievement must hire principals who are capable and able to execute the responsibilities of the job effectively. To do this, superintendents must hire the correct individuals and invest in
the necessary training and support. Principals are an integral part of the learning leadership team and connect the superintendent to the teachers. This is similar to principals being charged with hiring the most effective teachers to ensure effective teaching and learning in classrooms (Blase and Blase, 1999; Ritchie, 2013).

Pajak and Glickman (2002) stated that the school principal is not the most essential contributor to the success of a school system. Rather, that role belongs to teachers and central office supervisors, including the superintendent. Their premise was that the superintendent and other central office personnel are the “key figures in stimulating and facilitating efforts to maintain and improve the quality of instruction” (p. 1). This is done by creating and maintaining an “instructional dialogue” in all areas of the school system and with all stakeholders using an “infrastructure of support.”

Leithwood et al. (2008) made the point that indirect leadership, demonstrated through its effect on staff performance, increases student achievement (p. 34). Wahlstrom and Louis (2008) concurred, indicating that there are indirect ways of acting as an instructional leader that affect student learning. Instructional leaders must know what is required in order to improve the quality of teaching and learning (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). This is true for building administrators as well as central office personnel and superintendents.

Superintendents are responsible for creating the conditions that ensure student learning (Banks & Maloney, 2007). This is supported by Waters and Marzano (2007), who wrote that high levels of student achievement are correlated with superintendents who implement “non-negotiable” goals for instruction, align the resources of the district to support professional development, and monitor progress towards achievement of the established goals. Waters and Marzano noted three important findings in their work: “district-level leadership matters, effective
superintendents focus their efforts of creating goal-oriented districts, and superintendent tenure is positively correlated with student achievement” (p. 29). It is clear that the superintendent is the individual charged with setting the vision of a district so it focuses on student learning, and also assumes the charge of maintaining this as a priority for the district.

**Conclusion and Implications**

Research indicates that the superintendent is essential in creating the conditions for high levels of teacher efficacy and student learning. Leithwood et al. (2008) claimed that school leaders, superintendents specifically, contribute to the improvement of teaching and learning in an indirect manner through their influence on faculty and staff. This includes motivation of the adults in the school community, the commitment of all adults to the district and its children, and the creation of appropriate working conditions.

Bredeson and Kose (2007) stated that a superintendent can drive initiatives in the district with regard to teaching and learning. They further elaborated that superintendents with a commitment to curriculum and instruction, rather than a managerial focus, are being hired more frequently in the role of school superintendent. This indicates the need for this background and expertise in schools. Accountability for student achievement demands that the profile of the superintendent evolve from that of the traditional managerial approach to that of learning leader.

The school superintendent is responsible for everything that happens in a school district (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). His or her primary charge is always to raise and maintain student achievement. This goal can come to fruition only in a district in which the superintendent acts as the primary instructional leader and sets a vision and mission that places student learning as the focal point of all activities. These activities encompass the actions of adults in the teaching and learning process, beginning with having an effective teacher in every classroom. Therefore,
building administrators, functioning as learning leaders, must hire and support the training and learning of all new and veteran teachers, under the direction of the superintendent. This must be supported by the district structures created and implemented by the superintendent (Honig, 2012). When the hiring, training, and ongoing professional development of staff is valued as having a significant impact on student learning, student achievement will improve (Drago-Severson, 2007). It is the responsibility of the superintendent to live the beliefs and values that support learning for all and to set the conditions for this approach so that a focus on student learning becomes a reality in his or her school district.
Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this doctoral thesis was to explore the perceptions of a group of suburban Massachusetts superintendents in the Metrowest area with regard to their role, as the primary instructional leaders in their districts, in creating the optimal conditions for excellence in teaching and learning. This study investigated how superintendents perceive their role as instructional leaders in their district and how they attempt to implement specific behaviors that can contribute to setting the conditions for excellence in teaching and learning for all.

The thesis used instructional leadership as its conceptual framework and the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm. The study was qualitative, using the methodology of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA was chosen because it supports the intent of the study, to analyze the perceptions and lived experiences of the individual participants in a detailed manner and to determine if there are wider patterns, themes, and trends across all of the participants. The positionality of the researcher was considered in this study.

Research Question

The research question was: What are the perceptions of a group of suburban superintendents in the Metrowest area of Massachusetts with regard to their role, as the primary instructional leaders, in creating and setting the conditions that promote excellence in the teaching and learning process? This study investigated how superintendents perceive their role as instructional leaders in their district and how they attempt to implement specific behaviors that can contribute to setting the conditions for excellence in teaching and learning for all.

Constructivist-Interpretivist Paradigm

Butin (2010) referred to constructivism-interpretivism as an ongoing story that changes shape as it is retold, with variations attributable to the individuals who comprise the storytellers.
All knowledge is embedded in shared understandings within various societies and cultures. The variations of understanding are dependent on many cultural factors and validate the constructivist-interpretivist view that there is no one best perspective, viewpoint, or way of being in the world. In other words, there are multiple realities. A study using the constructivism-interpretivism paradigm focuses on how people interpret events and is context specific. Research in the constructivism-interpretivism paradigm uses qualitative methodologies that encompass the more humanistic components of research. Constructivism-interpretivism supports the use of interviews, case studies, focus groups, surveys with narrative responses, and storytelling to gather evidence. In this paradigm, the researcher is an integral part of the research and interacts with the research itself. “Lived experiences” become the construct used to interpret day to day reality (Ponterotto, 2005).

The constructivist-interpretivist paradigm originated from the work of Edmund Husserl, among others, and was based on the hermeneutics work done previously by others in social science. This research paradigm does not require a hypothesis, and it is inductive and iterative in nature. Although it uses guided interview questions, a comment by a participant may lead to follow up questions. These areas of further probing may vary from participant to participant.

The constructivist-interpretivist paradigm set the stage for collecting data using interviews and then looking for common themes in that data. Six superintendents in suburban Massachusetts districts in the Metrowest area were interviewed. The constructivist-interpretivist paradigm facilitated having the participants define, explain, and interpret their experiences during focused, semi-structured interviews. The paradigm further allowed the researcher to explore the common themes, construct meanings, and interpret the results based on the
commonalities of the participants’ lived experiences, while acknowledging the researcher’s own background and positionality.

**Overview of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis**

IPA is a relatively new method of phenomenological inquiry, begun by Jonathan Smith of the University of London in 1996. While originally used in psychology, a wider application has been found in other social sciences, including the field of education. IPA is based on examining and explaining how participants live their experiences. While phenomenology and IPA both investigate the “essence” of a phenomenon, IPA concerns itself with the perceptions of the participant about the experience being described, while phenomenology is limited to description of the experience itself, rather than the perceptions of how participants internalized it. While phenomenology is one underpinning to IPA, both hermeneutics and idiography are also important components of IPA.

**Phenomenology.** Husserl viewed phenomenology as a thorough examination of a lived experience by a person (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Embedded in his belief was the concept that an individual would come to know his or her own experience and be able to identify the important features of that experience. He believed that phenomenological research identified the functional structure of an experience and that a researcher would be outside of the participant’s experience. In other words, a researcher would be “bracketed” out of the phenomenon itself, regardless of the personal experiences or positionality of the researcher.

Heidegger was a student of Husserl’s and incorporated key elements of phenomenology in his work. The key difference is a move towards a more hermeneutic philosophy. Heidegger acknowledged the study of an experience as being the basis of the methodology, but places the participant as an actor within the experience (Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, the context of a
situation in which an experience occurs becomes part of the scenario to be described and examined.

Van Manen (1984) defined phenomenology as the “study of lived experience” and the “study of essences” (p. 1). He further advocated for the idea of “thoughtfulness,” curiosity about a topic one cares about and that poses a question to be solved. Kenny (2012) stated that according to Clark Moustakas (1923-2012), a phenomenological researcher begins with a question that is vitally important to her or him. During the course of the work, a researcher becomes a part of the process and engages with the material using his or her own knowledge. Researchers must move between their own world and the world that they are exploring via the lived experiences of the participants in the study.

As noted in Creswell (2013), the phenomenological method of research has a number of characteristics. These include the focus of a study, the type of problem to be studied, the disciplines in which it is most found, the unit of analysis, the form of data collection, data analysis strategies, and the elements of a written report (Appendix A). Creswell detailed these elements and components as an overview of the phenomenological method of research. There are two types of phenomenological research. One is hermeneutical phenomenology, which relies on describing lived experiences within the interactions where they occur. In hermeneutical phenomenology, a researcher channels the interpretive process through data analysis, while acknowledging researcher bias and positionality within the work that is done. In transcendental phenomenology, a researcher must “bracket” oneself from the research in order to provide a higher level of objectivity while also presenting her or his bias (Creswell, 2013, p. 80). The data collection and data analysis phases of both types of phenomenological research are largely the same, notwithstanding the concern about bracketing a researcher’s own experiences.
According to Dowling (2007), phenomenology is both a research method and a philosophy, coming from the Greek word “phaenesthai, meaning to show itself, to appear” (p. 132). Dowling elaborated that the in-depth study of phenomena as they appear is required in order to draw important conclusions and have basic comprehension of an experience. Dowling (2007) also noted that a researcher must bracket one’s preconceptions by making them overt and clear. Kenny (2012) discussed the phenomenological approach as having heuristic roots in Clark Moustakas’ work, which was refined over a period of 30 years to help researchers make sense of the data emanating from it. Again, a Greek word is used to understand the heuristic roots, as “heuriskein” means to discover or find” (Kenny, p.6). This term is used to describe a way of thinking and is shared among other qualitative approaches. Kenny (2012) noted other approaches to phenomenological research that cannot be overlooked. These include engagement with the phenomenon of lived experience, other aspects of auto-ethnography that integrate a researcher’s experiences, aspects of narrative inquiry that value the process of collecting stories to capture human experiences, and grounded theory-data that comes from the process in an iterative manner. Blau, Bach, Scott, and Rubin (2013) went a step further and reviewed Moustakas’ work as the development of “potentialities” and the process of “becoming” (p. 98). These concepts also certify the researcher’s role in the study of human phenomena.

**Hermeneutics.** The study of hermeneutics is embedded in IPA. This underpinning is critical, as hermeneutics pertains to the idea of interpretation (Smith et al., 2009). The interpretive process incorporates the understanding of the writer as well as the phenomenon being written about, while still examining an individual’s lived experience. Hermeneutic analysis allows one to enter the research by acknowledging one’s own bias and positionality as part of the
interpretation. In fact, it is called “double hermeneutics,” as the interpretation is of both an individual’s experience and the writer’s experience.

Heidegger played an important role also in the development of hermeneutic philosophy. His work discussed interpretation and noted that researcher preconceptions must be accounted for in the interpretation of someone else’s lived experience. This researcher preconception can change as a result of interactions with a study participant who examines his or her own lived experiences and interprets them for a researcher. Hermeneutics also emphasizes understanding the relationships between a whole and its parts. This speaks to a non-linear and sometimes circular method of interpretation and analysis (Smith et al., 2009).

Idiography. Idiography is the third and last of the underpinnings of IPA and is concerned with the “particular” (Smith et al., 2009). This includes a sense of detail so that an accurate summary and interpretation of an event or lived experience is explored. The analysis must be deep, complete, and methodical. In IPA, context is critical so that the “particular” is well understood and examined with accuracy. The context is also a key element in the individual’s perceptions of a specific set of lived experiences, and it helps drive the interpretative analysis.

IPA is a newer addition to the field of research, having begun in the world of social sciences and psychology. IPA encompasses the study of lived experiences by individuals in an educational setting, making it an appropriate qualitative research choice and match for this study. The researcher examined the lived experiences of several participants by exploring their perceptions as a school district superintendent. The researcher also incorporated her existing preconceptions about the work of superintendents into this study.

**Data Collection and Analysis Process**

Data was gathered using a semi-structured interview process with guiding questions. All participants were asked the same questions (see Appendix A). The open-ended nature of the
questions allowed participants to elaborate on the topic so that his or her viewpoint and perceptions of the lived experiences were clearly the focus. Data collection included three rounds of interviews so that follow up questions could be generated and answered. Guiding questions were used for the first two rounds; the third round of interviews was designed to clarify any remaining questions. Therefore, the third interview consisted of questions designed to clarify or probe specific topics raised in the first two interviews. The first interviews were approximately 30 minutes and each subsequent interview lasted approximately 60-90 minutes.

Data from both sets of interviews was transcribed and coded so that larger themes could emerge from the research. These themes were cross-analyzed so common themes and differences could emerge from the data and become the basis of the study findings. Interviews were recorded using an iPhone and the application rev.com. The transcriptions were completed by rev.com, subject to a thorough review by the researcher. Additionally, participants were afforded an opportunity to review the transcripts for accuracy. Coded pseudonyms were used for all participants and individuals and their districts were not identified in the transcriptions or the dissertation. The researcher also took notes during the interviews and these notes became part of the data collection.

Participants. Six suburban superintendents were interviewed. They had completed at least one year in that role in their district. Participants were drawn from demographically similar suburban communities in the Metrowest area of Massachusetts. This ensured that the focus on the superintendents’ lived experiences would have a common base and that their perceptions of their lived experiences as instructional leaders could be examined based on their homogeneity. The sample size was designed to be representative yet manageable within the dissertation process.
**Recruitment and access.** Given the researcher’s role as an assistant superintendent, there were many superintendents with whom networking could occur. Superintendents in the local area frequently attend the same conferences, belong to the same special education collaboratives, and serve as colleagues together on various boards. An analysis was undertaken to determine which of the superintendents in the target geographic area met the criteria of the study. Superintendents were approached via email by the researcher. It was hoped that superintendents who had completed doctoral work were likely to choose to participate in the study in order to contribute to the knowledge base in the field and help a colleague.

**Data analysis.** Creswell (2013) presented data analysis as consisting of several important steps. He first noted that an organizational system for the data is required, followed by the careful reading of all data. During the reading process, the researcher formed initial codes, made notations in the margins, and created lists of commonalities to begin making sense of the data. When the initial reading and noting was completed, the process of breaking the data into codes and themes began. Only after codes were determined could themes emerge from the data, allowing significant statements to be developed. This was the beginning of the meaning making part of the work. The next phase included the interpretation of the data and encompassed the development of both textural and structural descriptions. These elaborated the essence of the phenomenon and can be thought of as what occurred and how it occurred, from the perspective of the study participant. Kenny (2012) described the data analysis process as the integration of a researcher’s understandings, resulting in the development of themes using “creative synthesis” (p. 9). McNamara (2005) also referenced synthesis, pointing out the need to work with the apparent and less obvious components of the research. Like Creswell (2013), he noted that the outcome is both “textural and structural” (p. 700).
Miles and Huberman (1984) explained that the data analysis process includes procedures for accumulating, reviewing, synthesizing, separating, and analyzing the data using set criteria to determine if a finding is meaningful. Most of this work is implicit, differing from quantitative research. They further noted that analysis has three activities embedded within the process, which all happen simultaneously. These three activities begin with data reduction. They define this as the process of converting raw data to text by sorting, coding, eliminating, and summarizing to sharpen the focus of the work. The second step is data display, which includes an organized presentation of data that would facilitate the next process, determining findings. Data display could include narrative, graphs, and charts. The last phase is drawing conclusions and verifying the data. This includes the creation of meaning from the data displays by examining patterns and explanations, as well as tests for validity. Marques and McCall (2005) used a “solidification strategy” to validate and support findings in a qualitative paper (p. 440). They defined this strategy as a form of qualitative inter-rater reliability, the degree to which various people within the project agree on the coding that was developed as emergent from the data. They further noted that validation strategies are implicit in qualitative work and are amended as needed throughout the work. This becomes part of the iterative data analysis process in phenomenological studies.

Smith et al. (2009) noted that the process of data analysis is not linear, and that a researcher should maintain a flexible approach that is iterative and inductive. They outlined a number of steps, many of which overlap with the phenomenological approaches noted by other researchers. According to Smith et al. (2009), these steps are: reading and re-reading, initial noting, development of emerging themes (within the data from one participant), searching for
connections across emergent themes, moving to the next case (participant), and looking for patterns across cases (participants). These six steps were followed in this study.

Presentation of findings. Miles & Huberman (1984) identified that a set of procedures for reporting the data is needed and that the process used for this purpose must be clearly communicated. It is necessary to document the way that a researcher collected data, did the analysis, and interpreted the results. Additionally, the data is typically in words, not numbers, and therefore must be organized into meaningful text. The data can and should also be displayed graphically.

Smith et al. (2009) identified writing as a creative process in which analysis continues throughout the writing and re-writing phases. They further identified the need to provide a complete report of what has been learned about each participant, supported by evidence from the data. This is repeated for all participants. However, it should be noted that rather than a summarization, it is incumbent upon a researcher to analyze the data. The written account must encompass the themes that emerged as well as the dissonance found as a result of the research. In all cases, claims must be supported by evidence from the research, included as excerpts in the written account.

Data storage. The iPhone recording was done on rev.com, a secure site with password protection. The iPhone was password protected. Transcripts were backed up on an external hard drive and were on the researcher’s computer, which is not shared and is password protected. The researcher was the only person able to access these materials and the list of coded pseudonyms which was used to protect the participants’ identity. At the conclusion of the research, original transcripts from rev.com and all recordings will be destroyed.
**Trustworthiness.** The researcher specifically addressed her own positionality with the interview participants. The research question was described as: What are the perceptions of a group of suburban superintendents in the Metrowest area of Massachusetts with regard to their role, as the primary instructional leaders, in creating and setting the conditions that promote excellence in the teaching and learning process? The researcher explained her interest in interviewing current superintendents in order to research their perceptions of their role as instructional leaders. It was the researcher’s belief that participants who chose to be interviewed came to the process willing to share their thoughts and perceptions. The researcher knew the participants personally or more generally before conducting the research. Similarly, the participants knew the researcher’s job title, colleagues, and other pertinent facts. The researcher provided transcripts so each participant could review her or his own interviews. The base of the interviews was the same for all participants: largely open ended questions. The researcher followed up with questions as needed for clarification in the original and second round of interviews.

**Conclusion**

This research study explored the perceptions of suburban district superintendents with regard to their role as the primary instructional leaders in their districts. IPA was an appropriate methodological choice for this research because, as Smith et al. (2009) pointed out, IPA is used to explore the lived experiences of an individual and his or her perceptions of that experience. Further, the positionality of the researcher was taken into account as a part of the study. This research identified common themes among the participants as instructional leaders that can contribute to the body of research describing the lived experiences of school district superintendents in select communities located in the target research area.
Chapter 4: Research Findings

This chapter explores the profiles of the study participants and also details why each individual chose to become a superintendent. The reasons for becoming a superintendent included three major themes: to be a change agent, to be the primary instructional leader in the district, and to implement a vision. An exploration of the participants’ perceptions of their expected and unexpected outcomes while in the role of superintendent is also presented. The superintendents who participated in the study all noted that there were both expected and unexpected outcomes as they assumed this role. In many cases, expected and unexpected outcomes overlapped in that the situation may have been expected, but the end result was different than anticipated. Many participants noted that they expected to be involved in budget preparation and school committee matters, but did not anticipate the extent to which their involvement in these areas would impact their role.

The chapter presents the significant themes found after analysis of the research data. The major themes include the beliefs of the participants about teaching and learning, the connection between these superintendent beliefs and their leadership, and the impact of these beliefs on the teaching and learning practices in a district. Additional themes that were found in the data include a discussion of the beliefs that influence decision making, the superintendent as the responsible party for creating the conditions for excellence, and the successes and challenges noted by participants. Further themes included the superintendents’ desired changes in the teaching and learning practices in each community, the changes to the role of superintendent for these participants, and the structures as well as the strategies and practices used within each district by the superintendent. The major themes contained a variety of sub-themes and ideas presented by the study participants, which are also explored in this chapter.
The purpose of this doctoral thesis was to explore the perceptions of a group of suburban Massachusetts superintendents in the Metrowest area of Boston with regard to their role, as the primary instructional leaders in their districts, in creating the optimal conditions for excellence in teaching and learning. Originally coined by a local newspaper in the 1980s, the term Metrowest encompasses the geographic area that comprises the communities west of Boston and east of Worcester. The area is made up of over 20 municipalities in three different counties. Each municipality has its own school district or participates in a small regional school district. In all cases, the school districts are funded by the local cities and towns in conjunction with state and federal aid.

**Demographics**

The demographics of the six Metrowest communities in the study are fairly homogeneous, typical of the region, and stand in sharp contrast to the population of students in the state of Massachusetts as a whole. The state of Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2016) reported that approximately 63% of all students statewide are identified as White. The proportion of White students in the Metrowest communities represented in this study ran from 85% to 91%. The percentage of students in the state who are identified as coming from economically disadvantaged families is over 27%. The communities in this survey identified a range of 4-17% of economically disadvantaged families. Students who are considered English Language Learners (ELL) were less than 2% of the total students in the survey communities, compared to 9% statewide. The only statistic that is within a similar range as the comparable state statistic is the percentage of students with disabilities. The state data identifies 17.4% of students as having disabilities, and communities in this research ranged from 12%-19%, fairly close to the statewide average.
Participant Profiles

Mary. The first study participant was the superintendent of a Metrowest suburban school district with 11 schools and approximately 6,000 students in Community 1. She had been in this job, her first superintendency, for seven years. She had over 30 years of experience in education in several states; prior to becoming a superintendent, she worked as a special education teacher, a special education director, and an assistant superintendent. She held a bachelor’s degree, a master’s degree, a certificate of advanced graduate study (CAGS), and a doctorate in educational leadership. The researcher had known the participant professionally for over 5 years prior to the study. Both interviews were conducted in her office, located in the district administration offices, which were situated within the town hall of Community 1. She appeared completely at ease and was enthusiastic about her participation in the study.

Mary became the superintendent after being approached by her community school committee. She was the assistant superintendent at the time, and the district did not want to embark on significant transition in the leadership role by hiring a candidate from outside the district. She noted the following areas in terms of unexpected outcomes: politics, budget needs, the scope of the job, and the work to be done to effect change. Mary said:

I think the politics have had a huge impact. So much of the job is about politics and relationships. An understanding of both of those and how they interplay are just so important. I think the one thing that was most surprising to me is everybody wants something from the superintendent of schools. That was something I didn't expect or anticipate, so the ability to say no in a variety of ways is a skill that I think is essential.

Noreen. The second study participant was the superintendent of a Metrowest suburban school district with three schools and approximately 1,400 students in Community 2. She had
been in this job, her first superintendency, for 8 years. She had over 40 years of experience in education in several districts; prior to becoming a superintendent, she worked in bilingual education, as an assistant principal, as a director of curriculum special education director, and as an assistant superintendent. She held a bachelor’s degree, a master’s degree, a CAGS, and a doctorate. The researcher had been acquainted with the participant professionally for over 5 years prior to the study, but the interviews were their first lengthy conversation without others present. Both interviews were conducted in her office, located in the district administration offices, which were situated within one of the schools in Community 2. She appeared completely at ease and was enthusiastic about her participation in the study as well as the topic of the study.

Noreen noted that the superintendency found her, in that she was in the district when a leadership change came about. She elaborated that:

I think the reason I was willing to consider the superintendency is because you can make a big impact and I do feel that I can take my, it's not just my vision, but we all have a shared vision of what it could be in terms of truly personalizing and engaging students, personalizing education so that students are super excited about what they're doing in school, and make that happen.

Noreen noted that, “Having just lived through what we're calling the year from hell, there are definitely unexpected things. The superintendency is a different thing every single year.” She continued, “The other thing I was surprised at was the legal, the amount of legal work I do.”

**Arnold.** The third study participant was the superintendent of a Metrowest suburban school district with four schools and approximately 2,400 students in Community 3. He was currently in his second year as either interim superintendent or superintendent in this community, and was new to the role at that time. He changed careers, entering education from the public
health field, and had almost 25 years of experience in education in several districts and two states. Within the education field, prior to becoming a superintendent, he worked as a health teacher, a K-12 director of health and physical education, an assistant principal, a principal, a director of curriculum, and an assistant superintendent. He served as an interim superintendent before being appointed to the post in this district. He held a bachelor’s degree, a master’s degree and a doctorate. The researcher had known the participant professionally for over 5 years prior to the study. Both interviews were conducted in his office, located in the district administration offices, which were situated within one of the schools in Community 3. He appeared completely at ease with the study and was eager to participate in the study.

Arnold chose to pursue the superintendency in the same district in which he was the assistant superintendent. With regard to being a change agent he said:

Schools are very old organizations that have a lot of institutional and cultural histories. It becomes really difficult to change within that organization. One of the things you realize is that if you want to make change in the organization you really need to be in a position of authority to do that.

Arnold discussed the ways in which the outcomes were expected by noting:

I think that there are parts of the position I understood well, around what is the core of our work, which is really teaching and learning. We can talk about educational improvement and putting processes and systems in place to make that happen. I anticipated and expected that, and that's been a really rewarding part of my work.

He continued:

The parts that I didn't expect or didn't have a lot of fluency with are really around the political domain and the fact that when you move into this position you really take on
responsibility to be an advocate for your district. That political domain is incredibly huge and often challenges the way we've done our work, or the style in the way that we've done our work.

Arnold concluded by saying, “I didn’t expect the superintendency to be so far away from teaching and learning.”

**Charlotte.** The fourth study participant was the superintendent of a Metrowest suburban school district with six schools and approximately 3,500 students in Community 4. She was in her fourth year in this job, her first superintendency. She had approximately 30 years of experience in education in two countries, two states in the United States, and several Massachusetts districts. Prior to becoming a school superintendent, she was a school psychologist, an elementary school teacher, a special education supervisor, a principal, a director of literacy, and an assistant superintendent in other communities. She held two bachelor’s degrees, two master’s degrees, and a doctorate. The researcher was not acquainted with the participant prior to the study, although they had many mutual professional acquaintances and were members of some of the same professional organizations. Both interviews were conducted in her office, located in the district administration offices, which were situated in a stand-alone building in Community 2. She appeared completely at ease and was enthusiastic about her participation in the study as well as the topic of the study.

Charlotte chose to pursue a superintendency in a district in which she was not currently working, saying that it was time to “be in charge.” She elaborated by stating, “It came down to one thing: decision making power.” She further defined the change agent work in terms of being the primary instructional leader in a district by explaining, “I believe that the school committee is hiring a superintendent who will be the instructional leader for decisions for the town.” Charlotte
stated, “The biggest unintended, unexpected outcome was the amount of time that the superintendent, if they're going to do their job well, needs to spend with the school committee. That was not something that I had experience with.”

**Jonathan.** The fifth study participant was the superintendent of a Metrowest suburban school district with five schools and approximately 2,500 students in Community 5. He was in his fourth year as superintendent in this community, his second superintendency. He had 25 years of experience in education in several districts, in both traditional and vocational educational settings. Prior to becoming a superintendent, he worked as a secondary history teacher, an academic coordinator in the vocational education environment, and a principal in a more traditional setting. In a prior district, he served as an interim superintendent in conjunction with his role as the high school principal before being appointed to the role of superintendent. He held a bachelor’s degree, a master’s degree, and a doctorate. The researcher had known the participant professionally for over 6 years prior to the study. Both interviews were conducted in his office, located in the district administration offices, which were situated in a stand-alone building near one of the schools in Community 5. Like the other participants, he appeared completely at ease with the study and was eager to participate in the study.

Jonathan had previously been a superintendent, but chose to pursue the same role in a different district. Jonathan noted that, “Pele once said that when you control the ball, you control the game.” He further elaborated that being a superintendent is necessary in order to be a change agent within the district. Jonathan defined unexpected outcomes with some regret and said, “I think the disappointment in the job for me has been how much of a compliance with Race to the Top and all that other stuff that we’ve been doing literally from the time I’ve walked into the superintendency.” He went on to note that in addition to compliance, there has been a need to
learn about things he was previously unfamiliar with, such as building projects and a sewer system. He elaborated:

I never would have expected to be involved in a sewer project but the schools never had a sewer. It's always been on a septic system so for 30 years and they've wanted this. We finally got the town to agree that it was a good thing, but it is costly in the long term.

**Patrick.** The last study participant was the superintendent of a Metrowest suburban school district with five schools and approximately 2,300 students in Community 6. He was in his second year in this job, his first superintendency. He was a career changer, having begun in the field of rehabilitation counseling and then moving into the school counseling area. He had approximately 18 years of experience in education. Prior to becoming a school superintendent, he was an in-school suspension coordinator, a school counselor, an assistant principal at the middle school level, a high school guidance director, and a high school principal, all in Community 6. He held a bachelor’s degree, a master’s degree, and a CAGS. The researcher was not well acquainted with the participant prior to the study, although they had many mutual professional acquaintances. Both interviews were conducted in his office, located in the district administration offices, which were situated in a stand-alone building in Community 6. He appeared completely at ease and seemed pleased to participate in the study.

Patrick became the superintendent in the same district in which he had been working. He pursued this opportunity, saying, “I felt there was an opportunity for me to make a difference in the district. I have a vision of where I want us to be.”

**Significant Themes**

The primary research question was: What are the perceptions of a group of suburban superintendents in the Metrowest area of Massachusetts with regard to their role, as the primary
instructional leader in a district, in creating and setting the conditions that promote excellence in the teaching and learning process? After analysis of the data, several significant themes and sub-themes emerged.

The first theme that emerged from the analysis of the data was the study participants’ core beliefs regarding the teaching and learning process. The second theme was the connections between these beliefs as a superintendent and the subsequent leadership actions of superintendents. Sub-themes emerged from this data analysis, including the need for consistent leadership within a district, the foundational philosophy of the superintendent, and the impact of these core values and beliefs on district policies; the leadership skills and personal qualities needed by an effective superintendent; the modeling of desired behaviors by the superintendent to achieve desired results in the district; and the support and resources needed by the superintendent within the community to be effective in achieving the stated goals.

The third theme that the analysis of study data identified was that superintendent beliefs influenced decision-making about the work of the district. Sub-themes included the need to be a change agent to bring about important modifications to practice, the need to be financially analytical in order to implement cost effective initiatives within the district, the need to create an inclusive educational opportunity for all learners, the need for high level planning for successful outcomes, the need for high quality educators within the district, the approach of creating policy that is student-centered rather than adult-centered, and the financial support needed from the community to accomplish all of the stated objectives.

The next theme identified in the analysis of the data was the creation of the conditions for excellence in teaching and learning practices within a district. This included the sub-themes of having an effective team to drive and guide the work, the creation of a culture of trust and
respect in the district, the development of an educational environment with a focus on excellence for all stakeholders, and the need for the resources to accomplish all of the goals and objectives. The next theme detailed the successes and challenges for the superintendent in each district in creating the conditions for excellence in teaching and learning.

The next two themes identified were the superintendents’ description of the changes to teaching and learning that they would like to see in their districts and the changes to their role as superintendent that they would like to see. The last theme identified in the analysis of the data was the identification of the structures, strategies, and practices used by each individual superintendent to achieve the goals and objectives set with regard to excellence in teaching and learning.

**Beliefs about teaching and learning.** The participants indicated, in a variety of ways, a deeply rooted belief that all students can learn, while acknowledging that not all stakeholders in education have had the same core values or mindset. Jonathan was the most succinct in his statement, saying, “I think my core belief about teaching and learning is that all children can.” Patrick elaborated a similar approach by saying, “I believe that every student has the capacity to learn.” He also noted:

> Some learn at different rates or different times and different levels throughout the school year, throughout their school history. I believe that the core of getting kids to learn is from that person that stands in front of them every day and they need to be strong in their instructional practices, and I mean strong. Strong instruction.

The belief that all students can learn permeated the responses from all participants, with many providing further context and elaboration.

Mary explained:
I’ve always believed, since I entered education, that all students can learn. I would describe my belief system as one of a growth mindset. I think one of the first people I heard speak about beliefs was Pedro Noguera when I heard him say, “You know, they’re not keeping the good kids at home. They’re sending us the best they have.” It was really mind altering for me.

Mary also noted that others do not necessarily share her beliefs, saying:

When I was a young teacher, one of the things that I found most frustrating was to see how teachers formed perceptions about kids, and beliefs, and groups. Not necessarily based on intelligence or achievement, but based on demographics, socioeconomics, specifically affluence.

Noreen said, “Throughout my career, I have consistently focused on what is now known as growth mindset, on personalization of learning. It goes back to Dewey and active learning, most authentic real-world learning.” When asked about the underlying beliefs that were the foundation to the growth mindset, she elaborated that this stemmed from her belief that all children have the ability to learn, saying, “Student-centered learning is coming back into vogue.”

Arnold explained his beliefs by saying:

I have a fundamental belief that all students can learn and that a lot of the structures we put around education and systems that have to exist actually prevent, more than help, sometimes that particular process. But, I think we start at the place where we believe all students can learn.

Similarly, Charlotte approached the question in terms of the teaching and learning process in schools: “I think the best way to describe my beliefs about teaching and learning is that the focus
needs to be absolutely on the learning part of that equation.” One of the difficulties she noted was:

It is a culture change to have that conversation with teachers, because things have changed so much in the past, I want to say 10 years and we're still catching up, but the idea that it's not so much content-based anymore. It's not about covering material. It's not about I taught it, you didn't learn it, there must be a problem with you. It has to be about I taught it, you didn't learn it, how can I reteach it? How can I approach this differently?

All of the superintendents were unified in their responses that the basis of their beliefs about teaching and learning was that all students can learn.

**Connections between superintendent leadership and teaching and learning practices.** There were several sub-themes that emerged regarding the connections between the leadership of a superintendent and the teaching and learning practices in a district. These sub-themes included the need for consistent leadership in each district, the foundational philosophy of the superintendent, and the impact of this on district policies; the leadership skills and personal qualities needed by an effective superintendent; the modeling of desired behaviors by the superintendent to achieve desired results; and the support and resources needed by the superintendent within the community to be effective.

**Consistent leadership, philosophy, and policies.** Mary noted:

Having consistency in leadership has helped. There are a lot of districts where in 8 years they have had three different superintendents. I think that really doesn’t serve the instructional program well. I think having consistent leadership over time is integral to a strong instructional program.
Noreen approached the idea of consistency from the standpoint of deep implementation and singular focus. In reference to change efforts, she noted, “You don't get results until you have deep implementation.” She further elaborated that deep implementation relies on a focused approach, saying, “Mike Shmocker’s work is all about focus, focus, focus. I think it takes a long time to change teachers’ mindsets, but it takes that long to also change the culture and stick with the same thing.” Noreen described the work she has done in her district on the growth mindset with teachers and students, further connecting the idea that consistency with the superintendent’s vision is linked to teaching and learning. She elaborated on the importance of this work by saying, “It's not just my vision, it's the vision we've built together.” She indicated that consistency of leadership allowed for deep implementation, with focus.

**Leadership skills.** Arnold said, “The superintendent requires a width of skill set that's really quite remarkable, and I think are not often seen from the outside or easily understood even from the inside.” He described how he maintains the focus on teaching and learning this way:

I think for me in order to continue to make sure that my focus stays on instructional leadership to the greatest degree possible, the people around me know that that’s a really important value for me, so are quite adept at pulling me back to that when they think we've gone too far afield.

Charlotte also addressed the superintendent as an instructional leader by saying, “It's making sure that if the superintendent truly is an instructional leader that it's authentic, and if they’re not, that they openly give that responsibility to somebody else within the district.”

Jonathan took a slightly different approach, noting, “I try to stay connected and make that connection. I really try to see what they are dealing with and how often they get interrupted with stuff, and remind myself that that is their role.” Patrick discussed needing, as a superintendent, to
“Model good teaching instructional practices.” He elaborated that, “We have had principals in the past that are really good at throwing out all of the buzz words. That’s not my style. I’m more direct and to the point.”

**Modeling desired behaviors.** Participants noted several aspects with regard to the superintendent being the role model for desired behaviors and practices in the district. Arnold noted:

As you know, the structure of districts and roles in districts have oftentimes meant that the superintendent is not the one focused on curriculum, instruction, and assessment. That's typically the assistant superintendent for curriculum, instruction, assessment, or curriculum directors. In this role [the superintendency], it was important for me to consider what impact I would continue to have on what's going on in our classrooms, day in and day out. As our teachers work with students and our principals work with the teachers, my real role in guiding the district around instructional leadership is my work with principals.

He further included work with the leadership team in general, not just principals, by noting:

I think that the other piece is that the tone of the leadership team and the focus of the leadership team is absolutely driven by the superintendent, so it's important that in my role that I really try to maintain a focus on teaching and learning, on what's going on in the classroom.

Charlotte discussed modeling behavior from the standpoint of “making sure that if the superintendent truly is an instructional leader, that it's authentic, and if they're not, that they openly give that responsibility to somebody else within the district.” In this way the background of the superintendent does not impede the work of teaching and learning in a district, and the
superintendent is also responsible for modeling the delegation of work to those with the expertise to complete the work appropriately. She gave the example of looking at performance:

Now if I'm a superintendent, I'm imagining that I'm looking at performance. None of us want to be Level 2 district in terms of state accountability, and many of us are. Most of us are. I'm going to look at that data, and I'm going to be working with my team to say, "Here's the accountability level. If it's not my area of expertise, what is it that we're doing? Let's find out where we need to focus more attention. Who are the students whose needs are not being met? What are the instructional programs that are in place that we need to be looking at? What are the instructional programs that I need to financially support in order to get at the needs of the kids?"

She noted that she would model asking these types of questions in order to identify the individuals with the answers and skills needed to solve the problem and to empower them to do so.

Jonathan was adamant that his core beliefs needed to be shared with all stakeholders. He said:

For me, really coming in and announcing to this staff and to the administration that all children can was something I needed to do early on. That helped to really bring on board the people who believe that, and provided an aha moment for those who didn’t. I let them know that I don’t believe there's a single exclusion. However, the end result isn't necessarily the same for all children.

He expressed this concept early in his superintendency, making it part of his entry plan with all stakeholders. Jonathan also modeled desired behavior by staying in touch with the teaching and learning process. He noted:
I spend a full day once a year in my khakis and my shirt with my comfortable shoes in a
classroom all day, and I play the role of teaching assistant. That helps me to stay
connected. I'm constantly looking at depth, looking at rigor and relevance.

Patrick also addressed the idea of modeling, saying:

I think it's my job to model good teaching instructional practices. It's different than
maybe the principal or curriculum coordinator in the school. I'm not going to go in and
model a class lesson, but I'm going to provide that model with my administrative team,
how I want to see things set forth and then I expect them to funnel it down to the teacher,
the department heads and the directors within the school.

Support and resources. Jonathan approached the need for resources by ensuring that all
needs were connected to teaching and learning. He said:

One of the things we try to do is we try to make an argument at my level that everything
we're asking for in our budget is tied in to teaching and learning. I need an extra
custodian to keep the building clean and environmentally safe, which is better for kids
and staff.

Mary noted, “It really comes down to building a high-performing team and hiring.” She
elaborated that “The team and the individuals hired are as a support to the district and this
requires resources for the district to implement.” She noted that the administrative team, as a
high-performing team, has the responsibility for:

Hiring the best teachers, and then ultimately supervising the teachers who are mediocre,
or worse. It comes back to the hiring process. You need to hire good building leadership,
district leadership, who also all are growing in the same direction with respect to
philosophies and beliefs.
Nancy noted that the financial resources needed to run her district were in place and that she cut some administrative positions. Her comments were starkly different from that of the other study participants, all of whom referred many times to the need for additional financial resources from their respective communities, and to the politics involved in gaining this type of support.

**Beliefs that influence decision-making.** The participants indicated that a number of beliefs influenced their decision making. These included being a change agent, the impact of costs and the associated benefits, providing an inclusive education, planning effectively, staffing, student-centered policies, and support.

**Change agent.** Many of the participants asserted that their work as a change agent was informed by their beliefs about teaching and learning. Noreen said, “I think the beliefs influence actions. I feel like part of my job is to ‘green light’ people. You have a great idea; go for it as long as it fits with that philosophy or vision or mission.” She further elaborated:

The impact, I think, is quick. I tend to try to trust and honor and support the teachers and the administrative team but at the same time never be satisfied. None of us are ever satisfied with the status quo.

Patrick said:

My belief is that right now we have enough positions in the district. What we are lacking is the training and understanding of what needs to happen in the classroom and having high expectations for every student. I’m looking to put a significant amount of money towards training.
He elaborated that the change effort involved beliefs about inclusionary practices and said, “There’s still that understanding that the regular education teacher teaches the regular education kids and that the special education teacher teaches the special education kids.”

**Cost-benefit analysis.** One of the responsibilities of a superintendent is to prepare and then manage the district budget. Many of the participants discussed how their beliefs impacted the decision making process with regard to utilization of resources. This was often done by considering the impact of the costs versus the benefits of the expenditure. Patrick gave the example of employing additional staff or providing additional training for existing staff. He went on to say:

> In our district we have traditionally struggled with bridging the achievement gap between high needs kids and regular education kids. What we typically do is we come to the budget process and we say, "Well, we need another special education teacher, we need an interventionist, we need this, we need that." We load up on positions. My belief right now is that we have enough positions in our district. What we're lacking is the training and understanding of what needs to happen in the classroom and having high expectations for every students, not just the regular education kids. I'm looking to really put in a significant amount of money towards training.

Arnold cited cost benefit analysis when looking at the “possibility of having some additional revenue.” He explained:

> We have been so focused on just meeting the budget directive of the board and town administrator that we stopped having conversations about what the possibilities were. I think much to the surprise of the administrative team, the leadership team, we spent a significant amount of time really exploring what would we do if we had an extra million
dollars, let's say. Each of the principals along with the department heads were really challenged to focus on the criteria for putting items on this list. At the end of all that, we came up with a list that valued at probably five or six million dollars and went through a process of prioritizing the list and then it started to feel more real for folks and then we actually were able to successfully get funding for about $600,000.

Arnold explicitly connected belief in a focus on teaching and learning to identification of new opportunities, noting, “We would have missed all those opportunities; we wouldn't even had seen them.”

Jonathan also noted an example of cost benefit analysis resulting from beliefs about teaching and learning. He noted that implementing technology was an example of living the beliefs. He said:

The one-to-one initiative we have going on in eighth grade this year that really comes from school choice funds we chose to use this way. We said, “This is the way of the world. We have to do it. They only get that grade once.”

**Inclusive education.** A number of the participants addressed the concept of inclusive education as a reflection on how beliefs guide decision making. Patrick noted, “We still struggle with pull out services. We have a lot of special education students who get pulled out for services. I’m looking for a more push-in, co-teaching model with really strong inclusionary instructional practices.” Mary echoed a similar approach and said:

When I started here as the assistant SPED [special education] director, we really began an initiative to do more inclusive education. I truly believe that inclusive education for all kids with disabilities is the key to achievement. I think over time we’ve had some
tremendous results with our students with disabilities. I think we've really done a nice job in closing achievement gaps.”

She also noted:

There are populations of students who are not served in an inclusive setting. I think it’s just as important to know how to distinguish between those students, and the students who can benefit from inclusion, because I think the downside of inclusion when it’s not done well, you have students who may be in an inclusive setting who can be a disruptive influence to the education of other students. It really comes down to having a philosophy of teacher training is key to successful inclusion. Teacher training. Teacher training. Teacher training, and PD [professional development], and parent training. Having parents understand what inclusive education looks like is important in getting the parents to understand the beliefs that underlie it.

**Planning.** Many districts created a variety of plans, including a strategic plan, a district improvement plan, and school improvement plans. Charlotte noted:

My first year here they had been waiting for several years to renew the strategic plan, so we went through that whole process, and we developed our strategic plan. Curriculum, instruction, and assessment are three of the key areas of focus. We also renew our strategic plan annually, so although it's a 5 year plan, we reevaluate where we are in the plan and set new priorities within the strategic plan on an annual basis, and then we align our personal goals and our school improvement plans to those priorities. Lastly, we identify primary responsibilities. We want to be able to take a look at our plan, scroll through the primary responsibility column, and make sure that the same names are not coming up over and over and over again to ensure a distributed leadership responsibility.
Jonathan noted the importance of the strategic plan by saying:

We spent a lot of time on our strategic plan, making sure that we were really talking about teaching and learning. Anything that comes up in our budget process has to be tied into our strategic planning. As a matter of fact, the format that we use is that if a principal is looking for another teacher in the budget, he or she is looking for a resource that doesn’t exist. They have to make an argument, a concise argument that the need is tied into our strategic plan. The other thing is when we look at our goals at the district level for that year, they come from our strategic plan, so it informs our district improvement plan, which is then tied into our school improvement plans, which is then tied into our teacher evaluation practice and smart goals.”

He noted that this effort has taken time:

That's been a learning process for us. We finally have teachers talking about why I've chosen a goal and why I’m doing that and it is because it's actually tied into our SIP [school improvement plan], which is tied into our DIP [district improvement plan], which is tied into our strategic plan.

He further elaborated:

That makes me feel good because it makes a nice connection that we're not just being a compliance district, that we're actually looking at the things we said we thought we wanted to do in order to become a better district for kids.

**Staffing.** Charlotte immediately thought of staffing as the first example of how beliefs are part of the decision making process. She said, “The first thing that came to mind when you asked me that question was personnel. Having the right people on the team is the first part of my decision making.” She further explained the importance of having the right people on board:
I’m definitely looking at and being aware of new hires, and working closely with them.
All of our principals, as the evaluators, are directly responsible for new hires. It's not something that we delegate to anybody else, and we understand that decisions have to be made about renewal or non-renewal. It's really important that we look at our new hires within those first 3 years to make sure that they are effective and that's one way my belief about teaching and learning impacts our staffing decisions.

Noreen discussed the need to “trust and honor and support the teachers and administrative team, but at the same time to never be satisfied.” Mary also discussed the need to support the teachers and administrators, saying, “It really comes down to having a philosophy of teaching training.” Patrick stated that he would like to see a more contemporary approach used by his staff, particularly with regard to special education. He said, “I don’t even feel like I can be progressive because we are 10 years behind.”

**Student-centered policies.** Several participants noted that their beliefs about being student-centered influenced decision making in the district. Arnold said, “I guess I would say, which is incredibly cliché, but I think that the decisions that I make always try to begin with what's in the best interest of a student or students, first and foremost.” He further elaborated, “That doesn't always reconcile with my role and my responsibilities in this position. It doesn't always reconcile with what we can or cannot do.”

Jonathan noted that providing what students need is part of his belief system. He said, “The one to one initiative we have going on in eighth grade this year is a big thing. They only get that grade once and this is what they need.” Mary also noted that her most important belief is about inclusive education. She said:
I truly believe that inclusive education for all kids with disabilities is the key to achievement. I think over time we have had some tremendous results with our students with disabilities. I think we have really done a nice job in closing achievement gaps.

**Support.** Superintendents also noted the need to support teachers and principals as they engage in the work of teaching and learning in the district. Jonathan said:

I need to make sure that the principals can focus on this idea of teaching and learning and are not distracted by a lot of other mandates, a lot of other priorities that have to take place. I try to protect them as much as I can and provide a filter to the many things that are coming at us.

Mary noted that teacher training by the district is vital to supporting teachers and administrators. She said, “Teacher training, teacher training, teacher training, and professional development, and parent training.” She added that parents are important partners and said, “Having parents understand what inclusive education looks like and getting the parents to understand the beliefs that underlie it.”

Arnold discussed the need to support parents and focus on the needs of the students. He said, “We need to take that step back and ask, ‘what is really in the best interest of the kids?’” He noted a specific example related to student transportation:

The parents weren’t asking for transportation because it was more convenient, it was a hardship situation and we were able to work on an alternative that really met the need of the family. But more importantly, we ensured that we staying focused on the teaching and learning aspects of things and avoided what would have been many late arrivals or absence from school.
Creating conditions for excellence in teaching and learning. Participants were asked if they believed that the superintendent could create the conditions for excellence in teaching and learning in their districts. All participants responded in the affirmative, and identified areas of success as well as challenges in doing so. Several sub-themes became apparent in the responses, including having an effective team, a collaborative and trusting culture, the educational environment, resources, and politics.

An effective team. Mary said:

I do believe they can, but I think it’s probably more challenging. It probably looks easier than it is. I think you really have to have a combination of factors. The stars all need to be aligned. I think it starts with people who are around the leader, because you can’t have the superintendent as a superstar. That doesn’t work. That model doesn’t work in education in this climate. The superintendent is as strong and effective as the people around them.

She added, “Hiring the best people in their roles. Try to stay out of their way, and let them do their job. We’re not looking in this climate for managers. You need to have instructional leaders.” Other participants also noted the importance of having a strong team and effective teachers and administrators to create the conditions for excellence in teaching and learning.

Noreen said:

I can’t take credit for all of it because no matter what we do, I know people give a lot of lip service to teams and collaboration but we do it. If there's a continuum, we're on a strong end of the continuum where we really focus on team process. We really elicit input from teachers and try to have as much distributed leadership as we can.
Trust and culture. Another common theme in the participants’ responses about the creation of the conditions for excellence in teaching and learning centered on the concepts of building trust and the culture within a district. Noreen noted:

The quote I always use is that culture trumps strategy every day of the week, you improve and focus on culture first. I believe that creating a collaborative culture focused on the message and trying to protect them from all the unfunded mandates that get thrown on us that we have to deal with, but focusing on that is crucial.

Charlotte agreed, and said, “I think the thing that leads to excellence in teaching and learning is developing a culture of trust. We can talk all we want about the strategic plan and about the priority initiatives.” She further expanded this idea:

In creating conditions for excellence in teaching and learning, it is two things. It's including teachers in the conversation in the decision making. It's developing a culture of trust so that teachers are not looking over their shoulder waiting for the next foot to drop.

It is really I guess valuing their input.

Educational environment. Arnold noted that while the superintendent can create conditions for excellence in teaching and learning, there are some climate and culture challenges that emanate from outside the district. He said:

I think we can absolutely create the environment. I think that that's exactly the challenge though. I think when we think about and I'm not even talking about different belief systems, I'm talking about our current sort of climate around public education and the negativity that exists and everyone from our teachers, all the way up through administrators working harder than they ever have worked before and not feeling like they're making any progress, not feeling like they're valued from the outside community,
so that climate work, so to speak, that really needs to be done, or the conditions that need to be created in order for people to do their best work are really around culture and climate.

Mary agreed, saying, “I think public education has been under fire for the last few years.”

**Resources.** Patrick raised the idea of resources as an integral part of creating the optimal conditions for teaching and learning. He said, “I think it’s providing the resources for the teams to get there. Really providing that structure for each building to reach those goals of excellence.” Arnold noted that adding a human resources (HR) director in his district allowed for the better use of resources. He said, “We reorganized a bit. We have an HR coordinator for the first time. We have a director of wellness who is more focused on teaching and learning.”

Mary further elaborated, “Sometimes you just need money, and that’s the challenge. Mary noted, “The biggest thing is resources. You can be creative in a lot of ways, but creativity will only get you so far.” She added, “Sometimes you just need money and that’s the challenge.” Jonathan noted:

We have hired 11 special educators in the last 3 years while having difficult budgets. We changed our resources and where we put our resources. We tweaked paraprofessional positions and pushed to bring special education students back in to the district from out of district placements.

**Successes and challenges in creating conditions for excellence in teaching and learning.** All participants noted that there were both successes and challenges in creating the conditions for excellence in teaching and learning. Successes centered on hiring the best teachers and administrators possible, and then allowing them to do their jobs in the most effective manner possible. They also promoted a deep understanding of the change process as a lever for success
and the need for transparency in creating a culture of excellence. Challenges included budget, resources and sustainability; developing a culture of excellence without fear; and having effective systems and processes.

**Successes.** Jonathan noted that success depends on having effective and reflective staff. He said:

I think I have overall I really great staff. I have pockets of excellence. I think it's hard for any of us to say that I have excellence in teaching, and that sounds like it's a guaranteed 100 percent. We need to have people continue. We say all the time, we look in the mirror. We have to look in the mirror. The superintendent needs to look in the mirror. The teacher needs to look in the mirror. If you learn something and it was part of an initiative or if it was just part of a class that you took, how are you implementing that? How are you doing it? Where do you need support?

Mary also identified staff as a point of leverage for success in teaching and learning, but went a step further by also identifying change as an essential element. She said, “It starts with teachers in the classroom. I think our both district and building leadership really understand how to implement change, and understand the research on change.” Mary elaborated:

It’s constant work. It started slowly, and started from teachers up. I think I’ve really valued how our instructional leadership values coaching, and peer coaching, because I think those are two keys. Teachers helping teachers is the best way to implement and make sure change sticks.

In citing successes, she noted:

I think a commitment to the change process, and understanding the change process, is key. Understanding the politics of teachers, teachers union, how to get things done, and
empowering teachers. I think just having exceptional, and extraordinary leadership, I think has let that happen. I don’t think it had much to do with me. I think it had much more to do with the leaders around me, and the people who are in the classrooms.

Charlotte discussed success by citing an example of identifying student stress from homework and working as a district on this issue. She said:

Well, this is a district issue, so we decided that we would form a committee, a working group that had teachers representing every grade level. We were all over the place in terms of what we're doing and the amount of homework kids had in certain grade levels is out of control. We had some very candid conversations with teachers from every grade level and surveyed parents.

She went on to note that the work served to be transparent with teachers and built a sense of trust and support. She stated:

We analyzed the results and come up with some recommendations. I developed a report for the school committee, but before it went to school committee, and that's really important, I shared it with the teachers, telling them that their input was really important before this becomes a public document.

Charlotte also cited an example of hosting a public forum on a difficult topic. She reflected by saying, “Here's an example of developing trust.” She noted that, “We hadn't done a good enough job communicating about the high school math pathways.” The administrators were a little resistant about having a public forum about this and she said, “We're not asking permission about the decision. We are the educational experts. All that we're doing is sharing the reasons behind our decision making.” She noted that it was a “fabulous public forum.” Her role as the superintendent was “to manage the conversation, to make sure that we were maintaining
respective exchange of ideas.” She explained, “I'm going to need to make decisions and recommendations. What I can really work to do around this question in creating conditions is helping people through communication to share the reasons behind the decision making.” Mary summarized success by saying about her staff, “Get out of their way and let them do their job. Try to give them the supports they need. Try to get them the resources they need, and let them do their thing.”

**Challenges.** The most often discussed challenges by the participants included the need for resources and the budget limitations in most communities. Sustainability was also identified as a challenge within the idea of monetary restraints. Noreen said, “Budget always is a challenge and that we're always trying to do a lot with less money.” Arnold noted the idea of sustainability in terms of using the resources allocated by the school committee and as a component of programmatic success. He said, “I need a fiscal sustainability, but we really need to think about how we're going to sustain that effort for more than just a year.” Arnold continued:

I wouldn't say we've done it yet. I think they have been really thoughtful in their planning, we gained some approval to expend some resources. I'm not sure we found utopia yet around those particular things. I guess there are lots of examples where we haven't done that.

In creating the conditions for excellence in teaching and learning, several participants observed that a culture of fear and mistrust was a barrier to success. Arnold explained:

I'm talking about our current climate around public education and the negativity that exists and everyone from our teachers, all the way up through administrators working harder than they ever have worked before and not feeling like they're making any progress, not feeling like they're valued from the outside community.
Charlotte noted that teachers are afraid of being perceived as ineffective when students who are not experiencing success are identified. She described an example of using data by saying:

We know that students that are not progressing both. They were struggling last year. They continue to be struggling. We're going to document what we're doing for them, because it's just made logical sense to all of the administrators that if we're documenting what we're doing, the next year's teacher will know. We met huge resistance to the point where there was a grievance about it, because we didn't involve them, the teachers, in the decision making, and therefore they didn't understand it.

She reflected that the teachers did not yet trust her, as she was relatively new to the district. She said to her administrators, "We need to put on the brakes. They don't trust us. They don't know. They don't understand this." She identified the barrier as, “People were really feeling that if those kids are not showing growth, then I'm going to get evaluated and all of that.” This superintendent realized that teachers feared for their jobs rather than viewing the use of data as an opportunity for growth.

Jonathan said, “I think it absolutely has to start with trust. They need to know that this is not about making you unemployed, but making you better.” He elaborated, “I think that's the biggest issue between building trust between supervisors and teachers. In today's world, I'm a little concerned about this.” Patrick also identified communication as a part of the trust equation, saying to his administrators, "I'm so happy you're excited by this, this is great, but I need you to bring this message to your schools." He also noted that when asked about fixing the district, he said:
Stop right there, it's not about me, it's about how we can do it. It's not one person that can fix an entire district. I need my principals to be on board, I need the teachers to be on board, so we all move in the same direction.”

As a strategy to build success, Patrick reflected, “I wanted to set a foundation of what I expect and I will build from there.”

Charlotte also noted the culture of fear in a different manner. She explained that administrators have typically received significant resistance from parents about the academic program, specifically the criteria for high school students to take upper level math courses. She discussed the divide between teachers who do not feel a student is ready and parent who is willing to support a struggling student with a tutor. She noted the parental attitude as, “We are the parent, and we can override,” and we're saying:

We're not going to allow that. What we are required to provide is an appropriate education for your child, and we're offering it. This higher level math, your child didn't meet the criteria, and we're not required to offer that.

She has identified her roles as supporting the principal, as part of changing the culture, and standing firm on the merits of the educational decision, in spite of “huge push back from families.”

Jonathan discussed the need for vulnerability by teachers and administrators to drive an improvement effort, even in the face of the fear of the unknown. He said, “Last year, at our opening day remarks, I said that in order for us to improve, we need to make ourselves vulnerable, and that starts with me.” He identified the need to identify the places staff is less comfortable, such as technology. He planned to model the use of technology, saying, “My goal this year is to put myself out there and present using those types of technology.”
Arnold identified the need to:

Really look at our systems and processes to see what level of inefficiencies exists there, so we can free folks up in order to do their best work. These things occur very regularly in districts, but everyone acts as if they've never happened before.

He further explained that:

Everyone engages in it as if we've never done that and that to me, that's not a criticism of them, it's a criticism of the fact that that creates a level of inefficiency that is almost immeasurable and we are taken away from what our primary focus should be, which is really about teaching and learning. If we can improve those systems, and get those to be somewhat automated, then we all are disturbed less and are able to focus on the work again.

Another area of challenge identified was teacher unions. As the result of a recent change, Noreen said:

I think for the first time, I understand what other superintendents talk about when they talk about their union, their teachers association getting in the way of progress. There's a new president and we're both learning how to work together.

Mary summarized the work involved with improvement and change by saying, “You can’t hit people upside the head with a bat to get change. It has to be from the ground up. It has to be cultivated. You have to set the conditions. It starts with teachers in the classroom.”

**Desired changes in teaching and learning.** The participants in the study cited different ways in which teaching and learning has changed in their districts. In some cases, they discussed the changes that they would like to see implemented under their leadership. Noreen said:
I would want to shift 100 percent of the staff and 100 percent of the time to being focused more on the great shift. I think is that shift from “I taught to it” to “Did they learn it.” I think that's crucial and that's complex. That's the focus on the student centered learning. The attitudes, habits of mind, along with the skills in focusing on the outcomes versus the teacher actions. Some teachers still are stuck in, “Well I taught it they just didn't learn it.”

Charlotte took a different approach, saying:

We have been really developing our professional learning communities to work together to be able to look at data that says, “Wow, what did you do in your class? Because your kids did so well on that particular skill, and what was it so that you can help me?” There's that, and then there is making sure that students who are struggling are provided with targeted interventions as opposed to just throwing resources at them. We know this happens. They're going to the resource room, but what's happening in the resource room? What are you doing during those 30 minutes, and how is it matched with the needs of that student? I think that's the answer.

Patrick noted:

I've been here for 2 years, I know what good teaching looks like. We're talking about differentiation because I know all about differentiation. Then why is it, when I come into a classroom I don't see it. It's not here, it's not happening.

He further elaborated:

Every student can learn. There's really a lack of understanding of the growth mindset and that division of “Your kids, my kids, or he can't really get it because he's a SPED kid.” I hate that, drives me insane. I really would want to see that change. I think with that, we would have tremendous growth. Just with that understanding.
Arnold addressed the instructional approaches used and said:

I think there are probably two things, the first is our instructional approaches, which we see every time we walk into the classes and we see teachers engage with different levels of success, really needs to be rethought. They by and large require students to sit there and students will sit in columns and rows and just sort of take in the information.

He added:

We have a very traditional classroom, so I would love to see that move to more of an experiential, or project-based, kind of learning. The challenge is scalability, the challenge is, and we're a relatively small district, but to try to think about how that works inside the construct of a 180 student middle school, or a 750 student high school, or fairly large elementary schools.

Charlotte took yet again a different approach, saying, “It would be the number of students who are found eligible for special education.” She elaborated:

We looked at some data yesterday. We were looking at the percentage of students in the needs improvement and the warning categories (in state assessment data). In fifth grade, we were above the state, and I said, “That is unacceptable in this district.” It’s very difficult to control because the people that are making the recommendations for finding students eligible are the teachers. They are scaring the parents, and so the parent demands the evaluation. That takes a whole bunch of time, and then it goes on. The student isn’t found eligible, so then they keep failing, and again we're not meeting their needs, and then we test them again. Eventually, they're far enough behind that they're found eligible, and that is the story. It's actually heartbreaking to me, because we're serving them a
lifelong sentence. They hate school. They're not being successful, but we haven't tried hard enough. We're just throwing resources at them.

She then identified the needed change, saying:

I think the paradigm shift around the thing that I want to change the most relates to that building of trust. I think the reason it happens is because the student is struggling. The teacher really has tried to meet their needs and hasn't been able to and really doesn't know what else to do. They have tried everything that they knew, but in addition, they're afraid to admit that.

Arnold approached the question from the standpoint of rethinking the traditional school day and said:

We are not in a place where we're going to go from a 6 and a half hour day to say it's going to be 8 hours and we're going to just sort of drill and kill the kids for 8 hours. That's not what it should be like.

He spoke about giving students the opportunity to explore their interests and said:

If we can't do that during the school day, give students the opportunity to really explore their passions and really dig deep in their passions, we should allow them to do that work. We would need to build that in as a structure and an expectation, so that while students may not be excited about getting up at 7:00 to go to eighth grade math, they could be excited to get to school that day, so that they can hit the robotics club after school or they can do who knows what.

Jonathan answered quickly, saying:

It's an easy one, time. I don't think that we can continue to do things the way that we're doing it by having a 7 hour day. As a matter of fact, I'd like to completely throw a curve
ball into it. I believe that most teachers spend some time at home preparing lessons and correcting tests. My model is I’d like to change the day into an 8 hour work day and you can't take anything home. That extra hour would be literally, you get your 45 minutes planning time every day or whatever, and then there's that hour after the kids leave, and that is solely about you correcting papers, etc. It’s an 8 hour day. Those meeting days would become 8 and a half hour days if we had to, and I'm not sure we would.

He elaborated by saying for teachers:

That hour is about teaching and learning and you and your classroom. If you want to meet with a parent, you can, but if you want to enter grades, you can. If you want to put your lesson together and go to the copy machine, you can.

He noted that, “It’s really about using your time more efficiently."

Mary answered the question by going in a different direction. She said:

The easiest answer is I would have a better bottom line budget. I’m not greedy. A little more resources I think would help. I see people doing extraordinary work with the resources we have, but I think with maybe five or six additional positions, I think we’d be poised to really do extraordinary work for kids. It’s really about resources.

She noted that in her community:

I’m not sure that that’s going to come at this point. I’ve been part of overrides for 20 years in this community, and it's sadly the political reality is, unless you cut music or sports and art in this community people won’t listen.

**Desired changes to role as instructional leader.** Participants identified several aspects of their roles that they would like to change. Most agreed that the political needs of the job absorbed time that could be spent on other topics. Many also discussed the resources available as
a part of the needed changes, either positively or negatively. Noreen noted that budget is an ongoing concern and said, “I do budget, maybe that's part of why we're struggling. Maybe I should be devoting more time to budget and getting overrides passed.” She equated the budget impact with the political impact on her role by saying:

I like budget, I like managing budget internally, what I don't like is the political process of having to get an adequate budget approved and passed. Getting a bigger piece of the town-wide pie is really a struggle, a political struggle.

She also addressed issues related to time by saying, “I'm also the HR director for the district so that's time consuming. Policies, revising policies and paying attention to legal issues. If I could put all that with somebody else, I'd be in heaven.” She also noted as important:

Less time taken away by the non-instructional issues, politics. It's all important, but I love the instructional piece. On average my time is maybe 50/50, which is I think pretty good and that's why I love [Community 2]. I can still keep a lot of my toes and fingers in the instructional pot. I think I'm very reluctant to go anywhere else where it becomes more of a political and business situation.

Charlotte had a different view about the need for change in terms of resources, and would cut the available resources instead of looking either to maintain status quo or to add jobs. She said:

You're going to be surprised when I say to you that I reduced two positions and the reason I did it was going back to the conversation upfront about the focus. There were too many people [at central office] with their own initiatives, and each of those people ended up delegating to the principals. There were just too many hardworking, well-intentioned administrators. They were top-heavy.
Charlotte also noted that when things get busy, “The first thing that goes is classroom visits, and I’m going to try to do better at that this year.” She addressed this need by changing the evaluation structure to free up more of her time in the district and said:

When I came on board, I felt that it was important that I be the primary evaluator of the principals so that I could have a very clear understanding of who's doing what and where changes needed to happen. What I discovered, what I learned was that first of all, that was such a huge amount of time that it took to do that, that I wasn't able to be just a visitor. Just getting into buildings, getting into classrooms. I wasn't able to do it as much as I would've liked to have been able to do. I believe I've built the structure now going into next year. That will allow me to do that. One of the things that in hiring a new assistant superintendent is having her take that on, and it allows me to have a different relationship with the administrators. Now I'm not their evaluator.

Jonathan noted that politics had impacted his time as the instructional leader, and said:

My goal is to spend more time in the classroom this year. Last year the override vote that we had from December until May really just took up all my time. I would have some people even in this building say, “Wow, I haven't seen you in a while.”

“He added, “Michael Fullan talks about the best way to resolve issues in our districts is to really have some trust. People know you have to make decisions they don't like or you have to make difficult decisions.” He added that in difficult situation, “You can't respond, so that's the reason why you have to be trusted. I think it's also consistency. If there's trust, there's also consistency.”

Arnold noted the use of time with regard to his role as superintendent:

Understanding it better means that I have to be a generalist, not a specialist, and so there are days where that's incredibly frustrating. When we're talking about sort of facilities
kinds of issues, which don't feel very close to kids, or we're talking about issues around a particular bad set of circumstances that we're trying to manage, so when you're in crisis management mode and you're in facilities management mode, those things seem pretty far away from teaching and learning, except that I wouldn't want anyone else to have to manage that. I don't know that I would feel as comfortable that my beliefs and my philosophy were being lived through that because I think all of those things, regardless, if you're talking about replacing a water heater at an elementary school or you're talking about managing a bomb threat at the high school, all of that I think really can be impacted by the beliefs of the person that is leading the district at that particular time. I think what I would change honestly and what I'm working on changing is really, is to try to get those lower level, routine kinds of processes and behaviors, to try to get those to a place of automaticities, so that I'm not sitting in my office signing, like I did yesterday, I think 50 appointment letters or all kinds of various type in positions. Just not a good use of my time.

Mary addressed the idea of time, saying:

I’m constantly trying to foster relationships with facilities, DPW [Department of Public Works], police, fire, those kinds of things. With facilities we tend to struggle with to get things done, because it was something back in 2007 the town took over. It was a rather hostile takeover of facilities. In the scheme of things, the schools are not always a priority.

She added, “In winter, with snow plowing I have to spend a lot of time advocating on the phone. Get this plowed. You need to do this. It takes a lot more time than it ought to.” She also noted
that her desired change would be, “To have more time being in buildings. I think that’s the struggle. I set it in my calendar, and just something blows up all the time.”

Charlotte raised the observation that more experienced superintendents may be able to manage time more effectively. She said:

I feel like if you could ask me this question 2 years ago, I would’ve had a very immediate answer. But what I’ve done is spent the time building the team that I need to support me in my work and me to support them. I’ve developed a network so that my role is manageable, so that I can spend the amount of time on instruction that I want to.

She added:

When you talk about time, I guess my answer to that one is that we, when we take on this role have to understand that it’s a 24/7 job. It’s a given that you never separate yourself from that device [the cell phone].

She elaborated, “We have to plan our time. We have to know how to react. We have to have a system in place that allows us to focus on what is right in front of us.”

Structures, strategies, and practices used.

Structures. Many of the participants referenced the district structures that were put in place to assist superintendents in their role as the primary instructional leader of the district. Others discussed the individual strategies and practices used to manage the demanding workload. Charlotte identified a structure that is used in her district and said:

We have what we call the learning design team, and we meet every other week, and it's comprised of the director of technology, the assistant superintendent, the superintendent, the director of special education, and there used to be a curriculum director but we eliminated that position.
She elaborated:

We're the learning design team. We're designing. We're working together to design the focus, and the rich conversation yesterday that came out of that meeting was the fact that the special education director said to the assistant superintendent, “I should not be having separate meetings with the special education teachers looking at learning design. We should be working as a connected general education and special education. Let's get together to look at this data, because we all own the kids, and how can we make that structure happen.”

Mary discussed use of a consultant in the district. She said:

I think our work with a consultant has helped. Really opening up the dialogue, and having better feedback loops. The consultant has worked with our administrative team, and really helping us to become a more high-performing team. I think some of the work we have done at the central office together with her on feedback, the building, and then together there are far fewer parking lot conversations then there were 10 years ago.

Arnold also identified structures in terms of sustainability and a literacy initiative and said:

There absolutely was a plan [for sustainability] and this has been my mantra a long time in education. The elementary principals and I worked on a 3 year plan for implementation with regard to this particular project and we identified through our walkthrough data what the impact was.

He also noted the need for maintaining a flexible approach, saying:

We got to the point of deciding to expend additional resources to support our teachers, which wasn't part of the plan because they very clearly articulated their desire to have this
additional level of support and I think that that's the challenge. You need to develop a plan, but you need to make sure that the plan always makes sense and there's going to be these needs to, this need to make accommodations to the plan moving forward.

He also addressed the issue of sustainability in terms of building the internal capacity of the teachers. He said:

The goal is to get our teachers, most of whom are incredibly humble about their skill set, to the right place. We largely believe that they are already, that they understand this approach well enough that they can teach it to anyone, but we need to make sure that they feel like they have the self-efficacy to do that, so part of this continued support has been about making sure that we have that capacity of teachers that will allow us to engage in long term sustainability and not spend significant resources bringing consultants in when we know we can do that work ourselves.

He added that the structure for this type of change is a multi-year approach, saying:

I think most of us think in 1 year cycles because that's what a school year is. This is a good example of how to lead change well because we're going into Year 4 at this point and we're not done yet.

Noreen talked about visiting classrooms and using a structure to do so. She said:

We're developing a learning walks pilot this year and using the learning walks protocol. We all do walk-throughs and I think that's crucial in being visible and being in touch with and being able to comment on I saw you do that great thing, staying really in touch and that's also what I love about a small district. I think that's something that also might be challenging if you had a big district. I'm able to get around a lot more and be more visible.
She added:

It makes me more effective because they know and hopefully trust me. Every conversation I can sneak in my values so I think it helps make that common belief system, it helps support it. It's more authentic and it also shows what we value.

**Strategies and Practices.** Many of the participants identified strategies and practices that they utilize to be effective in their work. Patrick noted the need to delegate some of the work. He said:

I'm trying to be better at delegating. I have to trust my other administrators to do their job and when it doesn't happen or it's not to the extent that I want, I hold them accountable for it. That's a work in progress for me.

Another practice identified by Charlotte was the way conversations with all stakeholders were conducted. She said, “I think it's really important when there's a conversation about a difference of opinion, an upset parent, that that be a face-to-face conversation.” She elaborated that she handles this the same way with staff and said:

I would always get in my car and go over to the building. Sometimes I'll be on my way in the morning, and I'll just pick up the phone and say, “I just want to drop by and have a conversation.” It's always a very respectful, open, but I think there's a lot of trust that builds in taking the time as a superintendent to go to them. As often as possible, I will always go to them as opposed to having them come to me.

Jonathan discussed how he runs meetings as part of his strategy. He said:

One of the things I've been trying to do here as a practice has been in my leadership meetings. I've tried to have my principals feel comfortable about having their faculty meetings be more like a leadership meeting. Your good teachers are going to come to the
foreground during your faculty meetings. Now, I'm also not a believer in traditional faculty
meetings, so that's something I've told them this year they completely need to get away
from. You can use that time for teaching and learning.

Charlotte also identified strategies, saying:

One of my strategies that allows me to stay focused is to organize my priorities.
Obviously my calendar is coordinated according to the school committee. That's the first
piece of it, but I organize my priorities around the strategic plan, and the strategic plan
focuses me. If we put the emergency of the day as the center of attention, then we're
never going to get anywhere. We have to be able to say to people, “We understand that
this is a concern. The superintendent is going to be looking at it, but she's not going to be
dropping everything before the next school committee meeting.”

She added that:

I have to be able to push back to them to say, “Here are my goals. These are the goals that
you approved. Here's the strategic plan that you approved. I will deal with the public, but
you cannot ask me to make whatever the flavor of the day is the biggest priority.”

Charlotte also cited organizational methods as a part of her strategy. She said:

The other thing that I do personally is I have folders for each day of the week, and I can
take a week's worth of things that need to be accomplished and sort them into days and
feel way less overwhelmed. I carry very little paper.

She also noted:

One of the things that I do is I will have a list, or I'll print an email that I know I have to
follow up on, and in my half hour drive, I'm on the phone the entire time. I just feel like
sitting at my desk on the phone is not the best use of time.
Mary used the strategy of gaining input from stakeholders:

One of the feedback loops I get is that I have a superintendent’s roundtable of teacher representatives from each building, and they are a good touch point for me. They update all the little things going on in the building, and it’s an opportunity for them to share practices with each other. It’s also a good way for me to get feedback on things and check in with them on different initiatives.

Arnold addressed the budgetary aspects of structure and strategies saying, “The fiscal priorities of the district really do rest with me.” He discussed the area of professional development and said:

We really tried to do an early adopter model. Tried to find those teachers that were really excited and interested in this work to give them some really high quality training, let them figure out what was going to work well and then bring on the rest of our teachers as we went. I have seen firsthand the impact that that early training had on those teachers.

Arnold noted that part of his practice and the strategies used emanate from his beliefs about teaching and learning. He said:

My goal is to try to say yes as often as we can. When a teacher comes to us, or an educational leader, a building comes to us and says, “I really want to do X,” we should really be figuring out how we can make that happen versus how we’re going to say no.

Summary

This chapter presented findings based on analysis of the interview transcripts. The research results were organized using the significant themes and sub-themes identified in the study. The analysis of the themes and sub-themes answer the primary research question, which was: What are the perceptions of a group of suburban superintendents in the Metrowest area of
Massachusetts with regard to their role, as the primary instructional leader in a district, in creating and setting the conditions that promote excellence in the teaching and learning process?

The first section of the chapter introduced each participant with a brief profile, including a discussion of her or his reasons for pursuing a superintendency. This section also presented the findings with regard to both the expected and unexpected outcomes each participant found within the role of a school district superintendent. The findings show that the participants perceived that many outcomes were expected, and there also were many unexpected outcomes that challenged the achievement of goals and objectives.

The balance of the chapter explored the major themes and sub-themes identified by the participants. Central to the chapter was an exploration of each participant’s *Beliefs about teaching and learning*. Each of the participants was able to articulate why and how his or her beliefs about teaching and learning were central to her or his leadership. This was followed by the findings centered on the theme of *Connections between superintendent leadership and teaching and learning practices*. Sub-themes that emerged included consistent leadership, philosophy, and policies; the leadership skills needed by an effective superintendent; the modeling of desired behaviors by the superintendent; and the support and resources needed to be effective. Again, the superintendent participants discussed the impact of leadership in a district, and specifically their own leadership, on the teaching and learning practices within a district. In addition to the philosophy that underpinned the leadership actions, participants identified the need for adequate support and resources in order to do the work in each district.

The next theme explored was *Beliefs that influence decision-making*. Sub-themes included being a change agent, the impact of costs and the associated benefits, providing an inclusive education, planning effectively, staffing, student-centered policies, and support. The
participants’ perceptions supported the idea that the superintendent is generally charged with bringing about change in a district. However, it was noted that effective change takes place over a period of time, with the work of many people. It was again noted that support, both financial and otherwise, is essential to the change effort.

The next section of the chapter explored the theme *Creating conditions for excellence in teaching and learning*. Several sub-themes became apparent in the responses, including having an effective team, a collaborative and trusting culture, the educational environment, resources, and politics. The participants voiced the need for having a strong team working within a supportive culture in order to create the appropriate environment and outcomes for students. The political aspect of the superintendency was highlighted by many participants as having a significant effect, positively or negatively, on the ability of the superintendent to lead a district towards excellence in teaching and learning. Resource allocation was again noted as an important element.

The research findings were then discussed as they related to *Successes and challenges in creating conditions for excellence in teaching and learning*. All participants noted that there were both successes and challenges in creating the conditions for excellence in teaching and learning. Successes centered on hiring the best teachers and administrators possible and then allowing them to do their jobs in the most effective manner possible. Also noted was a deep understanding of the change process as a lever for success and the need for transparency in creating a culture of excellence. Challenges included budget, resources, and sustainability; developing a culture of excellence without fear; and having effective systems and processes. Many participants elaborated extensively on the challenges and connected the challenges to unexpected outcomes. The impact of creating a collaborative culture, the political scenario in a
district, and the availability of resources were an integral part of the discussion by the participants in the study.

The findings presented in the next section addressed the participants’ perceptions of Desired changes in teaching and learning in their districts. The participants cited different ways in which teaching and learning have changed in their districts. They noted that some of these changes resulted from state and federal mandates, while others resulted from local initiatives. In some cases, they discussed the changes that they would like to see implemented under their leadership. These included the longer-term impacts of changing the teaching and learning culture to be focused on students. Most participants referred to inclusive education that would help the special needs students in a district, requiring changes in teaching and learning practices currently in place.

The next section detailed the findings based on the superintendents’ perceptions of Desired changes to role as instructional leader. Participants identified several aspects of their roles that they would like to change. Most agreed that the political needs of the job absorbed time that could be spent on other topics. These were presented as a distraction from focusing on teaching and learning. Many participants also discussed the resources available as a part of the needed changes. The need to advocate in the political arena for these resources was one aspect of the resource discussion, as was the reallocation of resources within a district to maximize positive impacts for students. The topic of resources permeated most aspects of the research findings.

The last section presented the findings with regard to Structures, strategies, and practices used by each of the superintendents in their work. This section contained many varied approaches to the work and no unified sub-themes emerged. Each superintendent developed a
variety of coping strategies to manage the workload and each strategy and practice identified was unique to each participant.

In summary, the words of one of the study participants reflected the significance of the perceptions of the school district superintendent and their impact on teaching and learning in a district. Charlotte said:

I think that superintendents need to take the opportunity to be in this position really seriously. We have an impact, or the opportunity to have an impact on an entire community, and we need to take really seriously the impacts of our actions. You have to make decisions off what you believe is best for kids within the constraints and in the context of the community.

School district superintendents are the primary instructional leaders in their districts. The task for these individuals is to maximize the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process and outcomes in the school system to benefit all students. School district superintendents must create and maintain the appropriate conditions for excellence in all curricular, instructional, and assessment matters in order to maximize student learning and achievement. As the primary learning leader of the district, the superintendent is responsible for hiring and retaining high quality principals and teachers who will drive student outcomes in individual classrooms, ensuring that high quality professional development is provided, maintaining best instructional practices in all classrooms, and enabling the conditions that promote student growth and achievement. The findings indicate that this charge is complex and can be accomplished only with significant resources and other structures in place to support success.
Chapter 5: Discussion of the Research Findings

The purpose of this doctoral thesis was to explore the perceptions of a group of suburban Massachusetts superintendents in the Metrowest area with regard to their role, as the primary instructional leaders in their districts, in creating the optimal conditions for excellence in teaching and learning. The work directed by the superintendent frequently fits within a policy, compliance, legalistic, and mandate framework that ignores the actual work of teaching and learning in classrooms (Cuban, 1984). A greater priority placed on excellence in the teaching and learning process would help refocus the important vision of successful student achievement in all classrooms (Honig, 2009).

The implications for a superintendent’s high level of influence on conditions for excellence in teaching and learning can affect students and families, teachers, principals, other administrators, and all stakeholders in the educational process (Honig, 2012). This is the work of a change agent within the microcosm that is a school district. However, the challenges to achieving success are many. These challenges include, but are not limited to, the lack of additional resources, the current allocation of available resources, the culture and environment within a district, and the political forces that come to bear on the superintendency within any given district in its particular circumstances.

Research Question

The primary research question was: What are the perceptions of a group of suburban superintendents in the Metrowest area of Massachusetts with regard to their role, as the primary instructional leader in a district, in creating and setting the conditions that promote excellence in the teaching and learning process? This study investigated how superintendents perceived their role as instructional leaders in their district and how they have attempted to implement specific
behaviors that can contribute to setting the conditions for excellence in teaching and learning for all. It was a qualitative study using an interpretive phenomenological analysis approach.

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework of instructional leadership was used as the foundation for studying the work superintendents engage in to further excellence in teaching and learning within their districts. Instructional leadership evolved from the work of many researchers and practitioners, such as Cuban (1984), Hallinger (1992), Fink and Resnick (2001), and Drago-Severson (2007). There is no single individual credited with its authorship. Instructional leadership is multi-faceted and has undergone a process of evolution during the last three decades.

**Methodology**

The method of interpretative phenomenological analysis was chosen as it supported the intent of the study to analyze the perceptions and lived experiences of the individual participants in a detailed manner and to determine if there were wider patterns, themes, and trends across all of the participants. The positionality of the researcher was also a consideration. The researcher had significant familiarity with the role of the superintendent and therefore researcher bias needed to be considered as a threat to validity. The researcher’s background could be considered as both a potential limitation as well as a strength. The researcher’s familiarity with the participants, as professional acquaintances, presumably increased their comfort level as they engaged in the interviews. It is possible that the participants were also more guarded with their information as a result of continuing professional relationships and encounters with the researcher within the local communities. Lastly, this study only considered the lived experiences of suburban school superintendents in a specific geographic location. This narrow focus, which
deliberately excluded urban and rural district superintendents, could limit the generalizability of the findings.

**Key Findings**

**Connection of key findings to theoretical framework.** Hallinger (1992) explored the progression of the role of educational leaders through three phases that have evolved since the 1980s. The first phase placed the administrator in a managerial role, and was followed by a second phase, in which the administrator was an instructional leader. The third phase was that of a transformational leader. This is the current incarnation of school leaders. The administrator is thought of as the “head learner,” and as such participates with staff in the professional growth and development process. The findings indicate that the superintendent participants have encountered each of these role incarnations. Each spoke about the day to day work of ensuring that district management occurred in a seamless fashion, but each also spoke of the need for the superintendent to be an instructional leader as well as a change agent within the district. The participants also noted that each had experienced both successes and challenges with regard to each of these role expectations.

Fink and Resnick (2001) noted that schools are often “bifurcated” entities with dissimilar goals. The two primary sub-entities are the operations of a school and the curriculum and instruction sector of a school or district. Fink and Resnick (2001) presented a cultural shift in the priorities of administrators toward learning leadership, unifying the bifurcated systems within a school setting. The participants noted that each of the ideas that Fink and Resnick (2001) put forward were true in their work. These superintendents consciously tried to migrate towards an instructional leadership mindset and to join disparate parts of the school system under a set of uniform and agreed upon goals. In most cases, the superintendents used a strategic plan to
accomplish this task or discussed harnessing district improvement plans and school improvement plans to achieve unification.

In another iteration of instructional leadership, a seminal work by Drago-Severson (2007) explored how school leaders can promote teacher learning within schools. Teacher learning is one aspect and outcome of instructional leadership. Drago-Severson (2007) outlined four pillar practices that support teacher learning, professional development, and adult learning theory. These four pillars serve as a foundation for transforming school administrators into learning leaders. The pillars are teaming, providing leadership roles, collegial inquiry, and mentoring. Each of the superintendent participants addressed the concept of adult learning. In some cases, participants described administrator professional development as a primary focal point of their work. They expected that work with the administrators would filter to teachers as a result of clearly setting expectations, particularly around the supervision and evaluation of teachers. All participants also addressed professional development for teachers as an integral part of their work, sometimes in the form of mentoring programs. Continued improvement in a district was noted to hinge upon the continued growth of the professional staff. Some participants referred to this as a growth mindset.

Leithwood et al. (2008) addressed seven claims that pertain to effective school leadership. Chief among these ideas is the concept that school leadership is central to student learning. This is a central tenet of instructional leadership. The role of a school district superintendent is complex, multi-faceted, and requires multiple skill sets. It is a “one-of-a-kind job” (Antonucci, 2012); one of the most important roles of a school superintendent is to serve as the primary instructional leader in the school district. Participants noted that they worked with principals and assistant principals to demonstrate the beliefs and core values that a
superintendent wished to see in the district. This took the form of modeling behaviors so building level administrators would be able to impart these same beliefs and core values to faculty and staff in their schools. The participants described the ongoing work of school-based leaders as extremely important to overall success and continued improvement in each of the districts.

King (2002) provided a detailed description of the shift towards learning leaders from managerial leaders in schools, recognizing the need for student achievement to drive all activities of both the principal and teachers. Therefore, the focus of the superintendent, among others, must be on teaching and learning to help teachers improve instructional practices, with student outcomes at the heart of all priorities. Many of the participants noted that the best way they can work towards achieving this focus is to be present in schools and classrooms. They noted that visibility was an aspect of the role, but that understanding the current state of affairs in classrooms was critical to being a learning leader and driving the work of improvement in teaching and learning. The superintendent is the primary instructional leader in a district, and by demonstrating the value of high quality teaching and learning, the superintendent sets the conditions for all stakeholders to strive for excellence in teaching and learning.

Connection of key findings to the literature review. The literature review identified the movement from a historical view of the superintendency to a more contemporary view, in which the superintendent is the primary instructional leader in a district. Major themes included the beliefs of the participants about teaching and learning, the connection between these superintendent beliefs and their leadership, and the impact of these beliefs on district teaching and learning practices. Additional themes that were found in the data included a discussion of the beliefs that influence decision making and the superintendent as the party responsible for creating the conditions for excellence, including the successes and challenges noted by
participants. Further themes included changes desired by the superintendent in the teaching and learning practices in each community, changes to the role of superintendent, and the structures as well as the strategies and practices used within each district by the participants in their roles as superintendents.

The contemporary context of the superintendent as the primary instructional leader was explored in the literature review and described in the research findings. This contemporary lens encompasses the concept of the superintendent as having a specific vision and being a change agent for that vision in a district. The literature and the research also indicated that a variety of district structures support the effort of the superintendent as the primary instructional leader. These efforts include the work of the central office and school personnel as well as a focus on professional development. Structures that come to bear on the work of the district from outside the district were also discussed, including the impact of local politics and the availability of necessary resources and budgeting. Lastly, this chapter explored how and why the superintendent, when viewed as the primary instructional leader in a district, contributes to setting the conditions for excellence in teaching and learning.

*Superintendent as the primary instructional leader.* Robinson et al. (2008) stated that there are specific instructional leadership practices that can improve student outcomes and contribute to success. These practices apply to superintendents, principals, and others on the leadership team. Bredeson and Kose (2007) concurred and noted that these actions succeed or fail as a result of the superintendent’s vision and priorities as a district change agent, or lack thereof. The findings are consistent with the literature, and identify instructional leadership practices by the superintendent and other district leaders as a key element in achieving goals for student learning. The participants all articulated their belief that all students can learn and that
this belief served as the foundation for all practices they engaged in and informed all decisions they made.

The participants voiced the need for having certain conditions in place in order to function effectively as the primary instructional leader. These included having a strong team working within a supportive culture in order to create the appropriate environment and outcomes for students. All participants noted that there were both successes and challenges in creating the conditions for excellence in teaching and learning, which was consistent with the literature. Superintendents must create and maintain the appropriate conditions for excellence in all curricular, instructional, and assessment matters in order to maximize student learning and achievement. As noted in both the literature review and the findings, the superintendent, as the primary learning leader of the district, is responsible for hiring and retaining high quality principals and teachers who will drive student outcomes in individual classrooms, ensuring that high quality professional development is provided, maintaining best instructional practices in all classrooms, and enabling the conditions that promote student growth and achievement.

Vision of the superintendent. Lewis et al. (2011) put forth the concept that a school superintendent must create the vision for the district and must plan for all stakeholders to meet the goals that are a part of that vision. The literature noted that identifying the vision and mission of a district and setting the necessary goals to achieve that vision and mission are among the most important aspects of a superintendent’s job (Dufour, 2007; Portis, et al., 2007; Townsend et al., 2013). The research findings consistently supported this stance, as superintendents must create and maintain a focus on the district’s primary vision. This vision was embodied in a strategic plan that informed all aspects of the district’s work. In all cases, the district strategic
plan or the vision for district improvement was directly related to excellence in teaching and learning and ultimately to improving student achievement.

Lashway (2002a) and Drago-Severson (2007) noted that superintendents must create a vision that has instruction at the top of the district’s priorities. All work in the district must be geared towards continuous academic improvement for students, while the managerial work and the other requirements for success continue as well. The researcher also found that the superintendent, as the district change agent, must create an environment where all work of the district is focused on continuous improvement of student achievement, while also managing the day to day responsibilities and obligations of the school district’s work in the schools and the larger community. The participants indicated that various aspects of their work influenced their own decision making. These included being a change agent in the district, the impact of costs and associated benefits, providing an inclusive education, planning effectively, staffing, student-centered policies, and support.

**Superintendent as a change agent.** Change in school districts is inevitable, whether due to the imposition of state or federal mandates or implemented after a period of introspection about strengths and needs. Bredeson and Kose (2007) presented the view that the imposition of mandates can also serve as a vehicle for needed change. Lewis et al. (2011) contended that school superintendents in today’s educational setting must adapt quickly to these frequent changes in order to be successful. These changes may stem from the external imposition of mandates and regulations or from internal motivation to make positive change. Participants interpreted these mandates and regulations as a part of the political landscape encompassed in the superintendent role. Many of the participants noted that their work as a change agent was informed by their beliefs about teaching and learning. The findings noted that the
superintendents’ beliefs in all cases served as the linchpin for change or the lack thereof. The need for inclusive education was one of the cornerstone concepts that all participants noted as a lever for past change or change needed in the future.

Dufour (2007) posited that one of the most critical duties of a school district leader, the superintendent, is to be clear about the current situation in a district and identify both the strengths and challenges inherent in the current situation. Then it must be determined if there is a need for change, resulting in setting coherent goals for achieving identified change targets. While change is often necessary to advance the reform effort of a school district, Danna and Spatt (2013) warned against a “change of the day” approach to the running of a school district. This is again consistent with the study’s findings in that many participants discussed the need to implement change but were concerned that the amount of change in the current political landscape of education was too overwhelming to be effective. Study participants noted their responsibility to serve as a filter against political forces outside of the district wanting change, bringing all change efforts back into alignment with the strategic plan, the vision for the district. For the participants, the strategic plan included the articulation of excellence with regard to the expected quality of teaching and learning in a district and the climate in which this focused effort would take place. The commitment to a vision and emphasis on excellence in continuous learning is the responsibility of the superintendent and, by extension, the rest of the organization (Portis et al., 2007).

**District structures that support the superintendent as the primary instructional leader.** Study participants noted that it was the responsibility of the superintendent, as the primary instructional leader in a district, to create the conditions for excellence in teaching and learning. All participants identified areas of success as well as challenges in doing so. These included having
an effective team, a collaborative and trusting culture, the educational environment, resources, and politics. They also indicated that success centered on hiring the best teachers and administrators possible and then allowing them to do their jobs in the most effective manner possible. As a group, there was a deep understanding of the change process as a lever for success and the need for transparency in creating a culture of excellence. Participants identified challenges to success as a lack of budget and resources, sustainability of programs and initiatives, the development of a culture of excellence without fear, and having effective systems and processes. The themes identified by the researcher with regard to the impact of the superintendent were also found in the literature.

Central office structures. Sullivan and Shulman (2005) determined that it is the superintendent’s leadership that drives a district. Three basic strategies were identified as part of the implementation of an education vision. These included the modeling of professional practice, providing individual support as needed, and direct involvement in the hiring and retention of staff. Consistent with the literature, almost all of the participants noted modeling was a primary tool they used to create the desired environment in the district. They noted that this extended to individual work with central office personnel. The literature noted the importance of this work because the success of all individuals, including teachers and students, is the task of central office personnel (Honig, 2012). Grove (2002) called the central office staff “crucial” to the effectiveness of a school system. Grove (2002) held that central office personnel were “invisible,” contributing to their ability to be effective, but also making it more difficult to isolate the impact of these individuals on the district.

School-based structures. Grove (2002) stated that the primary role of the superintendent, the central office directors, and support staff is to provide the schools with what is needed to get
the job done. In concrete terms, this includes heat, classroom furniture, learning materials, appropriate staffing, and a host of other elements. All of the participants noted the need to keep the district running smoothly by attending to the mechanics of the buildings, busses, and other logistics, while placing importance on the teaching and learning process. For the participants, this translated into the need to have an effective team of people to accomplish the work. The participants were in accord with Honig (2008), who noted that districts must build capacity at the school level to support teaching and learning. Mary noted that, “It really comes down to building a high-performing team and hiring.” She noted that the administrative team, as a high-performing team, has the responsibility for:

- Hiring the best teachers, and then ultimately supervising the teachers who are mediocre, or worse. It comes back to the hiring process. You need to hire good building leadership, district leadership, who also all are growing in the same direction with respect to philosophies and beliefs.

Ritchie (2013) stated that the only vision a building administrator needs is to:

- Hire the best teachers you can find, support them in every way possible, help them grow, evaluate them fairly, set and exemplify high expectations for everyone, and create and insist on a climate and culture where students feel safe, known, and challenged. (p. 20)

Every participant discussed the need to be involved in the hiring process for both administrators and teachers. They were also in agreement with each other and the literature about the importance of being directly involved with the hiring, induction, and mentoring of all teachers. The notion of building capacity among administrators to support this work was noted by the study participants and in the literature. Cudeiro (2005) stated that superintendents identified their first priority as supporting the principals as instructional leaders. The participants all agreed that
hiring and training new teachers falls under the overall responsibilities of a school district and that the design and implementation of an effective process and program begins with the superintendent. Sometimes this is delegated to a designee of the superintendent, but the bottom line responsibility remains with the superintendent (Honig, 2012).

*Professional development structures.* Another aspect of the successful hiring and induction of teachers lies in creating the proper conditions for teaching and learning. Youngs and King (2002) noted that these conditions include such factors as the “establishing of trusting relationships, creation of structures that promote teacher learning, and promoting teachers to initiate change efforts” (p. 665). Darling-Hammond (2009) further noted that one prerequisite for teachers to be able to learn effectively is the allocation of an ample amount of time. A commitment to high quality induction programs helps meet the new teachers’ need to become familiar with a district and its instructional expectations. All of the participants noted a critical need for professional development for teachers and administrators alike, but they also noted challenges to success, including the availability of time and money.

The participants discussed the culture of a district as another key component in effective professional development and the creation of high performing teams. Youngs and King (2002) elaborated that administrators create and mold the beliefs and culture within a school and district with regard to teaching practices as a result of the priority, or lack thereof, placed on teacher professional development. Noreen stated that, “The quote I always use is that culture trumps strategy every day of the week; you improve and focus on culture first.” Charlotte agreed, saying, “I think the thing that leads to excellence in teaching and learning is developing a culture of trust. We can talk all we want about the strategic plan and about the priority initiatives.” She further expanded this idea by saying:
In creating conditions for excellence in teaching and learning, it is two things. It's including teachers in the conversation in the decision making. It's developing a culture of trust so that teachers are not looking over their shoulder waiting for the next foot to drop.

The literature described high quality professional development as integral to effective teacher quality, but was largely silent on the creation of a culture in which professional development could and would be effective. The participants all spoke about underlying trust and cultural impacts across many subjects, not just professional development.

Darling-Hammond (2009) and Drago-Severson (2007) posited that professional development is most effective when it is part of a larger coherent effort aimed at school and district reform or improvement. Time must be provided in order for adult learning to occur, and Darling-Hammond (2009) further noted that “sustained, job-embedded, and collaborative” strategies yield highly effective teacher professional development results (p. 3). Several superintendents concurred that effective professional development takes time and must be embedded and sustained deeply in the work of the classroom teacher in order to be most effective at changing practices. Participants agreed with the need for professional development. Drago-Severson (2007) noted that support for teacher learning is directly tied to improved teaching and therefore also supports student development and achievement. Similarly, Brookhart and Moss (2013) posited that establishing a culture of learning in a school improves student learning by empowering teachers to become learners as well.

**Pressure on district structures from outside the district.** Banks and Maloney (2007) discussed the pressure on a superintendent from a school board or other elected governing committee. It is this committee, often composed of non-educators, to whom the superintendent must answer. They pointed out that setting the instructional vision with a focus on student
learning is the most important job of the school district superintendent and that this priority must be protected from the political factions in a community. Every participant in the study noted the impact of pressure from outside the district on the workings of the district. These included, but were not limited to, statewide political mandates and impacts, the regulatory climate in Massachusetts, financial limitations within the school finance structure, local political pressures, and the generally perceived lack of public support for public education. These pressures collectively served to frustrate the study participants and also to inhibit their ability to function as the highly effective instructional leaders that they wished to be.

*Impact of the superintendent.* Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) identified a strong connection between the work of district leadership (the superintendent) and the organizational conditions within the district as they affect school leaders. The creation of these conditions in a district can nurture or impede the effectiveness of school leaders. Study participants who were newer to the role or their district identified challenges with creating the coherence and trust necessary to connect district work with work in the schools. The researcher noted an alignment of these efforts tended to relate to the length of time the superintendent had served within a district. The literature supported the notion that these efforts require not only effort, but also time.

Pajak and Glickman (2002) stated that the superintendent and other central office personnel are the “key figures in stimulating and facilitating efforts to maintain and improve the quality of instruction” (p. 1). This is done by creating and maintaining an “instructional dialogue” in all areas of the school system and with all stakeholders using an “infrastructure of support.” The participants all noted that the importance of being an instructional leader rested with the superintendent, which set the tone for the rest of the district administrators in.
Leithwood et al. (2008) made the point that indirect leadership, demonstrated through its direct impact on staff performance, increases student achievement (p. 34). The participants agreed that administrative impact on staff performance did ultimately affect student performance. Many of the participants identified the work done in the supervision and evaluation process as pivotal in this effort.

Superintendents are responsible for creating the conditions that ensure student learning (Banks & Maloney, 2007). This was supported by Waters and Marzano (2007), who wrote that high levels of student achievement are correlated with superintendents who implement “non-negotiable” goals for instruction, align the resources of the district to support professional development, and monitor progress towards achievement of the established goals. Waters and Marzano noted three important findings in their work: “District-level leadership matters, effective superintendents focus their efforts of creating goal-oriented districts, and superintendent tenure is positively correlated with student achievement” (p. 29). Participants corroborated the significant impact of the superintendent when he or she is perceived as the primary instructional leader of a district, but also noted the impediments and obstacles to becoming the type of leader they wished to be.

Limitations

One limitation of this study was the size of the sample group of participants. There is limited generalizability from the findings as there were only six participants. The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the perceptions of these six participants and insight into their lived experiences. The study included only superintendents who had completed at least 1 year in that role in their district. Participants were drawn from suburban communities in the
Metrowest area of Massachusetts and from communities with demographic similarities. The sample size was designed to be representative yet manageable within the dissertation process.

**Future Research**

The findings indicate that there are many opportunities for future research with regard to superintendents as the primary instructional leaders of a school district. Given the small size of the survey and the homogenous grouping of districts represented, it would be important to expand this type of research to include both urban and rural districts. Districts with significant diversity within the student population were not represented and therefore may be appropriate for future study. Similarly, substantially larger districts were not represented in this group. It would be important for researchers and practitioners alike to view a larger and more diverse context for potentially valuable information on the topic of the superintendent as the primary instructional leader in a district.

School superintendents report to a school committee within a specific community. Participants noted political influence on their role as superintendents. Another opportunity for study would be to determine if the views of school committee members are aligned with the perceptions of the superintendents they employ. A study could examine the impact of alignment of these core values and beliefs between the superintendent and the school committee members on the district’s teaching and learning processes and achievement.

As school district superintendents interact with other significant stakeholder groups, research could also be conducted to compare the perceptions of other administrators, staff, students, and families to the superintendent’s perceptions of the efficacy of teaching and learning within a district. This could then extend across other districts in an effort to identify similarities and differences. More extensive study of the perceptions of other stakeholders with regard to the
perceived excellence in teaching and learning could have wide-ranging impact on both superintendents and the communities in which they serve.

**Implications for Practice**

The findings clearly show that the role of the school district superintendent as the primary instructional leader is enormously complicated and difficult. The demands of various constituents and their varying needs place a huge burden on the superintendent, as noted by the participants. The homogenous nature of the communities represented in this study limit the extent of its implications for creating the conditions for excellence in teaching and learning in a district.

One unifying factor in the research was the need to clearly articulate the core values and beliefs of the superintendent, as these affect the creation and implementation of the district vision. This vision then shapes all areas of the district, including allocation of resources, the necessary changes to teaching and learning practices, the implementation of professional development for teachers and administrators, hiring practices, and a myriad of other structures and strategies used within a district. The vision of the superintendent as a change agent in the district is pivotal for the work in any community, as all stakeholders must have similar values for effective progress in achievement to move forward.

The literature and the findings agreed that the outside forces that come to bear on the success of a superintendent are significant and can be an area of both future success and challenges. Most participants thought of this as a part of the political forces that come to bear on the superintendent. This would include the adequate budgeting of resources, but goes beyond the dollars and cents of this equation. All participants addressed local, state, and federal politics as an impediment to the implementation of their vision for excellence in teaching and learning. This
could be in the form of mandates, but more significantly participants addressed the need to spend
time and effort educating and networking with those individuals outside of the school system.
Each bemoaned the amount of time taken away from the work of fostering excellence in teaching
and learning. Examination of the political structures and how possible changes to that structure
could enhance a superintendent’s ability to focus on the work of improving student achievement
would be a critical outcome for any community.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to gain a deep understanding of the role of school district
superintendents as primary instructional leaders in their districts. This is a complex position,
because the superintendent must interact with many stakeholders as both individuals and as
groups. The potential of an effective superintendent, as the primary instructional leader, to
improve student achievement is significant. However, the challenges to the superintendent’s
ability to have this effect are also significant. These largely stem from outside sources and
influences, rather than either a lack of desire or ability on the part of the individual
superintendent. This study created a greater understanding of the perceptions of superintendents
in the role of primary instructional leaders and provides current superintendents and future
researchers with a deeper understanding of the various factors that support and inhibit success for
both a superintendent and a district.
References


Appendix A

Invitation to Participant

Sent via email
July 2016

Dear :

My name is Joyce Edwards and I am the Assistant Superintendent for Teaching and Learning in Franklin, MA. I am engaged in doctoral work at Northeastern University and I am writing to ask for your help. Please consider this invitation to participate in a research study I am conducting as a requirement to complete a doctoral degree at Northeastern University. The topic for this research is to examine the perceptions of a representative group of suburban district superintendents in the Metrowest area of Massachusetts as the primary instructional leaders in their districts. This study will explore the patterns that emerge in participants’ interviews in order to understand how perceptions and beliefs about teaching and learning may influence the setting of optimal conditions for teaching and learning in a district. Analysis of the participants’ lived experiences may reveal a deeper understanding of how their perceptions and beliefs about excellence in teaching and learning may inform decision making within their public school district.

Participation in this study will involve scheduling three interviews lasting approximately 30-90 minutes each. Interviews will be scheduled at your convenience and at a site you agree to. You have been invited to participate based on your experiences as a superintendent of schools in the role for at least one year. Your insights and reflections will help to further understand the impact of the educational leader on programs and practices within public schools.

Your decision to participate in this study is voluntary and you may elect to not answer any questions during the interview process. Your identity and the identity of your school district will remain confidential and will not be published in any document.

I have enclosed a copy of the Informed Consent Document for your review. If you have questions or would like to volunteer to participate in this study please contact me at 508-272-4475 or at Edwards.joy@husky.neu.edu.

Thank you for your consideration to be part of my research.

Respectfully,
Joyce Edwards
Student Researcher/Doctoral Candidate
Northeastern University
Appendix B

Interview Appointment Communication

Date

Dear : 

Thank you for committing to participate in this research study. Your insights and reflections are appreciated and will add to the body of knowledge on my topic. I would like to schedule a time to meet for the first interview. As the Informed Consent indicates the purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of a representative group of sitting, suburban superintendents regarding their beliefs about teaching and learning and how these beliefs may impact decision making in a district.

I will defer to your schedule as we set a time to meet. Please email or call to set up a mutually agreed upon time and location for our interview.

I can be reached at 508-272-4475 (cell) or by email at edwards.joy@husky.neu.edu.

Thank you,

Joyce Edwards

Student Researcher/ Doctoral Candidate

Northeastern University
Appendix C
Informed Consent Documentation

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies

Principal Investigator: Sara Ewell, PhD

Student Investigator: Joyce Edwards

Title of Study: District Superintendents as Instructional Leaders: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis of School Superintendents as the Primary Instructional Leaders in a Group of Massachusetts Districts

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a doctoral research study. This document will describe the study and will explain the extent of your participation. The study will also be explained to you by the researcher. You may ask questions and reflect on your willingness to be a participant. You do not have to participate and you may withdraw from the study at any time. If you agree to participate in this study you will be asked to sign this consent form. You will be furnished with a copy of the informed consent for your records. Please be advised that this research is being done to complete requirements for a doctoral degree and not for publication in any professional journal.

Why have I been invited to be part of this study?

As a Superintendent of Schools (served in the role for a minimum of one year) you have been selected to further understand how perceptions of the Superintendent with regard to excellence in teaching and learning informs educational decision making in a district.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this IPA study is to understand how the perceptions and beliefs of educational leaders, specifically the superintendent of schools, impact decision making that promotes excellence in teaching and learning in a school district. This IPA study will explore the beliefs and perceptions of a group of suburban superintendents in the Metrowest area of Massachusetts and how these beliefs about regarding teaching and learning may influence educational decision making.

What will my participation involve?
Participation in this study will involve a commitment to be interviewed for three sessions lasting approximately 30-90 minutes. Sessions will be audio taped and the tapes will be transcribed professionally. You will be given a copy of the transcript to review for accuracy.

An outline of each session is provided.

- **Session I** (approximately 30 minutes) will focus on collecting demographic data including beliefs and perceptions about teaching and learning.

- **Session II** (approximately 60-90 minutes) will explore the impact of the beliefs and perceptions of a superintendent on the teaching and learning process.

- **Session III** (approximately 30 minutes, if needed) is to clarify or further probe topics as needed.

*Where will this study be conducted and what is the time commitment?*

The interviews will be conducted in a site selected by the participant. The interviews will be scheduled at a time convenient for the participant. Each session will be approximately 30-90 minutes as detailed above and adherence to the time frame will be respected by the researcher.

*What is the risk to the participant?*

There is no identified risk to the participants. Identity will be coded and only the research and advisor will have access to the key. At the conclusion of the study all transcripts and audio tapes will be shredded professionally. At no time in this study will the identity of the participants or will his/her affiliate district be made public. Confidentiality of the participants will be respected in all aspects of this study.

*How will access my personal information?*

The only individual who will access your information is the researcher. Each participant will be assigned a confidential identification code. All information and transcripts will be maintained in a secure fire proof file cabinet. At the conclusion of the study all information’s and data will be destroyed. The final dissertation will not identify any individual or school district.

*What is the benefit participant’s in this study?*

There is no direct benefit to any participant. However, insights and reflections from the study may help educational leaders acquire insights into how beliefs and perceptions inform their decision making. Insights may offer reflections that may help inform educational programs.

*What are my rights if I elect not to participate in this study?*

You may elect not to participate and not required to be a participant. At any time during this study you may end participation. During the interviews you may choose not to answer specific
questions and you may end participation at any moment. If you choose not to participate you may discard this form.

Who may I contact if I can further questions or concerns about this study?

Joyce Edwards
Student Researcher
741 Lagrange Street, West Roxbury, MA 02132
edwards.joy@husky.neu.edu
508-272-4475

Sara Ewell, Ph.D.
Principal Investigator
Northeastern University
College of Professional Studies
360 Huntington Ave.
Boston, MA 02115
s.ewell@neu.edu

Who may I contact to discuss my rights as a participant?

Any questions about your rights as a study participant may be directed to the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Queries can be directed to: Nan Regina Director Human Subject Research Protection, CPS, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. The phone number is: 617-373-4588 and email: n.regina@neu.edu or irb@neu. You may call anonymously if you so choose.

Will participants be compensated?

There is no compensation for participation.

Will there be a cost to participants?

There is no cost to participants in the study. They only cost is the time required to participate in the interviews and to review interview transcript.
Consent to Participate / Signature Page

I __________________________ have read this document and was offered the opportunity to ask questions regarding this consent form. I was offered the opportunity to have information clarified. I fully understand the expectations for my participation. I fully understand the nature of my participation and the risks to me has been clearly articulated. I agree to participate in this study on a voluntary basis. I understand that I may withdraw my consent at any time during the course of this study.

I agree to be a participant in this study: District Superintendents as Instructional Leaders: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis of School Superintendents as the Primary Instructional Leaders in a Group of Massachusetts Districts conducted by student researcher, Joyce Edwards.

____________________________________________
Research Participant (Printed Name)

____________________________________________
Research Participant (Signature) __________________________ Date

____________________________________________
Researcher/Individual that Explained Consent __________________________ Date

CC: Participant

Principal Investigator

Student Researcher file
Appendix D

Interview Questions

For this IPA study there will be three interview sessions of approximately 30-90 minutes each.

Session I Questions (approximately 30 minutes)

Session I will focus on collecting demographic data, data regarding work experience in K-12 education, and leadership experience in K-12 education.

1. Please share information about your background and how you made the decision to enter the world of K-12 education. Please include information such as your age, degrees earned, career experience prior to entering education, number of years in education, and why you chose education as a career.

2. Please share information about the positions you have held and your career path in K-12 education prior to becoming a superintendent, as well as how many years you have served as a superintendent in this and other districts.

3. Please share information about your job(s) as a school district superintendent and the demographics of the communities in which you have served in this role. Please include the number of students, the approximate percentage of those on free or reduced lunch, the approximate percentage of SPED students, and the approximate percentage of ELL students in each district.

4. Please share why you decided to pursue a superintendency.

5. Has the role of the superintendent been what you expected it to be or have there been unexpected outcomes? Please give an example(s).

6. Is there anything you would like to add?

Session II Questions (approximately 60-90 minutes)
Session II will explore perceptions about teaching and learning, specifically the role of the superintendent as the primary instructional leader with regard to setting the conditions for excellence in teaching and learning in a K-12 school district.

1. How would you describe your beliefs about teaching and learning?

2. Can you share your perceptions about the connection between the instructional leadership of a superintendent and the teaching and learning practices in a district?

3. How do your beliefs about teaching and learning influence your decision making as a superintendent? Please give an example(s).

4. Do you believe a superintendent can create conditions that lead to excellence in teaching and learning and if so, how can this be done effectively? Please give an example(s).

5. Have you been able to create those conditions and why or why not? Please give an example(s).

6. What are the opportunities and challenges in creating the conditions that lead to excellence in teaching and learning? Please give an example(s).

7. If you could change something with regard to teaching and learning in your district, what would it be?

8. If you could change something with regard to your role as the primary instructional leader of the district, what would it be?

9. What other structures, strategies, practices, and use of resources do you use in your role as the primary instructional leader?

10. Is there anything you would like to add?
The interviewer will be looking for examples and stories specific to these experiences which may include, but will not be limited to, examples/stories about professional development, organization of administrative teams, professional learning communities, use of resources, etc.

Session III Questions (approximately 30 minutes if needed)

1. Probing questions as needed to clarify any topics previously covered in the first two interviews.