

# Leadership Practices that Affect Student Achievement: Creating a Supportive Organization for Learning

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BOSTON COLLEGE  
Lynch School of Education

Department of  
Educational Leadership and Higher Education

Professional School Administrator Program (PSAP)

LEADERSHIP PRACTICES THAT AFFECT STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT:  
CREATING A SUPPORTIVE ORGANIZATION FOR LEARNING

Dissertation in Practice  
By

TARA GOHLMANN

with

Nicole Gittens, James M. Reilly, David M. Ryan and Kris Allison Taylor

submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education

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Kris Allison Taylor

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# **Leadership Practices that Affect Student Achievement: Creating a Supportive Organization for Learning**

by

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## **Abstract**

It is widely accepted that school leadership has both a direct and indirect impact on student achievement. Hitt and Tucker's (2016) Unified Leadership framework summarized a decade of work by numerous researchers identifying the five most effective leadership domains that influence student learning. Using that work as a conceptual framework, this qualitative case study analyzed one of the five interdependent leadership domains in an urban elementary school that succeeded in educating traditionally marginalized students and outperformed other schools with similar demographics in the district.

This study focused on the fourth of Hitt and Tucker's (2016) key leadership domains or practices: creating a supportive organization for learning. Creating a supportive organization for learning is important because just as teachers need to establish a sense of well-being and trust for students to learn in their classroom, administrators must establish the same sense of trust and comfort to create an environment where teachers can teach to their highest capacity.

This study explored whether the key leadership practices of creating a supportive organization for learning were present in a school and whether the school leaders believed that presence of the attributes contributed to the effectiveness of the school. This

study found that the five attributes of creating a supportive organization for learning were present at the school in that the principal built capacity in her building, the school resources targeted student achievement and there was a belief that all students can learn. Importantly, the superintendent also highlighted the principal's ability to push her staff to continuous results without pushing so hard that they lost trust in her and love for the students they serve. There were, however, opportunities for improvement including creating a clear set of district supports for schools and improving cultural proficiency at the school level. We also found that administrators in the district believe that school leaders have made the school successful by setting high expectations for the students, no matter their situation, and created a culture of productive collaboration that was focused on continuously improving student achievement, key components of creating a supportive organization for learning.

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# **Chapter One<sup>1</sup>**

## **Introduction**

### **Statement of Problem and Purpose**

Studies of urban schooling are often grounded in what has come to be known as the achievement gap and focus on disparities of academic achievement when disaggregated by race, ethnicity, disability, and socioeconomic status (Allen, 2008; Brown, 2003; Laprade, 2011). While the legacy of societal injustice plagues traditionally marginalized students across a variety of contexts (Milner, 2012), it is often most profound in urban schools with high concentrations of black and Latino students. In such schools, policies and practices have been laden with deficit-thinking for decades and resources remain scarce (Anderson, 2007; Blanchett, Mumford & Beachum, 2005; Braun, Wang, Jenkins, & Weinbaum, 2006; Lewis, James, Hancock & Hill-Jackson, 2008).

Reform models employed by urban school leadership teams frequently focus on addressing technical practices, such as improving pedagogy, that have demonstrated positive results albeit often in dissimilar contexts (Books, 2007; Mehta, 2013; Wiggan, 2008; Wiggan, 2014; Wiggan & Watson, 2016; Williams, Greenleaf, Albert & Barnes, 2014). Research on urban schools suggests, however, that improving instruction alone is insufficient (Page & Kemp, 2015; Silverman, 2014; Ma, Shen & Krenn, 2014) if not coupled with other factors such as instilling the belief in staff members that all students

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter was jointly written by Nicole Gittens, Tara Gohlmann, James Reilly, David Ryan and Kris Taylor.

can truly achieve (Jager & Denessen, 2015; Milner, 2008). Other conditions that empirical literature links to improving student achievement in urban schools include school climate (Weijun, Vaillancourt, Brittain, Krygsman, Smith, Haltigan & Hymel, 2014; Ramsey, 2015), principal instructional activities (May & Supovitz, 2011), teacher instructional practices (Stone & Lane, 2003; Lyons & Barnett, 2011), and the overall quality of instruction (Blazar, Litke & Barmore, 2016). The job of the urban school leader is to determine which of these conditions are in most dire need of change and to then implement leadership practices that will promote improvement in these areas and impact student achievement. As a result, student achievement can hinge on the decisions a school leader makes. However, because each school context is different, school leaders often have little guidance as to how and where they should focus their efforts. This could be the reason academic success varies greatly from school to school in many urban districts. Regardless, it is clear that some schools provide better opportunities for learning than others, and that these high performing urban schools, and the leaders of these schools, may approach student learning in a way that should be emulated by their lower performing peer institutions.

Variation in school performance is particularly evident in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts where the ten largest urban school districts are all considered underperforming by virtue of their state accountability standing (MA DESE: School and District Profiles, Accountability Report, n.d.). However, each of these districts also has at least one school with 80% or more of its students classified as high needs<sup>2</sup> that is out-

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<sup>2</sup> High needs refers to a student who is “designated as either low income...economically disadvantaged... ELL [English Language Learner], or former ELL, or a student with disabilities. A former ELL student is a student not currently an ELL, but had been at some point in the two previous academic years” (MA DESE:

performing schools with similar demographics within the same district. This phenomenon calls for attention and gives signs of hope for other schools seeking to improve (MA DESE: School and District Profiles Accountability Report, n.d.; Griffin & Green, 2013).

The variation in school performance demonstrated in Massachusetts' largest urban districts raises the question as to what makes high performing schools different. Understanding why some urban schools outperform others that are serving similar student populations would benefit school leaders working towards improving student achievement goals for all. Further, district administrators would better understand the specific school leadership practices that create successful learning environments in order to implement system-wide change (Rorrer, Skrla & Scheurich, 2008; Honig, Lorton & Copland, 2009; Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010). Therefore, the overarching aim of this collective study was to identify the school leadership practices that existed in a high performing school that encouraged improved outcomes for all students and broke the cycle of underperformance and discrepancies in achievement embedded in many large urban districts. Our study was guided by one overarching research question: What leadership practices were present in a high performing, urban elementary school?

It is widely accepted that school leadership has both a direct and indirect impact on student achievement (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Jacobson, 2011; Leithwood, Patten & Jantzi, 2010; Leithwood & Sun, 2012; Sun & Leithwood, 2015; Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, Anderson, Michlin & Mascall, 2010; Sammons, Gu, Day & Ko, 2011; Waters, Marzano & McNulty, 2003). Hitt and Tucker (2016)

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Profiles Home, n.d.). Economically disadvantaged students are designated by the state. We use the term "high needs" throughout this study to mirror MA DESE's definition, though the term is deficit-laden.

created a unified leadership framework informed by a decade of research on the most effective leadership practices that influence student learning. This study identified 5 domains and 28 dimensions of quality school leadership. Domains are the overarching categories that summarize the leadership practices and dimensions are a set of specific behaviors engaged by the school leader. The goal of this research project was to learn whether or not the dimensions identified in Hitt and Tucker's Unified Framework were present in a high performing, urban elementary school. Historically, urban schools have struggled to educate traditionally marginalized students and the aim was to study how an urban school was able to rise above the challenges and attain academic success despite the obstacles.

### **Context**

The primary driver of this study was to apply, in practical terms, Hitt and Tucker's (2016) Unified Framework to an urban school and to determine to what extent the leadership practices, particularly the dimensions that comprise the five domains, were evident given the complexity of an urban environment. A Brookings Institution (2011) report illustrates a significant shift in the American child population and the challenges that come with such a shift. The report contends that between 2000 and 2010, the national population of white children decreased by 4.3 million while the total number of Hispanic and Asian children increased by 5.5 million. In addition, Shin & Ortman (2011) report that by 2020, 62% of those who speak a language other than English will be Spanish speakers. Finally, another United States Census Bureau report shares data on historical poverty showing that 22% of all black families and 20% of all Hispanic families live in poverty (U.S. Census, 2015). These numbers increase significantly if a family is led by a

single mother; the percentages increase to 36% and 37%, respectively (U.S. Census, 2015). Given the change in demographics and the challenges of the urban poor, the task for urban public school districts is great but not without hope. As previously noted, at least one school in each of the top ten districts in Massachusetts is performing on par with the highest achieving schools in the state.

When considering top-level schools within an urban district, it is important to understand how Massachusetts assigned performance levels to districts during the time period of this study. The Massachusetts Departments of Elementary and Secondary Education (MA DESE) linked the overall performance of a district to its lowest performing school. For instance, a district could include several high performing or Level 1 schools; however, if the lowest performing school was designated Level 3 or ‘in need of improvement’, the entire district was considered a Level 3 district. Levels range from 1 to 5, where Level 5 required state receivership. Additionally, a district or school is considered to be making progress toward narrowing proficiency gaps when the cumulative performance on state assessments reaches certain targets as defined by MA DESE. Using accountability levels to portray student achievement has been a standard practice in education since educators began dividing publicly available data by subgroups (Brown, 2003; Jennings & Sohn, 2014; Hammes, Bigras & Crepaldi, 2014), a practice that led to the identification of a performance gap between demographic groups (Harris & Herrington, 2006; Ipka, 2003).

The ten largest urban districts in Massachusetts were all classified as Level 3, 4 or 5. Each of these districts faced significant challenges in that they all reported more than two thirds of their population as high needs. This study used the MA DESE high needs

designation to identify schools with challenging demographics because high needs students were part of traditionally marginalized groups. There was normally a high number of students of color attending schools in low performing districts. Two of the top ten Massachusetts school districts with the highest percentages of students of color, Boston and Lawrence, were Levels 4 and 5 respectively. A similar relationship existed in two Level 5 districts currently under state receivership, Holyoke and Lawrence, which served high percentages of high needs students. In order for marginalized populations to receive a high-quality education, it is imperative that urban districts figure out how to successfully educate an array of student populations.

Within each of the largest Massachusetts urban districts, there was at least one high performing school that figured out how to educate a diverse student population with high needs; however, the variation in performance across schools in these districts raised the question, “what makes the high-quality schools with large numbers of high needs students different?” While the literature is flush with analyses of effective schools and effective districts (Maas & Lake, 2015; Purkey & Smith, 1983; Trujillo, 2013), we followed Hitt and Tucker’s (2016) Unified Framework to help answer our research question: What leadership practices are present in a high performing, urban elementary school? We believed this was best accomplished by performing a case study analysis of the leadership practices at one of these “positive deviant” urban schools (Bryk, Gomes, Grunow & LeMahieu, 2016).

## **Literature Review**

Despite the challenges that faced urban districts and as mentioned in the previous section, there were some schools having a positive impact on student outcomes. This



section first explores empirical literature establishing the importance of utilizing positive deviance as an approach when examining school reform. It then provides a summary of the importance of leadership in promoting student achievement, both generally and in the unique context of leading an urban school. These bodies of literature introduced the conceptual framework that grounded our analysis of leadership practices linked to improved student achievement.

**Positive deviance.** The focus of our study was the exploration of an urban school that had outperformed others with similar demographics in an effort to assess the school's effectiveness. A key ingredient in understanding school improvement was understanding the conditions contributing to improved student learning. Bryk et al. (2016) propose "more systematic approaches to...improvement" (p. 19). They note that school improvement work in the United States has been underway for decades and, while the educational system as a whole appears to be getting better on average, there still seems to be a growing disparity between excellent schools and districts and underperforming schools and districts. They further suggest that widening the chasm is the conundrum of increasing societal expectations of schools to not only advance learning and increase graduation rates, but to also reduce the costs of doing so. In light of these expectations, there is an emphasis on "understand[ing] sources of variations in outcomes" and "responding effectively to them [which] lies at the heart of quality improvement" (p. 35). In other words, the need to identify and implement practices that promote improvement in a timely and effective manner becomes even more paramount as the demands and constraints on our educational institutions increase.

The concept of ‘positive deviance’ is one way to describe a school that is able to promote student achievement in a context where similar institutions fail: “Positive deviance... is founded on the premise that at least one person in the community, working with the same resources as everyone else, has already licked the problem that confounds others” (Pascale, Sternin, & Sternin, 2010, p. 3).

LeMahieu, Nordstrum and Gale (2017) describe a positive deviance improvement method as an asset-based improvement technique that identifies a case where certain outcomes are well beyond what other cases within the same system are able to achieve. LeMahieu et al. incorporate the components of positive deviance into a methodology that they believe is practical for use in education. It is based on a two-step process. The first step is to find out where other school leaders who work in schools with similar demographics have made headway, and the second is to use the successful case to promote system-wide improvement. We applied the first part of this approach to our own study by identifying the leadership practices employed at an urban school in Massachusetts that is outperforming others within the same district. This study may also address the second goal by informing other schools how to improve.

**Influence of leadership on student achievement.** Empirical literature suggests that leadership is an essential element to promoting student achievement and equity, critical conditions for success in urban schools. This is often established through a leader’s role in the development of excellent teaching and by the implementation of school-wide reform (Sanzo, Sherman & Clayton, 2011). Bedard and Mombourquette (2015) state that “connecting school leadership to student learning is part of a moral imperative” (p. 237) because it facilitates the closing of learning gaps among students

who historically experience failure. Yet, this same literature base has not always agreed with how these conditions are created and supported by school leaders. Robinson, Lloyd and Rowe (2008) warn, “unless these processes are identified and understood, policy makers and practitioners will have difficulty creating the necessary elements required to achieve the desired effects” (p. 669).

During the Effective Schools Movement of the 1970’s and 1980’s, scholars took note of the salient role leaders play in impacting student achievement (Edmonds, 1982; Lezotte, 1991; Cawelti, 1984). These findings were bolstered by international studies focused on the impact of school leadership that reached similar conclusions (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood, Patten & Jantzi, 2010). Yet the majority of these studies suggest the influence of leaders is largely indirect and hard to quantify through actual leadership practices (Dutta & Sahey, 2016; Hallinger, 2010). For instance, scholars found an indirect impact of leadership on student achievement through improvement in working conditions such as teacher job satisfaction, school culture, and climate (Dutta & Sahey, 2016).

In an attempt to make the connections between school leadership and student outcomes more explicit, some scholars have focused on gathering evidence of leadership practices related to specific theories of leadership. Leithwood and Jantzi (2006), for instance, found that utilizing a transformational leadership approach was strongly correlated to influencing a positive teacher work setting and improving teacher motivation, and had a moderate to significant impact on teacher classroom practices. The authors suggest the cumulative impact of these changes on teachers led to improvements in student achievement. For the purpose of their study, Leithwood and Jantzi defined

transformational leadership practices as: (1) setting directions or building a vision; (2) developing people; creating opportunities for intellectual stimulation; and (3) redesigning the organization; creating a collaborative school culture. Other researchers have similarly identified a transformational leadership approach, especially when combined with instructional leadership practices, as essential to improving student learning (Robinson et al., 2008; Marks & Printy, 2003).

Transformational leadership has not been the only leadership theory linked to improved student achievement. Reed and Swaminathan (2014), for example, found that a successful urban high school principal increased student achievement by using a combination of practices associated with both distributive and social justice leadership. The tenets of distributive leadership practices such as shared decision-making and collaboration amongst teachers has been supported by other authors as well (Hallinger, 2010; Sanzo, Sherman & Clayton, 2011).

Some studies have attempted to delineate specific leadership practices, not just approaches attributed to leadership theories. In 1990, Levine and Lezotte released a report through the National Center for Effective Schools that named the characteristics of unusually effective schools. The report listed nine such characteristics, one of which was *Outstanding Leadership*. The authors went on to describe the characteristics of outstanding leadership as evidence of the vigorous selection of teachers, faculty protection from negative external influences, personal monitoring of school activities, devotion to school improvement, support for teachers, acquisition of resources, and effective use of instructional support personnel. While the report offers the important moves of leadership, Levine and Lezotte do not prioritize the most important practices in

which principals of effective schools should engage. They further report, and in contradiction to some other researchers (Waters et al., 2003), that “[n]o...set of actions is right for every school” (p. 582).

In a study commissioned by Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL), Waters et al. (2003) aggregated 30 years of research to quantify which leadership practices have the greatest impact on student achievement as measured by standardized testing. Their framework recognizes that “[e]ffective leaders understand how to balance pushing for change while at the same time protecting aspects of culture, values, and norms worth preserving” (p. 2). The authors applied specific criteria to narrow their data set to 70 empirical studies and used them to identify 21 leadership practices linked to student achievement. These practices were codified to create their Balanced Leadership Framework, a leadership model to help school leaders improve their own practice as a reflection of the research of effective principals. Of the 21 principles, having situational awareness, promoting intellectual stimulation, acting as a change agent, and allowing teachers’ input were found to impact student outcomes the most. The McREL report found that principals who were aware of the “details and undercurrent” (p. 12) within the school were current on instructional practice, were willing to change the status quo, and involved teachers in the decision-making process. When using this information, they were best able to positively impact student outcomes as measured by scores on standardized testing.

Before embarking on their own six-year study to identify how to improve student outcomes, Louis et al. (2010) reviewed the existing empirical literature and found “leadership is second only to classroom instruction as an influence on student learning”

(p. 9). The authors extended the aforementioned seminal work of Waters et al. (2003) who found “a substantial relationship between leadership and student achievement” (p. 3). Louis et al. concluded that “there is no improvement without talented leadership” (p. 9) and ultimately identified two core functions of an effective leader: direction and influence. While Louis et al. did not reach conclusions on an effective leadership in an urban setting, other scholars have addressed the practices in which urban school leaders must engage to improve student performance.

**Leadership in an urban context.** Many scholars have concluded that leaders of urban schools must adapt and evolve traditional practices to meet the unique needs of these institutions (Aveling, 2007; Benham, 1997; Clotfelter, Ladd, Vigdor & Wheeler, 2006; Cooper, 2009; Khalifa, 2012). These adaptations are based on an understanding of the out-of-school factors that impact urban students and families and the implementation of strategies that respond to these factors. Milner, Murray, Farinde, and Delale-O’Connor (2015) conducted a review of empirical literature and identified four external factors that impact urban schools: poverty, geography, funding, and parental involvement, each described below.

**Poverty.** The first of these factors, poverty, was found not only to impact attendance, but to lead to decreased attention and concentration in the classroom and to compromise successful interactions with others (Milner et al., 2015). The impact of poverty was further exacerbated when students were homeless or were exposed to physical or emotional trauma. Geography and social contexts was another factor cited. Many urban neighborhoods offered students limited access to resources and often increased exposure to hazardous environmental conditions such as pollution. Schools that

do not recognize the impact of these realities diminish their ability to build positive relationships with students and promote achievement (Milner et al., 2015).

***Geography.*** The second factor is the geography of the school, a proxy for whether the school is located in a safe location. In his research, Antrop-Gonzalez (2006) asserted that when urban schools promoted safety in schools to minimize outside influences such as gang activity, students not only felt safe, but trusted their teachers were aware of what was happening in their neighborhoods. This feeling of safety had a positive impact on student outcomes.

Creating safe and supportive school-wide environments often falls under the purview of administrators. In their two-stage multiple case study, Jacobson, Brooks, Giles, Johnson and Ylimaki (2007) examined the leadership practices of three urban elementary school principals whose schools demonstrated a history of improved student achievement. Identified practices or actions of these individuals included establishing a safe and responsive school environment, setting high expectations for all students, and holding students, faculty, teachers, parents, and administration accountable for meeting these expectations. The authors noted that these exemplary leaders of urban schools “[made] sure that students felt safe and cared for...so that they could comfortably avail themselves of the opportunity to learn” (p. 309).

***Funding.*** A third out-of-school factor critical for urban school leaders to understand is that funding is often applied under the premise of equality and not equity. In other words, schools often receive funding not based on their specific needs but rather general guidelines from ill-conceived policy. For example, schools may receive a set level of funding because a population is present in the school (for example, English

language learners) without taking into account how many students are part of this population and how close the students are to English proficiency. Counteracting these conditions often requires a social justice orientation and ingenuity (Milner et al., 2015). For example, in the aforementioned case study of three highly effective urban principals, Jacobson et al. (2007) noted that these leaders found and used any available funding to support professional development and to work individually and collectively with their staff.

***Parental involvement.*** Finally, it is important to understand that while urban families may not access traditional means of school involvement, many parents are invested and care deeply about providing opportunities for their children to succeed (Milner et al., 2015). Many urban school leaders do not make this connection and instead rely on their own narrow definition of what it means to be an involved parent. Watson and Bogotch (2015) used Critical Race Theory to examine how teachers and administrators interpret challenges with parent involvement at an urban high school. They found that many staff members still employ dominant narratives to define these relationships and unfairly minimize parent investment in education. For example, when a parent fails to attend a parent meeting, but the student is in school each day, administrators and teachers may not recognize the parent's commitment to education by ensuring the child is in school on a daily basis. Instead, school staff attribute the missed parent meeting to ultimately define the parent's support for their child's education. Watson and Bogotch assert there must be a willingness on the part of the school to activate the hidden strengths of families and this broader way of thinking is supportive of improved student outcomes.



Khalifa (2012) found that a principal's commitment to be a visible part of the community and advocate for community causes has a direct impact on levels of trust and rapport with community members, including parents. Relationships that had been antagonistic were transformed and this ultimately led to improved academic outcomes for students. Specifically, Khalifa found three practices or behaviors supported this work including creating meaningful opportunities for personal exchanges with parents and students, home visits, and mentoring or directly challenging exclusionary teachers.

Jacobson et al. (2007) found that successful leaders of high-poverty urban schools recognized that their staff needed "opportunities to build their intellectual and experiential capacity" (p. 311) in order to be successful in what they were expected to do. In their efforts to build capacity in their staff, the principals "role modeled best instructional practices and wherever possible, redesigned organizational structures, policies and practices to facilitate the higher level of performance" (p. 311). Klar (2012) studied how principals in three urban schools worked to foster distributed instructional leadership by providing increased opportunities for it by asking department chairs to "assume a much larger role in the instructional leadership of their schools" (p. 373).

Some urban schools and districts have created opportunities for teacher leaders to act in a capacity as an instructional leader. The teacher leader is in a nonsupervisory instructionally oriented position who brings his/her expertise to classroom teachers and school administrators (Portin, Russell, Samuelson & Knapp, 2013). Teachers who become teacher leaders report having three-pronged roles that improve student performance by increasing rigorous instruction, creating opportunities for teachers to talk about teaching and building a "culture of expectation and achievement" (p. 231). It is

important to note that these teacher leader positions were, for the most part, full-time positions that were dedicated to in-classroom mentorship/coaching and leadership in professional development (p. 232).

This literature review identifies the literature supporting our approach to examining a positive deviant school and the overall literature supporting leadership as it promotes student achievement both generally and specifically in a challenging urban context. These bodies of literature serve to introduce our conceptual framework that grounded our analysis of leadership practices identified in the literature as leading to improved student achievement.

### **Conceptual Framework**

In an effort to achieve clarity and promote the effective implementation of empirically driven best practices, researchers Hitt and Tucker (2016) created a Unified Framework which merges years of robust research into a single model for understanding effective leadership to improve student performance. They state:

Although high-quality teachers remain our best resource for promoting student learning, it is talented leaders who will take student success to scale. Our knowledge about what effective school leaders do to support teacher effectiveness and promote student achievement in the past 10 years has grown substantially. This Unified Framework is an effort to synthesize what we know about leader practices and provide a schema for future research. Organizing what we know about leadership is one way to become more deliberate and strategic in our efforts to improve the conditions for student achievement. (p. 563)

The framework stands on the shoulders of three pioneering leadership frameworks: The Ontario Leadership Framework (Leithwood, 2012), the Learning Centered Leadership Framework (Murphy, Elliott, Goldring & Porter, 2006) and the Essential Supports Framework (Sebring, Allensworth, Bryk, Easton & Luppescu, 2006). Hitt and Tucker (2016) chose these frameworks after a thorough review of empirical studies published between 1971 and 2006 that focused on the impact of leadership on student achievement. Each of the chosen frameworks identifies specific domains and dimensions of effective leadership that contribute to student achievement. The domains are used to describe broad areas of leadership and the dimensions describe specific leadership practices. The Ontario Leadership Framework identifies five domains and 21 dimensions. The Learning Centered Leadership Framework identifies eight domains and 31 dimensions and the Essential Supports Framework lists five domains and 16 dimensions.

The Unified Framework synthesizes the three frameworks into a thoughtful model that reflects the research of several scholars. It narrows the work into five domains and 28 dimensions by rephrasing, combining, and unifying effective leadership behaviors. Hitt and Tucker (2016) meticulously analyzed 56 empirical studies of leadership practices and categorized similar behaviors into phrases to represent the aggregate. Before identifying a domain, the following criteria were established: (1) the practices needed to be present in all other frameworks; (2) the practice indirectly influenced student learning by utilizing the organizational context; and (3) the practice indirectly influences student achievement by focusing on effective classroom instruction. The Unified Framework does not exclude any practice highlighted in the seminal leadership frameworks; however, it creates newly

synthesized domains conveyed in a manner that can be easily understood and applied by practitioners whose common purpose is to improve student achievement.

This study utilized Hitt and Tucker's (2016) Unified Framework of key leader practices that influence student achievement as a conceptual framework to understand leadership practices in a positive deviant school, or a school outperforming others, within an urban school district. This conceptual framework is built upon the notion that positive deviants, or schools that positively vary from the norm, will lead us to better understanding the reasons one urban school is outperforming its peer schools within an underperforming district. Each researcher in the collective study investigated one of the five domains or leadership practices described in Table 1.1 to determine if it was present in the school selected for study.

Table 1.1

*Hitt and Tucker's Unified Framework*

<b>Domains or Leadership Practices</b>	<b>Dimension Summary</b>
Establishing and conveying the vision	Establishing practices that are aligned to a purpose consistent with the articulation of the mission and vision.
Building professional capacity	Creating the process to develop leadership and teaching capacity.
Creating a supportive organization for learning	Building an organization where individuals are supported and valued.
Facilitating a high-quality learning experience for students	Developing a high-quality instructional program.
Connecting with external partners	Building productive relationships with families and external partners and anchoring schools in the community.

*Note.* Adapted from “Systematic review of key leader practices found to influence student achievement: A unified framework,” by D. H. Hitt and P. D. Tucker, 2016, *Review of Educational Research*, 86, pp. 545-560.

Given the 28 dimensions or leadership practices spread across the five domains, each individual investigator combined or adapted the dimensions within a domain to create better alignment to the individual research topic. For example, the first domain is establishing and conveying a vision. Within this domain, Hitt and Tucker (2016) outline several leadership practices beyond the articulation of a mission and vision. Dimensions within this domain include setting goals, modeling ethical practices, using data, fostering accountability and the communication of the mission and vision. The investigator for this domain primarily studied the importance of clarifying goals, building consensus, and

communicating a shared vision. All five investigators adapted the framework to specific research needs and have clarified this in the following pages. The methodology that each of the five researchers utilized to investigate a domain or leadership practice is described below.

**Establishing and conveying the vision.** In order to achieve high goals, such as eliminating achievement gaps for urban students, district leaders, school leaders and teachers must first share this as a priority and identify the necessary steps to achieve the goal (Sun & Leithwood, 2015). This is the reason mission, vision, and goal setting are important; these ideas not only shape beliefs, but also behaviors (Robinson et al., 2008).

District leaders and school leaders play a central role in shaping the learning environment for students and with helping schools remain true to their ultimate purpose, which is ensuring a quality education for all students. The role of district leaders and school leaders is to clarify the mission, collaboratively develop the vision or the way to achieve the school's purpose, and celebrate practices consistent with the goals and targets identified by the organization (Hallinger, 2010; Murphy & Torre, 2014). Hitt and Tucker's (2016) analysis of three prominent leadership frameworks in creating the Unified Framework consistently show the significant role leaders have in clarifying what is important. Without such guidance, it is difficult for schools and individual educators to measure progress.

The investigator for this domain primarily focused on the importance of clarifying goals, building consensus to create and implement a shared mission and vision, and broadly communicating the shared mission throughout the organization. These elements have been adapted from Hitt and Tucker's (2016) Unified Framework, which also

includes modeling ethical practices, promoting the use of data and holding others accountable.

**Building professional capacity.** Principals who lead successful schools understand that no one person can improve student achievement and that teacher quality matters most in improving student outcomes (Good, 2008). The effective school principal thus seeks to build the professional skills and disposition of the classroom teacher and set conditions for success. Hitt and Tucker's (2016) framework outlines those conditions that have been studied in highly successful schools. In an effective school where students are achieving at high levels, the principal's actions for building professional capacity should be evident in their work to promote professional learning for all staff. The dimensions, or actions, are observable and conditions are palpable (Ryan, 2018).

The actions of school leadership under this domain that were studied included selecting teachers for the right fit, providing individual consideration, building trusting relationships, providing opportunities to learn, supporting, buffering and recognizing teachers, creating communities of practice, and engendering responsibility for learning.

**Creating a supportive organization for learning.** Creating a supportive organization for learning includes seven dimensions, which were combined into the five attributes or specific leadership practices to eliminate overlap. The five attributes are as follows:

1. Strategic resource allocation focused on mission and vision
2. Considering context and valuing diversity
3. Collaborative decision-making processes and shared leadership
4. School culture strength and optimization

## 5. High standards and expectations

This section captured an investigation of each of these attributes to determine their presence in the school selected as part of this study. Hitt and Tucker's (2016) Unified Framework identifies these attributes as the key, specific practices which indicate that a school's leadership is creating a supportive organization for learning.

Creating a supportive organization for learning as a leadership practice is important because just as teachers need to establish a sense of well-being and trust for students to learn in their classroom, administrators must establish the same sense of trust and comfort to create an environment where teachers can teach at their highest capacity (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008; Singh & Billingsley, 1998). Singh and Billingsley further express that "the principal not only has a direct influence on teachers' commitment, the principal enhances commitment through fostering a collegial environment" (p. 238). Hitt and Tucker (2016) summarize this leadership domain as follows:

This domain builds on instructional, transformational, and integrated approaches to leadership by identifying practices leaders employ to concurrently demonstrate a concern for teachers and press for results that ultimately yields benefit for both individuals and the organization...[and that] [t]his is accomplished by finding ways to involve teachers in the broader definition of organizational culture and decision-making, and by establishing trusting relationships with all constituencies. (p. 552)

The five attributes underlying creating a supportive organization for learning address how a leader creates and builds capacity in his or her organization to support the instructional



goals of the school. This capacity to support instruction leads to improved student outcomes.

**Facilitating a high-quality learning experience for students.** According to Hitt and Tucker (2016), there are five key components of facilitating high-quality learning experiences for students: (1) maintaining safety and orderliness; (2) personalizing the environment to reflect students' backgrounds; (3) developing and monitoring the curricular program; (4) developing and monitoring the instructional program; and finally, (5) developing and monitoring the assessment program.

Hitt and Tucker (2016) found that “[e]ffective leaders protect the learning environment by instilling safety and order, and balancing a press for student achievement with a concern for individual student realities. It is important to note that marginalized youth need to feel a sense of security in school in order to be successful. With this in mind, there has been a movement over the past decade to create schools as “sanctuaries for youth of color” (Antrop-Gonzalez, 2006). The components of “school as sanctuary” are (1) caring student-teacher relationships; (2) provisions of [violent-free] safe spaces; and (3) racial/ethnic and nationalist political affirmation (p. 287).

Hitt and Tucker (2016) assert that in order to provide a high-quality learning experience for students, the school environment should reflect and value students' backgrounds. This includes designing opportunities for “mentoring and advising students as well as creating ways for students to engage in personally engaging learning experiences” (p. 557). Antrop-Gonzalez (2006) found that both Latino and African-American students believed that having a teacher who had the same ethnic background as them meant that someone on the staff would understand and respect them. Students also

felt that teachers of the same race had higher academic expectations as well as provided them with more academic “chances.” Additionally Antrop-Gonzalez found that schools that were successful with marginalized students offered formal courses that reflected students’ heritages.

Researchers have found that *odds-beating schools* have principals who are instructional leaders (Hallinger, Bickman & Davis, 1996; Borko, Wolf, Simone & Uchiyama, 2003; Robinson et al., 2008). Hitt and Tucker (2016) argue that “[e]ffective [school] leaders focus efforts on the curricular program by requiring rigor and high expectations of all students” (p. 557). They also believe that “[e]ffective leaders emphasize the instructional program through equipping themselves with a deep knowledge of pedagogy and devoting a large portion of the time to...advancing teaching” (p. 558).

Finally, within this domain, Hitt and Tucker (2016) found that effective “[l]eaders regard assessment as pivotal to the measurement of student progress as well as the development of data from which to make programmatic adjustments” (p. 558). It is important for principals to know what students should know and be able to do at each grade level, understand effective instructional practices, understand what interventions are necessary for struggling students, understand when to use which assessments (or data), and know how to create learning cultures (Goldring, Huff, Spillane & Barnes, 2009). Further, Goldring et al. found that there is direct correlation between principal expertise in data-based decision-making and how often data-based decision-making [for instruction] is ultimately supportive of student success.

**Connecting with external partners.** Families and communities are essential to children's learning and development (Epstein, 1987). Connecting with external partners focuses on the leadership practices that both promote parent and community partnerships and influence student achievement (Leithwood, 2012; Sebring et al., 2006). Hitt and Tucker (2016) identify three primary practices in this domain: (1) building productive relationships with families and the community; (2) engaging them in collaborative processes to strengthen student learning; and (3) anchoring schools in the community.

Making the school welcoming and inclusive is one example of how leaders may build productive relationships with families. Another is facilitating the faculty's understanding of cultural dynamics to help build trust. Involving families in the decision-making process in areas such as policy-making, budget expenditures, and improvement plans are some ways leaders can engage families in collaborative processes that influence student achievement. The third practice, anchoring schools in the community, may be evidenced by school leaders connecting families in need with appropriate community resources. It also may include engaging with other school leaders to discuss ways that home, school, and community efforts can be aligned. The primary investigator for this domain collected similar evidence across all three of the primary practices identified by Hitt and Tucker (2016).

The Unified Framework provides practitioners, policy makers, and institutions developing future leaders a tool to improve academic outcomes for students. For this study, the framework served as the lens for identifying those critical leadership practices documented in the study site.

## **Chapter Two<sup>3</sup>**

### **Research Design and Methodology**

This study determined to what extent the leadership practices highlighted within Hitt and Tucker's (2016) Unified Framework were evident in a high performing, urban elementary school. The research team collaboratively designed the methods for this study to explore the five domains of leadership practices emerging from Hitt and Tucker's synthesized model. Each member of the research team answered his or her individual research question(s), focused on one domain of leadership practice. All researchers on this team participated in the methods outlined in this chapter (See Figure 2.1). The data gathered from these methods, however, varied in relevance to the emerging themes and patterns identified in individual research work (Cheng & Yeng, 2011). The research team worked together closely and shared all data, analysis, and synthesis; however, the coding and analysis of those data pertaining to each individual researcher's study and related findings were completed by the individual researcher. The team's collective findings in Chapter 4 are the product of a collaborative effort. This chapter first outlines the study design, specifically discussing the site selection and data collection methodologies, and then reviews the process for data analysis.

#### **Study Design**

This collective study utilized a qualitative case study research design to analyze a high performing elementary school in an urban district located in Massachusetts. The

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<sup>3</sup> This chapter was jointly written by Nicole Gittens, Tara Gohlmann, James Reilly, David Ryan and Kris Taylor.

study used a bounded case study design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) and analyzed leadership practices in a single high performing elementary school within the selected district. The choice of design was reinforced by Yin (2008) and his observation that it is most advantageous to the researcher to study a phenomenon within its context. The study explored leadership practices in the organization framed by dimensions of practice included in a conceptual framework comprised of five domains.

The conceptual framework was based upon Hitt and Tucker's (2016) Unified Framework for effective leadership practices that have been found to influence student achievement. This study examined whether Hitt and Tucker's leadership practices were present at the selected site but was not designed to determine if these practices contributed toward student achievement. Correlating the leadership practices to the levels of student achievement fell beyond the scope of this particular study.

**Site selection.** The site selection process consisted of two steps. The first step was to select a district and the second was to select a school within that district. The study team chose a district that was listed as urban and underperforming in accordance with the state's accountability rating system. The district had many schools with varied levels of achievement with the greatest number of schools at the elementary level. The team selected an elementary school that outperformed the other elementary schools in the district. As outlined in Chapter 1, Massachusetts used an accountability system that classified school districts in accordance with their lowest performing school, therefore while the school district may be classified as underperforming, not all schools in the district were underperforming. The study used the accountability system as a guide in identifying and studying the selected school.

The site was selected as an example of a school that positively deviates from the norm by outperforming other similar schools within the district. The selected school was rated Level 2 by the MA DESE. The school enrolled a similar number of traditionally marginalized students or students with high needs, students of color, and students with disabilities comparable to the rest of the district. The study site selection process included assistance and agreement from the school district's superintendent and school principal.

***District description.*** The district studied was Evergreen Public Schools, an urban public school district that is one of the ten largest districts in Massachusetts serving students in grades Pre-K to 12. The superintendent was a veteran educator having been a classroom teacher and school principal for many years. The central office staff included one assistant superintendent who supervised principals along with two other district leaders who also supervised principals.

The average per pupil expenditure was just under the state average for per pupil spending (MA DESE, School and District Profiles, Finance, n.d.). Virtually all teachers were licensed to teach their class assignments and the student to teacher ratio was 14:1 (MA DESE, School and District Profiles, Teacher Data, n.d.). Evergreen was racially and linguistically diverse, as detailed in Tables 2.1 and 2.2. The district's students identified as special populations are outlined in Table 2.2.

Evergreen Public Schools was accountable to the state department of education's formula for identifying students with high needs. As mentioned in Chapter 1, high needs is defined as students who belong to one or more of the following populations: (1) English Language Learner or former English Language Learner; (2) students with a disability; and (3) economically disadvantaged. Based on this definition, Evergreen

Public Schools served a student population that was more than 75% high needs, as noted in Table 2.2.

Publicly available data showed that students struggled to achieve academic proficiency in the Evergreen Public Schools. At the time of this study, the state implemented a new system for tracking student performance and the district had not yet received an accountability rating. However, under the old state accountability system, Evergreen had been considered a low performing school district due to low student aggregate scores across the district and having at least one school with a Level 4 designation. State accountability levels ranged from 1 to 5. Level 1 designations were reserved for high performing districts while Level 5 designations required intervention from the state, including complete takeover of district responsibilities including all school operations.

Under the new accountability structure, Evergreen students performed below the state on accountability assessments. Composite Performance Index (CPI) scores were used to describe the performance of all students across the state. In the Evergreen Public Schools, on the English Language Arts assessment, K-5 students collectively earned 75 points (out of a possible 100 points) (MA DESE, School and District Profiles, Accountability Report, n.d.). District-wide, elementary students earned an average of 68 points on the math assessment and 65 points on science assessments (MA DESE, School and District Profiles, Accountability Report, n.d.). Across the state, CPI scores were calculated by assigning 100 points to every student who scored proficient or advanced on the state assessment. Students who did not score proficient or advanced were given a

score of 75, 50, 25 or 0. Failing scores were assigned a 0 (MA DESE, School and District Profiles, Accountability Report, n.d.).

To be classified as a Level 1 district, or a high performing district by the state, cumulative scores of students, including high needs students, must total 75 CPI points or higher (MA DESE, School and District Profiles, Accountability Report, n.d.). Given that cumulative scores for Evergreen students did not meet the bar for all three state assessments and there was at least one Level 4 school, Evergreen was considered a low performing, urban public school district.

***School description.*** The elementary school selected, the Standmore School, included a population of more than 300 racially and linguistically diverse students in preschool through grade 6. The Standmore School was considered a neighborhood school in that the majority of students walked to the campus. The school leader had been the principal for more than three years and previously served as a teacher and assistant principal elsewhere in the district. Many of the teachers taught previously at other schools in the district and arrived at the school following the most recent change in leadership. Virtually all teachers and school leaders were white, spoke English as their first language, and did not mirror the student population in terms of racial or linguistic diversity.

The Standmore School has a black population similar to that in the district. However its Hispanic and Asian population exceeds the district's. Table 2.1 specifies the demographics of the state, district and school.



Table 2.1

*2017 Student Race and Ethnicity Data*

<u>Demographic Group</u>	<u>State</u>	<u>District</u>	<u>School</u>
Black	9%	20%	20%
Asian	7%	10%	10%
Hispanic	19%	40%	50%
White	61%	30%	20%
Multi-race, Non-Hispanic, Native American, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander	4%	<5%	<5%

*Note.* Data from Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. School and District Profiles: The numbers in all tables related to the district and school have been rounded to promote the anonymity of the participants in the study. Accountability Report. Retrieved January 19, 2018 from: <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu>.

As shown in Table 2.2, the percentage of students who reported that English was not their first language and those qualifying as English Language Learners was higher than the overall district's percentage. These differences were also noted in the number of economically disadvantaged students and those identified as high needs.

Table 2.2

*2017 Selected Populations Data*

<u>Selected Populations</u>	<u>State</u>	<u>District</u>	<u>School</u>
First Language not English	20%	50%	70%
English Language Learner	10%	30%	50%
Students with Disabilities	17%	20%	20%
High Needs	45%	80%	90%
Economically Disadvantaged	30%	60%	70%

*Note.* Data from Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. School and District Profiles: The numbers in all tables related to the district and school have been rounded to promote the anonymity of the participants in the study. Accountability Report. Retrieved January 19, 2018 from: <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu>

Despite scoring below the district in the Composite Performance Index (CPI) both in ELA (school score 71; district score 75) and in Math (school score 67; district score 68), Standmore earned a higher CPI in Science (school score 73; district score 65) and earned a Level 2 designation based on the state accountability system due to the significant growth in student achievement since 2013, as noted in Table 2.3.

Table 2.3

*Four Year Standmore School Accountability Levels and Performance*

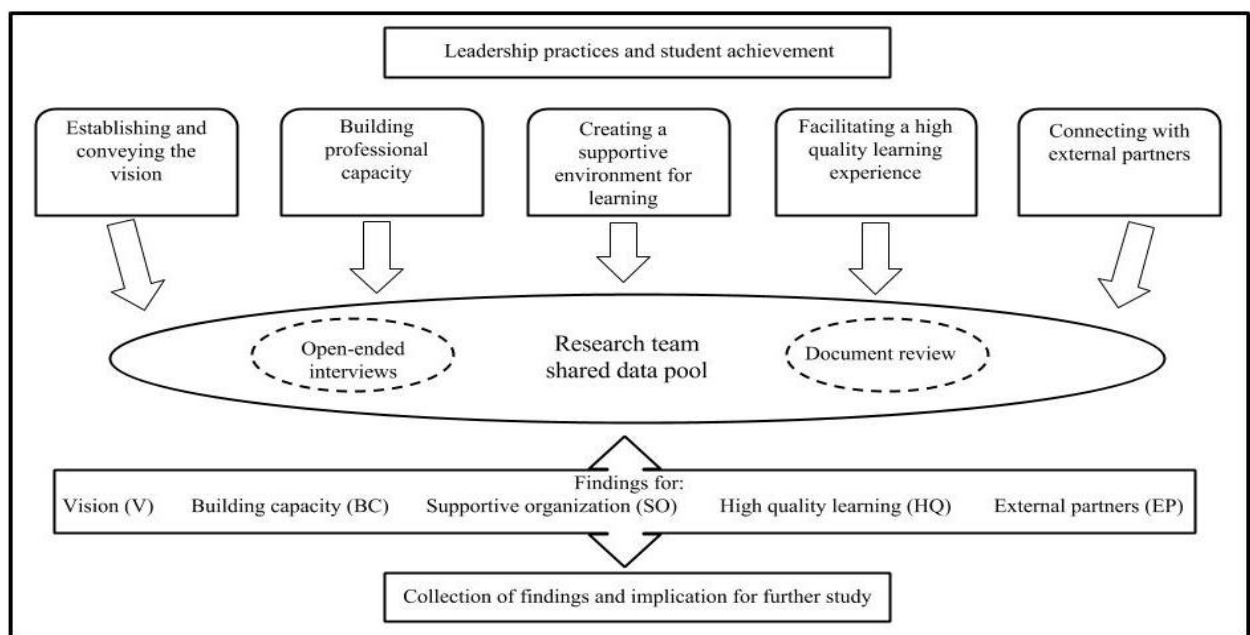
<u>Subject</u>	<u>2013</u>	<u>2014</u>	<u>2015</u>	<u>2016</u>
Accountability Level	3	3	3	2
School Performance	5%-10%	10%-15%	10%-15%	20%-25%

*Note.* Data from Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. School and District Profiles: Accountability Report. The numbers in all tables related to the district and school have been rounded to promote the anonymity of the participants the study. Retrieved January 19, 2018 from: <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu>

The accountability level in Table 2.3 represents that Massachusetts state accountability level as described in more detail above. The school performance percentage shows the percentile that the Standmore School performed overall compared to schools that serve the same grade levels across the state. In 2013, the Standmore School was performing in the bottom 5 to 10% of similar schools in the state, but by 2016 had significantly improved their performance to 20 to 25% using this measure.

**Data collection.** Data collection took place between September 2017 and December 2017. Prior to this phase, each member of the research team completed individual Institutional Review Board (IRB) certification and the project was approved by both the Boston College IRB and the study site's IRB authority. Data collection

consisted of two specific methods beginning with document review and followed by open-ended interviews. The pool of research subjects was limited to adults and each subject completed a Boston College Adult Informed Consent Form (Appendix A). As stated previously in this chapter, all members of the research team participated in performing on-site interviews with identified participants and collecting and analyzing documents and artifacts. This collaborative approach to data collection afforded the team the necessary time and energy to complete both phases of data collection on time. Figure 2.1 is a design map depicting how data sources contributed to the findings for each research topic and helped answer the collective research question. As the design map shows, there were five domains framing each researcher’s individual study while also serving as one-fifth interdependent variable in the overall study. These five domains each have a code associated with them that were used when reviewing documents. Using Hitt and Tucker’s (2016) Unified Framework as a conceptual framework to guide the project shaped the logic of the design and strengthened the potential for meaningful findings.



*Figure 2.1.* Research design map. This figure illustrates the research methods used and their connection to answering the research question.

**Document review.** Aside from sometimes being difficult to obtain, Creswell (2012) supported the use of documents as data because “they provide the advantage of being in the language and words of the participants, who have usually given thoughtful attention to them” (p.223). Documents reviewed included those identified in Table 2.4.

Data collection began with research team members visiting the school district, school, and state department of education websites in search of documents that would inform the study. These public documents were reviewed using an *a priori list* (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014) to determine if they would be helpful and then electronically downloaded into a Google folder on the Boston College network. In addition to the publicly available information, the principal provided some documents from the school for review. These documents were also reviewed upon receipt using the same *a priori list* and stored in the Google folder.

According to Boston College Information Technology Services staff (Boston College, 2017), the network hosting the Google folder was secure and the information contained in it was protected. This study fell under the confidential classification according to the Regulated University Data Chart (Boston College, 2017) and the storing of these public documents in this manner was acceptable.

As district and school level documents were collected, and after they had been placed in a storage folder, they were reviewed by each member of the research team and separated according to the specific domain under which they fell. Hitt and Tucker (2016) specifically used terms and phrases such as vision, building capacity, high-quality

learning, supportive organization, and external partners to organize the domains in their framework. These terms and phrases served as codes for each of the domains. Each member of the research team applied their code (see “Findings for:” in Figure 2.1) to relevant documents and moved a copy of those documents to a folder named after their domain. All folders with the elements of the specific domains and/or dimensions were shared among the team, and Table 2.4 illustrates how those documents were coded. In some cases, documents that were collected were not used. Since the document review was the first method of data collection, information from the documents helped refine and/or create additional research questions for the open-ended interview process (Creswell, 2012) and further informed the selection of subjects to be interviewed.

Table 2.4

*Alignment of Documents to Codes*

Type of document	Code
Mission statement	V, SO, HQ, EP
Vision statement	V, SO, HQ, EP
Organizational structure	
2017 District and School Budget	SO
Superintendent goals	V
Superintendent 100 Day Plan	V
School-wide goals for past 3 years	HQ
District Instructional Focus	V
Job postings	
Job descriptions	
Teacher evaluation plan	HQ,
Professional development master plan	HQ,
Standmore Staff News	SO, HQ, EP
School level achievement reports*	SO, HQ, EP
Grade level assessment scores*	SO, HQ, EP
School Accountability Plan	V, HQ, EP
School Instructional Focus	HQ
Teacher turnover rates*	

Administrator turnover rates\*  
Principal career experience (total)  
Staff tenure rates

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*Note:* The five codes are abbreviated as follows: vision (V), professional capacity (BC), supportive organization (SO), high-quality learning (HQ) and external partners (EP).

*Note:* \*for previous three (3) years

***Open-ended interviews.*** The second stage of data collection was open-ended interviews. The research team first reviewed some of the documents that helped develop thoughtful probes for interviews. As a result, the team was able to focus on specific areas in the interview phase that lacked clarity or suggested the need for further data gathering. This approach permitted the team to be most efficient with its time and thoughtful with its interview protocols germane to answering the study's research question.

Three district level administrators, one site council member, and 11 school level administrators and teachers were interviewed using five different interview protocols. Of those five protocols, four were used at the school level while one was used at the district level to capture data supporting the five domains of Hitt and Tucker's (2016) Unified Framework. The Standmore School principal and assistant principal were interviewed twice on two separate occasions using two different school level interview protocols. Appendix B identifies the interviewees by their pseudonyms and their assigned roles in the school and district. Two different interview protocols were utilized for interviewing school level personnel. Interview Protocol for School Level Personnel – A (Appendix C) focused on the leadership practices of establishing and conveying the vision and building professional capacity. Interview Protocol for School Level Personnel – B (Appendix E) focused on the leadership practices of creating a supportive organization for learning and facilitating a high-quality learning experience for students. Both protocols included

questions for the leadership practice of connecting with external partners. Interview Protocol for District Level Personnel (Appendix F) was used with the three district interviewees and focused on the leadership practices of establishing and conveying the vision and building professional capacity. The Interview Protocol for External Partners (Appendix G) was used with the site council member and focused on the leadership practice of connecting with external partners. The protocol used for each interview was selected at random based upon the availability of the interviewee and researcher.

The team designed interview protocols that drew from key information that directly reflected the dimensions of each researcher's individual study domain. This information was initially coded according to the five potential categories as illustrated in Table 2.4.

The research team conducted 45 to 60 minute interviews in an open-ended format that permitted the interviewer and respondent to engage in an informative discussion (Yin, 2008; Hoffmann, 2007). Table 2.5 lists respondents as school leadership, district leadership, administrative staff, teacher-leaders, and external stakeholders.

Table 2.5

*Interview Respondents*

<u>Respondents</u>	<u>Interview Team</u>
District Leadership	Taylor, Ryan
School Leadership	Gohlmann, Gittens, Reilly, Taylor
School Administrative Staff	Gittens, Gohlmann, Reilly, Taylor, Ryan
Teachers	Ryan, Gohlmann, Gittens, Taylor, Reilly
External Stakeholders	Reilly

Selection was based on the research team's belief in the respondents' understanding and experience they may have had with the phenomenon being studied. Following this logic, the research team believed that these respondents held the highest probability of providing useful information for answering the study's research question.

Table 2.5 also outlines the responsibilities of interview team members. Interview teams were chosen and assigned to interview respective respondents based on the likelihood of the team members' individual research interests being addressed. Each interview team ranged in size from one to four members. On teams greater than one, a single team member acted as interviewer and was chiefly responsible for asking initial questions as well as probes and follow up questions. The other team member(s) was responsible for ensuring the recording device was working properly, scribing field notes, proposing follow up questions, offering probing questions as appropriate, and lending support to the interviewer and respondent as needed.

Prior to conducting interviews, one team member engaged in cognitive interviews (Desimone & Le Floch, 2004) to validate the intent of the questions and sought assistance



from his colleagues and peers in the field to conduct think-alouds (Groves, Fowler, Couper, Lepkowski, Singer & Tourangeau, 2011). Based upon responses and respective probes and follow up, the interview questions were refined.

### **Data Analysis**

The team chose Dedoose as its qualitative research analysis software for its ease of collaboration, low cost, intuitive functionality, and Web-based accessibility for anytime, anywhere connectivity using cloud-based technology. Team members uploaded documents and transcripts into the software as they were collected and initially coded them (Saldaña, 2013). There were four cycles of analysis that involved collective and individual coding efforts.

Data were initially coded from the document review and open-ended interviews according to the five domains of Hitt and Tucker's (2016) framework as abbreviated in Table 2.4: vision (V), professional capacity (BC), supportive organization (SO), high-quality learning (HQ), and external partners (EP). This was the first cycle. This work, while accomplished separately by team members, was compared to ensure consistency in understanding how data were being coded under these initial themes and to establish a baseline of understanding. This comparison of coded data was done electronically by sharing a single account on Dedoose and all team members had access to the same account.

The second cycle of analysis involved the cross-referencing of data from the document review and interviews to uncover common patterns and themes. In this cycle, the research team again coded data individually, however here it was according to the several dimensions of leadership practices under each of the five domains. The coded

data were once again shared among the team under the same Dedoose account as well as discussed at several research team meetings. The third and fourth cycles of analysis were conducted by the individual researchers as described in Chapter 3.

The data collection effort demonstrated consistent evidence from the different respondents and document reviews. This consistency lent further credibility that the evidence supported answering the research questions. The data in the document review was triangulated with the data from the school level and district level interviews. Triangulation of data (Creswell, 2012) was also achieved through similar patterns of evidence found across the different transcripts. In comparing different interview responses to the same question, common themes were supported by similar emerging data.

In maintaining the spirit of collaboration, the research team constructed a process memo in the fall of 2016 and relied on it throughout the project. The memo was a string of comments posted through the Google documents platform and maintained a chronology of suggestions for edits, additions, and deletions to the sections of this dissertation-in-practice. The team also employed analytic memos about the project and maintained its reflectivity in its development (Phillips & Carr, 2007). As data were collected and ultimately coded, the sharing of code lists and review of each other's work was ongoing in a supportive and professional manner.

## Chapter Three

### Creating a Supportive Organization for Learning

As described more fully in Chapter 1, this study utilized Hitt and Tucker's (2016) Unified Framework of key leader practices that positively influence student achievement as a conceptual framework to understand leadership practices in a positive deviant school, or a school outperforming others, with similar student demographics within a Massachusetts urban district. This study focused on the fourth of Hitt and Tucker's key leadership practices: creating a supportive organization for learning. According to Hitt and Tucker, a supportive organization for learning is present "when people sense that they are recognized and supported as valuable individuals by leaders" (p. 552). They further state that this domain is important because teachers are more committed to their school when they feel recognized and valued. In a similar fashion, school level leadership would also be influenced when supported by district leadership. This commitment to instructional objectives then builds sustainable improvement in student outcomes.

Hitt and Tucker (2016) identify seven dimensions to the leadership practice of creating a supportive organization for learning. This study focuses on five leadership attributes derived from Hitt and Tucker and in particular on the attributes associated with creating a supportive organization for learning. This deviation from Hitt and Tucker's findings was made due to the conceptual overlap of certain dimensions and how these dimensions are interrelated, particularly when considering the district and school selected for study. First, the two dimensions, *considering context to maximize organizational functioning* and *tending to and building diversity*, were combined because the ideas contained in these dimensions consider both context and diversity as critical components,

particularly when considering these in relation to the selected school. These two dimensions both speak to “maximize[ing] the strengths of the school and its community” (Hitt & Tucker, 2016, p. 554) and to “view[ing] diversity, in terms of people and ideas, as a benefit” (Hitt & Tucker, 2016, p. 555). Diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, income, language ability and other background factors not only hold an important place in this study but also are also critical contextual factors in the school under study. As such, these two dimensions were combined into one leadership attribute: *considering context and valuing diversity*. This leadership attribute captures the thrust of both dimensions.

Second, the two dimensions, *building collaborative processes for decision-making* and *sharing and distributing leadership*, were combined because the processes for collaborating and sharing and distributing leadership are captured in the one leadership attribute of *collaborative decision-making and shared leadership*. Rather than overlapping as the first two combined dimensions did, these two dimensions are woven together into an identifiable leadership quality. These dimensions speak to “fostering ways for all stakeholders to see themselves reflected in the decision-making process” and “distribut[ing] and shar[ing] leadership and decision-making rather than centraliz[ing] these functions” (Hitt & Tucker, 2016, p. 554). In this manner, the leadership attributes of *collaborative decision-making and shared leadership* captures both interrelated dimensions. Deviating from Hitt and Tucker’s findings is relevant because this study investigated the leadership practices or, as described in this study, leadership attributes. The combined attributes reflect the substance of each of Hitt and Tucker’s dimensions. The literature review for the combined attributes weaves together the literature supporting each of these dimensions.

This study explored whether the five attributes for creating a supportive organization for learning were present in the high-quality, urban school being studied and, if so, whether the school leaders believe that presence of the attributes contributes to the effectiveness of the school. This individual study addresses the following two research questions:

- Are the five attributes of creating a supportive organization for learning present in the selected high-quality urban school?
- Do the school leaders believe the five attributes contribute to the effectiveness of the school?

## **Literature Review**

This literature review first briefly outlines the study's conceptual framework, Hitt and Tucker' (2016) Unified Framework, as discussed more fully in Chapter 1. Second, this review outlines how student achievement is influenced by Hitt and Tucker's fourth domain, creating a supportive organization for learning, the focus of this individual study. Next, this review identifies the empirical research showing how each of the five attributes of creating a supportive organization for learning contributes to improved student outcomes.

**Creating a supportive organization for learning.** Hitt and Tucker (2016) synthesize several leadership studies and frameworks into their Unified Framework which identifies five leadership practices or domains that are shown to improve student achievement. One such leadership study is Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe's 2008 study that found "there are substantial differences between the leadership of otherwise similar high- and low-performing schools, and that those differences matter for student academic

outcomes” (p. 657-658). Additionally, Robinson et al.’s 2008 study found that specific leadership actions, the focus of this study, were more important than theoretical leadership styles, such transformational leadership (p. 665).

This individual study’s conceptual framework is the fourth domain of Hitt and Tucker’s (2016) Unified Framework, creating a supportive organization for learning, which includes five attributes or specific leadership practices investigated as part of this study. Creating a supportive organization for learning as a leadership practice is important because just as teachers need to establish a sense of well-being and trust for students to learn in their classroom, administrators must establish the same sense of trust and comfort to create an environment where teachers can teach at their highest capacity (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008; Singh & Billingsley, 1998). Singh and Billingsley (1998) further express that “the principal not only has a direct influence on teachers’ commitment, the principal enhances commitment through fostering a collegial environment” (p. 238). Hitt and Tucker summarize this leadership domain as follows:

This domain builds on instructional, transformational, and integrated approaches to leadership by identifying practices leaders employ to concurrently demonstrate a concern for teachers and a press for results that ultimately yields benefit for both individuals and the organization...[and that] [t]his is accomplished by finding ways to involve teachers in the broader definition of organizational culture and decision-making, and by establishing trusting relationships with all constituencies. (p. 552)

The five attributes underlying creating a supportive organization for learning address how a leader creates and builds capacity in his or her organization to support the instructional

goals of the school. This capacity to support instruction has been shown to lead to improved student outcomes (Hitt & Tucker, 2016).

**Five combined attributes of creating a supportive organization for learning.**

The review of literature below discusses how each of the five attributes of creating a supporting organization for learning positively influences student achievement. The five attributes of creating a supportive organization for learning individually are:

- strategic resource acquisition and allocation focused on mission and vision
- considering context and valuing diversity
- collaborative decision-making processes and shared leadership
- school culture strength and optimization
- high standards and expectations

***Strategic resource acquisition and allocation focused on mission and vision.***

The first attribute in this domain relates to acquiring and allocating resources in a manner that is aligned with the mission and vision of the institution. Hitt and Tucker (2016) describe this attribute as strategically allocating resources in hiring and assigning teachers, in creating a professional development program and in developing supports for students. Hitt and Tucker also describe “resourcing strategically...addresses the practice necessary for leaders to align resources with optimal program delivery” (p. 553). The allocation of these resources then needs to align with the explicit student achievement goals of the school as stated in its mission and vision.

To align resources with mission and vision, Hitt and Tucker (2016) assert that goal setting must be specific and that resources must be clearly aligned to the specific goals. They go on to state that “[g]oal setting...has indirect effects on students by

focusing and coordinating the work of teachers [and] leaders...to focus on...not just leaders' motivational and direction-setting activities but [also] on the educational content of those activities and their alignment with intended student outcomes" (pp. 659-660). Robinson et al. (2008), Murphy, Elliott, Goldring & Porter (2006), and Timperely (2011) found clear correlations between setting academically specific, rigorous goals and matching resources to these goals to positive student outcomes. Hitt and Tucker further found that when goals were not clear or were not rigorous, student outcomes suffered. Timperely identified positive correlations between a leader's ability to create a vision and the student achievement in the schools that were the subjects of her study.

***Considering context and valuing diversity.*** Hitt and Tucker (2016) describe the attribute of considering context and valuing diversity as the leader's ability to use context to "maximize the strengths of the school and community" (p. 554). They state that a leader's ability to understand and leverage the strengths of a school and its community, the leader's placement of value on diversity and the leader's ability to be flexible in addressing issues, all positively influence student achievement. Diversity is a particularly important part of Standmore's context because of its high levels of poverty, ethnic and racial diversity, English language learners and students with special needs. This study considered diversity not only as a context, but also as a situational component considered from a "strengths-based perspective" (Hitt & Tucker, 2016, p. 554). Hitt and Tucker describe both context and diversity as important to be considered in an asset-based rather than deficit-based way.

One of the key threads of the research around how context matters in the practice of effective leadership is the notion that a leader needs flexibility to consider a school's



situation or context. This flexibility allows leaders not only to understand an issue, but also to adapt a solution to that issue (Daly, 2009; Leithwood, 2012; Marks & Printy, 2003; Murphy et al., 2006; Sebring, Allensworth, Bryk, Easton & Luppescu, 2006). Student outcomes are influenced when improvement efforts are flexibility tailored to the school's organizational context.

Murphy et al. (2006) and Sebring et al. (2006) found that in more difficult leadership situations, the leader's ability to clearly understand the context of the school's environment, teaching challenges, diversity in student body, and other contexts, is a critical factor to ensuring the success of the school. Racial and ethnic diversity bears specific mention as it not only is a reality of today's world, but also is present in our individual study as the Standmore School is in an urban district context with a diverse student body. Murphy et al. and Sebring et al. address the importance of effective leaders of not only understanding diversity but leveraging that diversity in an asset-based way to address questions and issues that arise in school.

***Collaborative decision-making processes and shared leadership.*** The third attribute of this domain is collaborative decision-making processes and shared leadership. Hitt and Tucker (2016) explain that this attribute impacts student outcomes because the sharing of decision- making and leadership with teachers and other stakeholders results in enhanced buy-in and input from constituencies. This buy-in enables leaders to develop better final decisions based upon the varied viewpoints and values of the stakeholders. This attribute addresses how "leaders... [foster] ways for all stakeholders to see themselves reflected in the decision-making process" (Hitt & Tucker, 2016, p. 554). Hitt and Tucker link this attribute to student achievement when input from multiple

perspectives and buy-in from stakeholders enhances the delivery of the educational product to students.

Wahlstrom, Louis, Leithwood and Anderson (2010) found that sharing decision making and distributing leadership impacts student outcomes and stated that “[a]most all people associated with high-performing schools have greater influence on school decisions than is the case with people in low-performing schools...[and that] [h]igh-performing schools have ‘fatter’ or ‘thicker’ decision-making structures, not simply ‘flatter’ ones” (p. 4). The more there is leadership distribution and sharing of responsibilities, the greater the capacity of all individuals within the school (Leithwood, 2012; Marks & Printy; 2003; Meyers & Hitt, 2017). Meyers and Hitt’s more recent work confirms that leadership distribution not only improves outcomes, but is even more successful when the leadership distribution relies on shared decision-making with individuals with diverse perspectives, experiences and backgrounds.

Heck and Hallinger (2009) found that shared decision-making had a positive impact on the quality of student outcomes and that the reverse was true in schools without shared decision-making. This is an important finding because it infers that where leadership is exclusive and bureaucratic, student outcomes suffer.

Hitt and Tucker (2016) indicate that shared decision-making not only allows for input from the varied perspectives of teachers but also creates a mechanism for teacher development. Teachers who are involved in decision-making can see how their input is implemented and learn from the ultimate results of these shared decisions. Marks and Printy (2003) found benefits to teacher involvement in decision-making. They stated “that the efficacious principal works simultaneously at transformational and instructional

tasks... [and] seeks to elicit higher levels of commitment from all school personnel and to develop organizational capacity for school improvement” (p. 377). These researchers assert that sharing decision-making not only results in better decisions, but also builds capacity of teachers and other leaders in the school organization. This then adjusts the overall capacity of the school to perform at higher levels resulting in higher student achievement.

***School culture strength and optimization.*** The fourth attribute of this domain is school culture strength and optimization. This leadership attribute describes the importance of positive school structures such as “authentic professional learning communities, openness, transparency, efficacy, trust, [and] conflict resolution” (Hitt & Tucker, 2016, p. 555). The norms and values that are part of school culture support the work to improve and build upon student achievement. Hulpia, Devos & Van Keer (2009) found that teachers commit to an organization when they feel support from school leadership. Murphy et al. (2009) also addresses the agency role of the leader in creating culture that is ethical and inclusive.

***High standards and expectations.*** The fifth attribute of this domain is high standards and expectations. The central premise for this attribute is that effective leaders who influence student achievement not only set high, clear standards and expectations, but also communicate and hold themselves and others accountable to these expectations in a balanced way (Marks & Printy, 2003; Murphy et al., 2006; Sebring et al., 2006; Timperley, 2011). According to Leithwood (2012), “[c]reating high performance expectations among students, staff and parents for those students who have traditionally

struggled at school is central to the development of more inclusive schools and to closing the achievement gap” (p. 16).

Once clear standards are set, teachers, staff and students must be held reasonably accountable to these standards (Murphy et al., 2006). Timperley (2011) discussed the importance of accountability in her study and noted that effective feedback “conversations were both challenging and evaluative in the sense that the focus was on how well students were responding to the instruction offered...; [the] [e]valuation did not imply blame ... but was a signal to learn how to do things differently” (p. 166). Further, Hitt and Tucker (2016) go on to emphasize the importance of not just feedback but supportive feedback to “[call] attention to what needs improvement...[and] positively [reinforce] what is being done correctly” (p. 555). The thrust of this attribute is that setting high, clear expectations, which are evaluated to positively reinforce good work, is linked to student achievement.

This literature review summarizes the research on Hitt and Tucker’s (2016) domain of creating a supportive organization for learning and how the attributes of this domain are linked to student achievement. The literature supports the individual study that investigated whether the five attributes of creating a supportive organization for learning were present in the selected high-quality urban school, and whether the leaders in the school believe the five attributes contributed to the effectiveness of the school.

## **Research Methods**

As further described in Chapter 2, this collective study utilized a qualitative case study research design to analyze a high performing, elementary school in one of the ten largest urban districts in Massachusetts, the Evergreen Public Schools district. We

selected the Standmore School using a purposeful approach to find an example of a school that was “positive deviant” or deviates from the norm by outperforming other demographically similar schools within a single district. This study utilized the case study methodology to determine whether evidence existed that a supportive organization for learning was present in the selected high performing school.

**Data collection.** As described in more detail in Chapter 2, data collection for this study comprised a document review and open-ended interviews of district and school level personnel. For purposes of this individual study, the publically available documents from the district website, starting with the documents referenced on the front page of the website then moving to linked additional information when relevant, were reviewed. In addition to the publically available information, the principal provided certain documents for review. The interview protocol at Appendix E contained the most direct questions related to the five attributes of creating a supportive organization for learning, however, data relevant to this individual study was drawn from each of the individuals interviewed by the entire study team.

Table 3.1 below outlines the documents and open-ended interview questions that were used to draw data to answer the first research question of whether the attributes of creating a supportive organization for learning were present in the school under study. To answer the second research question which explored whether the leadership at the school believed that the leadership contributed to the effectiveness of the school, all of the interview protocols included two questions which asked why the interviewee believed the school was successful and what the most important things were that the principal did to support student learning.

**Data analysis.** The data analysis process began with coding all data into the attributes or broad categories of creating a supportive organization for learning and looking for patterns (Saldaña, 2013). As described further in Chapter 2, this process was completed collectively with the entire research team through the first two cycles of coding. The third and fourth cycles of coding were completed with a specific focus on creating a supportive organization for learning. The third cycle organized the coded data by attributes to determine to what extent the practices were evident in the school. Analysis tasks included determining prevalence of known practices, identification of new practices not contained in the Hitt and Tucker's (2016) Unified Framework, and noting lack of practices. The final synthesis of the findings specific to creating a supportive organization for learning comprised the fourth cycle of coding.

In order to answer the first research question, the data specific to creating a supportive organization for learning was sorted according to the number of instances each document and interviewee provided support of the presence of an attribute. The data collection efforts around creating a supportive organization for learning demonstrated consistent evidence from the different interviewees and the document reviews, as described further in Chapter 2.

In order to answer the second research question that explored whether the school leaders believe the five attributes of creating a supportive organization for learning contribute to the effectiveness of the school, this study reviewed the interview responses to the two questions asked regarding the effectiveness of the school, and compared these responses to identify common themes.

Table 3.1

*Study methodology used to gather data on whether there was a supportive organization for learning*

<b>Five Attributes</b>	<b>Documents Used for Data</b>	<b>Open-Ended Interview Questions Used for Data</b>
1. Strategic resource allocation focused on mission and vision	Standmore School Guiding Principles, School Accountability Plan: Evergreen Public Schools 2016-2017: Standmore School, Central Office Department Accountability Plan: Evergreen Public Schools 2010 - 2011, Evergreen Public Schools Annual Budget Fiscal 2018	Talk about the district's and school's mission and vision and how they relate to your student achievement goals? What resources do you have that are most useful to your work with the children? Probes: Professional development, teaching supports? Are there other resources you want but you are not getting?
2. Considering context and valuing diversity	Evergreen Public Schools: Family Involvement Plan, June 2009, School Accountability Plan: Evergreen Public Schools 2016-2017: Standmore School	What are the specific challenges of your school as you think about moving it forward? What are the specific strengths and how do you work with those strengths?
3. Collaborative decision-making processes and shared leadership	None.	How are important decisions made in your school and what challenges do you face when making important decisions? Do you feel that your opinion is valued in the school's decision-making process? How have you contributed to decisions made by school or district leadership?
4. School culture strength and optimization	Standmore School Guiding Principles, School Accountability Plan: Evergreen Public Schools 2016-2017: Standmore School	How would you describe the beliefs and values that drive and shape the work of your school? How do these relate to the mission and vision of the school/district?
5. High standards and expectations	School Accountability Plan: Evergreen Public Schools 2016-2017: Standmore School, Standmore School Staff News, Evergreen Public Schools: District Level Re-Design Plan, FY2011	Can you tell us how you hold all students to the same standards? (Principal) How do you communicate student achievement goals? (Teachers) How are student achievement goals communicated and evaluated?

## Findings

The document review and interviews provided the primary basis to support this research study's findings. The first five findings directly related to the attributes of creating a supportive organization for learning and provided data to answer the first research question of whether the five attributes of creating a supportive organization for learning were present at the Standmore School. The sixth finding then describes the evidence supporting whether the district and school leaders believed the presence of the five attributes contributed to the effectiveness of the Standmore School to answer the second research question.

**Principal built capacity in her building.** The principal (Aron) engaged in numerous practices that built the capacity of the personnel in her building. First, she created a strong sense of mutual respect between her and her staff allowing her to continuously push for improvements and better results. Second, she created a culture of collaboration. Last, she put in place specific structures to support teachers and created not only the teachers' ability to improve practice, but also a requirement of all staff for continuous improvement.

***Mutual respect and admiration between the principal and her staff.*** The principal balanced high expectations of her staff with the value her teachers brought with their expertise teaching in the classroom. One of her teachers, Jaime, said that the principal "gives us freedom in our classroom and [is] confident that we are teaching to the core curriculum...I think she's confident in us and if she's not then she addresses that with that person individually." The principal's staff, including teachers, the assistant principal and other building level staff highly respected and admired her. Teachers



reported the principal enabled the teachers to teach at their highest capacity. For example, they said “I think that our principal trusts us that we are good teachers” (Jesse) and “[the principal] does fight for us [for resources]” (Jamie) and “[t]he staff has changed but it just seems like we are really lucky. We get really good people in here and we work really well together” (Morgan). Lastly, Blake, another teacher, spoke of the principal being the key figure in the building who set the tone of high expectations for all teachers and staff.

When asked about her leadership style the principal commented, “I think it’s a delicate balance of getting people to want to work for you and to do what we need them to do and also hold them accountable. So, you don’t want to make people angry and frustrated but you want to keep sort of applying appropriate amounts of pressure to get them to the next level.” The principal’s abilities in this area did not go unnoticed at the district level. Charlie noted that the principal “knew exactly when to push and when not to, when to challenge and when not to.” Charlie also spoke of the principal’s focus on sharing leadership in that she “is able to lead it, support it, monitor it, but it’s the teachers who have the voice when we go to meetings.” A number of teachers also mirrored this notion in describing Aron’s leadership practice. Jesse said, “I think that our principal trusts us that we are good teachers...so we also have the ability to talk freely to her and say, ‘This is the program that we have, this is what our district has given us. This is what we see working, and this is what we see not working.’” The principal further elaborated about the importance of her role in supporting her teachers when she said, “I feel like instructional leader is my most important job and to make sure that things are happening the way they should be happening for kids and providing support to people whether it’s

through myself or my coach or another teacher leader to make sure that those practices are happening.”

***Structures were in place to support teachers.*** Of the many structures in place that support teachers at Standmore, some of these included the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT), Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and the role of the instructional coach. The 2016-2017 School Improvement Plan noted that the school has an Instructional Leadership Team (ILT). The principal confirmed that she carefully selected that individuals that are part of the ILT and relied on the team members to recommend and help implement improvements to the school’s instructional program.

Another important structure in place at Standmore were the PLC meetings every week. PLC meetings were weekly meetings that were attended by the principal and, as the assistant principal affirmed, were rarely canceled. These meetings were with a group of subject matter or grade level teachers and the primary purpose was to discuss instructional issues and challenges and to brainstorm ways to move students forward. Additionally, the principal prioritized weekly PLCs by attending every meeting.

Standmore also had an instructional coach, Jordan, who was widely praised by the school’s staff because of her helpfulness in assisting teachers to improve their practice. A critical component to the effectiveness of the coach was the belief that her job was to support teachers in reaching and exceeding their goals. She said “[m]y goal is to help teachers understand a certain approach to teaching whether it’s guided reading, reader’s workshop, teaching conceptual math concepts, or whatever it is to help their practice.” Jordan further went on to state, “I’m going to make sure that I’m helping [the teachers] reach their goals.” An example of how the coach provided support was her modeling a

lesson in the new math curriculum, Envision, because many teachers were struggling with how to use the program effectively in their classrooms. The principal had set up norms to ensure that the coach was seen as a resource to the teachers rather than an administrator or supervisor.

While the principal used structures that existed at Standmore or other district schools previously, the benefit of these structures to Standmore was in the commitment to fully utilize them to support the instructional goals of the school. For example, PLCs were used in other schools in the district; however, Aron set the PLC meetings as a priority and created clear expectations about the goals and objectives related to these meetings.

***Collaboration was a requirement for all staff in the school building.*** Each school level staff person noted collaboration or working well together as a part of his or her work at Standmore School. Many even noted that collaboration was one of the most important reasons for the success of the school. Some spoke of collaboration directly, others spoke of the collaborative tools the teachers found the most impactful such as PLCs, the ILT meetings and shared work products on Google drive.

One teacher, Jamie, said, “everybody works together but I do feel that there is success and it is because the staff in general works well together...This building is very much about passing on information, whether it is about the students or just something that works for them.” Casey reinforced this by saying, “there is a big commitment to cooperative working together, all the teachers getting together, discussing, ‘What are you doing that's working? What are you doing that's not working?’ and that doesn't happen in every school.” Morgan talked about the necessity of sharing decisions in saying “there's

only a few of us on ILT and I feel like I shouldn't be the one that makes decisions when there are so many other people. You want to get feedback. So, you really do want to represent the people in the building.” The principal spoke about her philosophy of including a broad set of staff in decision-making when she said, “I think it’s important to distribute leadership to teachers because teachers can build buy-in with their colleagues and bring people along in a quicker way because they are also developing relationships with them and they work with them in teams and they are side by side with them.”

**Resources targeted student achievement.** Not only did the district specifically provide resources to support specific student achievement goals, Standmore leadership also intentionally directed resources to improving student achievement.

***Resources targeted student achievement.*** The 2018 Evergreen Public Schools budget demonstrated how the district supported the work of the schools in how resources were allocated and prioritized in the statement that “budget allocations represent the investments made into staff, programs, materials, and services in order to maximize student achievement within the district” (p. 26). The budget also identified specific areas where recent improvements had been realized such as in graduation rates, student growth accountability status. The Standmore School was named as one of the schools that moved up from Level 3 status to Level 2 in 2016. The 2018 budget also funded additional 19 teachers across the district to support English learners and class size reductions were prioritized so that 63% of elementary school classrooms in the district had fewer than 23 students. The Standmore School classroom average size was just under 17 students.

At the school level, resources were also carefully targeted to the goals of improving student achievement. The structures in place to affect student achievement

include PLCs, the ILT, the availability and focus of the instructional coach and others. In addition, the district allocated 90 minutes of professional development time every other Monday so that the principal could focus on specific development needs for the staff.

***Mission and vision informally focused student achievement.*** While Standmore personnel did not clearly articulate a specific vision and mission, they described mission and vision in remarkably similar ways (Taylor, 2018). Jesse said, “I have not really revisited our mission and our vision here since we wrote it, which was a couple of years ago...[but] it goes back to expectations, and it really goes back to having high expectations for the kids that sit in front of you.” Another teacher said, “Isn't the mission just to educate the students?” These comments reinforce that there was not a clear understanding of the specifics of a mission and vision. However, there was a consensus on the focus on student achievement.

***Structure supported students in the classroom.*** At the beginning of her time at Standmore, the principal changed many of the student-related structures. These structural changes focused on increasing classroom instructional time and were designed to ensure students were ready to learn. For example, Aron revamped the arrival procedures to establish boundaries, rules and structure. Several teachers mentioned during the interview process how important these arrival procedures were to ensure that the students were ready for learning the very moment they enter the classroom. Jesse reinforced this by saying that “[s]tructure is huge, and I would say that is one of the bigger things that [the principal] brought with her when she came in here. She wanted every classroom in the building to start having a morning meeting, where that was not taking place before.” The assistant principal, Lee, also talked about the morning routines:

Every single morning we do the pledge, we have a moment of silence...and then we go over the five B's and we do announcements. It is not like we come in here and do it over the loudspeaker. We all stand out there [in the playground] in a kind of community.

Cody noted that losing even five minutes in assimilation at the beginning of the day would result in significant loss of instructional time over the course of the year. Given the chaos many of the students at Standmore experienced at home, this structured environment was critical to create a sense of safety and calm that was necessary for the students to learn when they started each school day.

Another example of the structures in place was the clear emphasis on classroom management. The instructional coach, Jordan, mentioned that an important part of the coaching job was to provide support for teachers and she specifically talked about how to run an effective morning meeting and how to support teachers when they were having difficulty with classroom management. The research team also noted that during the two interviews with the principal and assistant principal, there were no interruptions for disciplinary actions. This provides some additional evidence that the classroom teachers took it upon themselves to manage their classrooms.

**Belief that all students have the ability to learn.** Standmore's principal believed that all students can achieve. She had a zero tolerance for the practice of blaming kids and families for the lack of students' academic achievement and she had high expectations of her staff to continue to build their instructional practice to serve the kids at the school.

*Students were cared for individually.* The teaching philosophy at the Standmore School was that the teacher's job and responsibility was to teach all kids and they all had the capacity to learn. We found evidence of this in many of the interviews with administration and teachers. Jesse spoke of how many of the teaching practices under former leadership allowed for teachers to teach what they felt comfortable with rather than what individual students needed. In talking about how the teaching staff looks at the students now, she stated, "You have to look at the children and say, 'What does that child need?'" Jesse, Blake, Sage and Cody noted that they were encouraged to find proactive ways to reach their students individually. Jesse and Jamie also noted that was encouraged to use different tools and resources in their classrooms so that she could reach each of their students individually and that the principal was supportive of this practice.

*Staff were committed to finding creative ways to reach families.* The administration and teachers demonstrated a passion for working with the students and families at the Standmore School (Reilly, 2018). Both the principal and the assistant principal did not explicitly talk about how much they liked working with the kids at the school, but it was clear in their stories and the context in which they spoke about their kids that they found passion and enjoyment in their work at Standmore. We found this with the teachers as well. Not only was it clear that they loved the students, but they also found creative ways to engage parents.

The assistant principal noted three specific examples of parent engagement (Reilly, 2018). First, Standmore moved from a poorly attended curriculum night to a very successful showcase of student work. The teachers used this time with parents to talk about curriculum, the importance of homework and other school issues. Second, the

school served food at parent events knowing that this drives up attendance. Third, the administration reorganized the student pick up process to better reach parents at the end of the day. Knowing that about 80% of the students were picked up on foot, the administration created a process where the walking kids were picked up in one room thus creating an opportunity every day for teachers to engage with parents with positive feedback and with issues that came up during the school day. These three examples demonstrated how the administration considered the context of the students and families to achieve the goal of engaging parents and thus, meeting each student's needs.

***Emphasis on students controlling their own learning.*** One common theme noted was that not all students receive academic support at home. Regularly, teachers sought ways for the students themselves to buy into their own learning objectives. The most obvious example was the following chant and 5Bs that was recited by all of the teachers and students at the beginning of every school day: "People, people can't you see? Education is the key. People, people don't you know? College is the place we'll go. Following this chant, the students are asked to call out the five B's – Be here on time, Be ready to learn, Be safe, Be responsible, Be respectful." School norms like this show how the school creates a mindset for students to take control of their own learning. In addition, the principal indicated that students started to take ownership of the Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) testing scores starting in Grade 2. Casey noted that this strategy to have the children buy into their own academic achievement was effective in the classroom. She noted that "[I]t gives the kids a sense of accomplishment..." Blake affirmed Casey's thought by clarifying the strategy for having students own their learning and goals. "The whole gradual release of responsibility, that's a big thing. Part of our



everyday routine in all the things that we teach we don't want these kids to look at the teacher like okay, I've got it. We want them to be able to do it on their own.”

***Standmore’s teachers believed in their students.*** Standmore’s tag line in printed materials was “Raising expectation to improve student performance.” Confirming this, all school staff interviewed said that they had high expectations for all students. Blake talked about the role of the teaching staff as, “we're going to do this every day and by the end of it the kids are going to be at this level.” Another teacher, Jamie, talked about how she held her students to high standards and said to her students, ‘I mean, you have to have some kind of self-pride. I'm literally not changing my expectations or my standards for you guys. So, if you want credit do it over, otherwise it’s zero.’” Lastly, Sage said, “we're trying to make everybody successful, whatever that means for that student... We don't lower our standards, we keep our standards high and make sure that we’re challenging all our students, even though there are a lot of students that need a lot of help.” These comments supported the teachers’ belief all students could achieve, and the positive achievement results experienced at Standmore over the past few years.

**District support of school was not clear.**

***District showed a focus on student achievement.*** The Evergreen 2018 district level budget stated in several places how the mission, strategy and vision were focused on improving student achievement. Further, as noted above, the district allocated resources to ensure Standmore had small class sizes and adequate teaching resources such as English teachers to support the students in the school. The 2016-2017 School Improvement Plan showed a focus on holding students to high expectations, assessing progress and identifying and supporting teachers needing improvement. Further, the

assistant principal talked about how the superintendent emphasized the importance of goals. It is interesting to note, however, that as of November, school level goals had not been set by the district. In November, the principal indicated that she expected to review her goals with the district in the upcoming weeks.

***Decision-making was not shared with district.*** While school level personnel were very complimentary in discussing the collaboration and shared decision-making at the school level, they also commented on the fact that sometimes decisions would come from the district that they did not understand. A key example was the decision to implement the new Envisions math program with a mandate that the program be implemented as is. Many teachers expressed frustration and concern as to whether this new program would help the students at Standmore progress in math.

***Principal received support from the district when she asked.*** The principal noted that the district is supportive when she asked for assistance. Dylan from the district also noted that Standmore's principal was proactive in asking for support when she needed it. For example, the principal asked for additional professional development around Envision implementation, which the district provided.

**Lack of cultural proficiency.** Neither ethnic and racial diversity nor context was thought of in an asset-based way at Standmore. Ethnic and racial diversity was considered in obvious ways such as by offering multiple languages on the district website and by including multi-cultural and language reading books in the classrooms. Additionally, the 2009 Family Involvement Plan talked about the importance of engaging all families. However, there is no evidence that school or district leadership thought about ethnic and racial diversity in an asset-based way or any intentional way. The general

sense from the administration and teachers was that the school was able to reach their kids despite their poverty and other family circumstances.

**Creating a supportive organization contributes to the effectiveness of the school.** The open-ended interview protocols included questions asking whether the respondent thought Standmore was a successful school and, if so, what were the most important things leadership did to support that success. The answers to these two questions provide support for whether the school's leaders believed the five attributes of creating a supportive organization for learning contributed to Standmore's effectiveness.

High expectations of all students and collaboration amongst staff were two of the components of creating a supportive organization for learning. Holding all students to high expectations was found in the 2018 budget, in the Staff News and in other documents reviewed. In addition, the superintendent, principal and assistant principal all noted these high expectations, without excuses for the students with difficult home situations, as a critical part of why the school was successful. It was also interesting to note that while only one teacher identified high expectations as a critical part of the success of the school, virtually all of the teachers spoke about holding all students to high expectations as important.

The second practice noted as impacting the effectiveness of Standmore was collaboration. As discussed at length above, school leaders noted various tools as critical to aiding the school level staff in their collaborative efforts such PLCs and the lesson plans on a shared Google drive. District and school (principal and assistant principal) level leadership noted the school's collaborative mindset in acknowledging the strong relationship between staff, the focus on successful and productive PLCs and the

continuous and positive feedback cycle. Five of the eight teachers interviewed specifically talked about collaboration being a key to the success of the school. Similar to school leadership, the other three teachers spoke more about the tools of collaboration without naming collaboration specifically as a key to the school's success.

Another area that the superintendent mentioned was the principal's ability to push and challenge her staff to continue to move them forward without burning them out. As described further above, her staff trusted her and clearly felt support in their work with the students of the Standmore School. This could be described as the principal setting a "press for results" (Hitt & Tucker, 2016, p. 552).

## **Discussion**

This study provided significant evidence that Standmore's leadership employed the practices of creating a supportive organization for learning. Three of the findings demonstrated the presence of the five attributes of creating a supportive organization for learning. These were: the principal built capacity in her building, resources supported student achievement, and there was evidence of a belief that all students have the ability to learn. Two of the findings demonstrated opportunities for the school and district to improve upon the successful practices already in place. These were that the district support of the school was not clear and there appeared to be a lack of cultural proficiency at the school level. The study also showed, with the sixth finding, that school personnel believe that high expectation and collaboration, two key parts of creating a supportive organization for learning, were critical to the success of the school.

The discussion below will first outline the findings related to the first research question regarding whether the five attributes of creating a supportive organization for

learning were present in the Standmore School. Then, the discussion will explore the school leaders' belief systems around the reasons that the Standmore School is successful.

**Presence of creating a supportive organization for learning.** The first research question addresses whether the five attributes of Hitt and Tucker's (2016) leadership practice for creating a supportive organization for learning were present. The leadership practice addresses how a leader creates capacity in his or her organization to support the instructional goals of the school and builds an organization that demonstrates "concern for teachers and a press for results" (Hitt & Tucker, 2016, p. 552). The sections below reviews each of the five attributes and outline how the data gathered in this study show that the attribute was present in the Standmore School. Then, the section summarizes this information to identify certain areas found to be missing when analyzing the five attributes.

***Strategic resource acquisition and allocation focused on mission and vision.*** This leadership attribute shows how resources and goal setting are aligned with both student achievement and the mission and vision of the school and district. The findings identified certain areas where resources and goal setting were aligned with student achievement and that, while school personnel clearly articulated mission and vision consistently and in terms of student achievement, documentation of mission and vision was lacking.

***Considering context and valuing diversity.*** The leadership attribute of considering context and valuing diversity focuses on viewing diversity and context in an asset-based way, or in a positive light, being aware of context when making decisions and

using context to think flexibly about solving problems. Considering context and valuing diversity was demonstrated throughout the interviews in that students were thought of as individuals and the principal used context to creatively find solutions the problems in front of her. We found that Standmore's staff believed deeply in serving the school's students and that these students were seen as individuals.

***Collaborative decision-making processes and shared leadership.*** The leadership attribute of collaborative decision-making and shared leadership encompasses collaborative decision-making, buy-in of leadership decisions and using shared leadership to build teacher capacity. This study found that Standmore was a very collaborative community and the leaders and teachers valued each other. A number of practices in the school supported this collaboration such as PLCs, the use of the instructional coach as a mentor and advisor to teachers in their practice, and the teachers' feeling they had freedom in their classroom to implement the instruction needed to support the ever-changing needs of their students.

***School culture strength and optimization.*** The leadership practice of school culture strength and optimization principally considers positive structures such as norms and values, culture and whether teachers feel support from leaders. The findings showed that structures were in place to support teachers, such as PLCs, and to ensure students are ready for learning, such as structures around morning routines. The finding also showed the intolerance of any of the staff or teachers for blaming students for their difficult circumstances. The principal built these practices from some of the positive cultural norms which were already present in the school, such as many teaching staff who loved

the school and believed the students all could achieve regardless of their social, ethnic and economic backgrounds.

***High standards and expectations.*** The leadership attribute of high standards and expectations considers how the school, teachers and students are held accountable to student achievement goals. This attribute also encompasses clarity and supportiveness of feedback and communication around these goals. The findings demonstrated the balance the principal had for academic results, teacher support and high expectations for all students. The principal consistently sent a message of her high standards and expectations in how resources were allocated and in how school staff were expected to function in the school.

***Summary of the attributes.*** The five attributes of creating a supportive organization for learning are interrelated, as demonstrated by how they support the three findings that support how they are present in the Standmore School. Together, they reinforce the principal's "concern for teachers" (Hitt & Tucker, 2016, p. 552) and how this concern created a general sense of well-being in the school building. The principal's staff, including teachers, the assistant principal and other building level staff highly respected and admired her. Grayson & Alvarez (2008) and Singh & Billingsley (1998) identify in their research the importance of teachers' feeling of trust and comfort from the principal as well as the support for their work. These important factors enable teachers to teach at their highest capacity.

***Recommendations.*** Although this study provided strong evidence of the presence of the attributes of the leadership practice of creating a supportive organization for learning, a few key areas for improvement were noted. The first area was in the lack of

clear support from the district. While the district appeared to focus on improving student achievement, the findings showed that specific support was not pushed to the school unless school personnel specifically asked for that support. Additionally, the evidence identified a lack of shared decision-making with the district in relation to new curricula. However, when district support was sought by school leadership, it was granted. Lastly, the school mission and vision was not clearly articulated and aligned with the missives from the district. The district and school relationship in this regard was complex because it was not clear how much of the support from the district came from the principal's strong relationship with district personnel rather than distinct processes in place that would support a principal working in a challenging school environment. The first recommendation from this study is for the district to create a clear process for support which is communicated to its schools and is reinforced in professional development and communications with school level personnel.

The second area where attributes of creating a supportive organization for learning were found to be lacking was in how diversity and the difficult circumstances in which many of the students lived was viewed as a liability. Standmore staff often spoke about their students as being able to achieve despite their difficult situations (Taylor, 2018). Murphy et al. (2006) and Sebring et al. (2006), however, found that effective leadership not only understands the context of their students but in understanding and viewing diversity in asset-based way, the leadership will influence student achievement positively. Hitt and Tucker's (2016) leadership practice of creating a supportive organization for learning contemplates viewing context and diversity as assets of students to be leveraged to positively influence student achievement. While this individual study



addressed diversity and context at Evergreen and Standmore, Hitt and Tucker's other leadership practices address more fully how cultural proficiency is infused into district and school norms. This issue of how diversity and the context of the students at Standmore is viewed is further discussed in Chapter 4.

**Leaders' beliefs regarding Standmore's success.** The data showed that Standmore's leadership believed high expectations and collaboration, two key parts of creating a successful organization for learning, contributed to the success of the Standmore School. Setting high standards was a consistent theme the interviewees discussed when asked about the success of the Standmore School. This area addressed not only how the leadership at the district and school level set high expectation of teachers, but also how teachers set high expectations of students.

Collaboration is another important area that touches on several of the leadership attributes. Teachers felt their expertise in the classroom was valued and they were consulted in how to best support the students in the school, demonstrating shared decision-making and distributed leadership. The positive structures such as the support from the instructional coach and the consistency of and the value teachers place in the PLC process showed collaboration through school culture strength and optimization.

### **Implications for Practice**

This study explored whether the leadership practice of creating a supportive organization for learning was present at the Standmore School and whether the leadership of the school believed that this practice contributed to the effectiveness of the school. Understanding the practices, specifically the leadership practice of creating a supportive organization for learning present at a successful school, provides information to policy

makers, district leaders and principals about the practices present in one high performing, positive deviant school out-performing others. While the scope of this study did not specifically explore whether the presence of creating a supportive organization impacts achievement at Standmore, readers of this study may rely upon empirical research demonstrating how creating a supportive organization for learning has been found to influence student outcomes. Readers may then decide how they believe the presence of creating a supportive organization for learning contributes to the effectiveness of Standmore. Finding correlations between the conditions present at high performing urban schools, particularly in districts where most schools continue to struggle, will provide information about how policy makers, district leaders and principals may implement practices in underperforming schools to improve their student outcomes.

### **Limitations**

While this study does not directly address whether the leadership practice of creating a supportive organization for learning has influenced the positive student achievement in the school under study, Hitt and Tucker's (2016) synthesis of prior research has shown that these practices influence student achievement. The primary limitation related to this study was due to the limited time frame in which the study was completed and the reliance on documents and interviews as the data to support the findings. The single point in time under which the study was conducted limits the conclusions to being relevant to that point in time. These limitations are specific to this individual study and to the overarching study. The limitations are discussed at greater length in Chapter 4.

## Chapter 4<sup>4</sup>

### Group Findings, Discussion, Study Limitations and Implications for Practice

This study explored leadership practices at a high performing, urban elementary school within a low performing, urban district. The research was guided by a leadership framework (Hitt & Tucker, 2016) comprised of synthesized effective leadership practices that have shown to improve student achievement. This study was focused on answering the research question: What leadership practices are present in a high performing, urban elementary school?

In order to answer the research question, the research team embarked on a qualitative case study in which each of the five individual studies was grounded in one of the five domains within Hitt and Tucker's (2016) Unified Framework. Taylor (2018) looked specifically at how leadership established practices that are aligned to a purpose consistent with the articulation of the mission and vision. Ryan (2018) looked at the principal's actions for developing professional capacity among faculty and staff while this study looked at how the leadership creates a supportive organization for learning. Gittens (2018) focused on how leadership is developing a high-quality learning program while Reilly (2018) researched how the school builds productive relationships with families and external partners. The findings from the individual studies illustrated that there were several elements of each domain's leadership practices found within the school. These findings are highlighted in the following section. The remaining sections of this chapter include discussion regarding the findings, overall limitations of the group's study, and implications for practice, policy, and research.

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<sup>4</sup> This chapter was jointly written by Nicole Gittens, Tara Gohlmann, James Reilly, David Ryan and Kris Taylor.

## **Group Findings**

Taylor (2018), Gohlmann (2018), Gittens (2018), Ryan (2018), and Reilly (2018) each conducted an individual study resulting in findings that contributed to answering the collective study's research question. Analysis of those findings was conducted by triangulating similar pieces of data emerging from the multimethods approach (Morse, 2003) outlined in Chapter 2. This led to a logically synthesized collection of findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Westhues, Ochocka, Jacobson, Simich, Maiter, Janzen & Fleras, 2008). Our research resulted in five major findings:

- 1) there exists a strong culture of accountability at the Standmore School where faculty and staff hold each other responsible for improving student achievement;
- 2) collaboration is standard practice and is embedded in the culture of the school, including but not limited to instructional planning, analysis of student learning, professional growth, and achievement of classroom and school goals;
- 3) the administration, faculty, and staff maintain high expectations for their own performance and that of each other which leads to higher expectations for student learning;
- 4) there is a shared belief among those who work at the Standmore School that all students can learn and they are responsible for driving that learning while students are in attendance; and
- 5) color blindness as it relates to race and its impact on students and learning is an accepted practice, so work remains to improve the school's and

district's level of cultural proficiency and position along the cultural competency continuum.

These synthesized findings led the group to support their conclusion that all of the domains of the effective leadership practices outlined in Hitt and Tucker's (2016) Unified Framework were presently active in the school at the time of the study, albeit to different levels of frequency and quality. In concluding such and effectively identifying those practices in each of the five individual studies as well as in summary in this chapter, the group believes it has confidently answered the study's research question. A more thorough analysis of the group's synthesized findings leading to this conclusion is discussed in the next section.

The synthesis of the findings discussed below is a result of multiple iterative stages of analysis (Westhues et al., 2008). Elements of data patterns emerging from the individual studies have been woven together to tell the story of the Standmore School relative to its effective leadership practices. These data are consistent with those found in the literature highlighting effective leadership practices that influence improved student achievement (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Jacobson, 2011; Leithwood, Patten & Jantzi, 2010; Leithwood & Sun, 2012; Sun & Leithwood, 2015; Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom & Anderson, 2010; Sammons, Gu, Day & Ko, 2011; Waters, Marzano & McNulty, 2003). While this study was not designed to elicit or represent any causal relationship between the two, it does present encouraging signs warranting further consideration for research, practice, and policy. These implications are discussed at the conclusion of this chapter.

## Discussion

**Culture of accountability and responsibility.** The deputy superintendent of Evergreen Public Schools was impressed by the culture of the Standmore School. She felt that much of the recent progress at Standmore was because of the climate and culture that was established by Aron, the current principal (Dutta & Sahey, 2016). The principal of Standmore stated that her school community “spends a lot of time focused on school culture.” That culture was one of accountability and responsibility. The deputy superintendent further stated that the principal is effective in balancing support for teachers and, at the same time, pressing those teachers for results. The principal of Standmore believed it was her responsibility to hold teachers accountable for student outcomes (Ryan, 2018).

Aron not only believed that it was her responsibility to hold teachers accountable, but she created the structures necessary for teachers to help students make academic gains. First, she increased instructional time by making certain that disruptions to instruction are minimized. Second, she expected that teachers use classroom time for instruction that was focused and well planned (Ryan, 2018). Aron also created structures to help with holding teachers accountable for student outcomes, namely Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and Instructional Leadership Teams (ILTs) (Taylor, 2018). Additionally, she allowed for her instructional coach to take a prominent role in instructional leadership and support for her teachers. The PLCs at Standmore took precedence over everything else and were almost never canceled according to Standmore’s vice principal (Gittens, 2018; Taylor, 2018 ). PLCs were described by teachers as the place where they supported one another in ensuring that students met

academic targets, where they communicated with the principal about what was working and what was not in the curricular and instructional programs. Teachers also saw PLCs as a *de facto* opportunity for teachers to hold each other accountable for student progress and that they were all on pace with curricula (Gittens, 2018).

The principal used both the PLCs and ILTs to review data to determine whether or not what teachers were doing was working for students. Aron expected that each PLC and ILT meeting was used to review student data and as a space for teachers to be able to “speak intelligently” to that data (Ryan, 2018). And because Aron immediately abandoned any practice or curricula that was not proving to move students forward according to the goals that were set, teachers were flexible with scheduling as students’ and teachers’ schedules changed regularly to address student needs (Gittens, 2018). Aron maintained that it is “too late to find out in June if there is a...problem with student learning” and thus felt that if teachers discovered an academic problem with a student or group of students, it was their and her responsibility to make sure that adjustments were made to address those problems (Gittens, 2018; Taylor, 2018). As a result, the teaching staff regularly assessed students to understand their progress and where students stood in relation to learning goals.

Additionally, Aron worked one-on-one with teachers who struggled to support students in making academic goals. Aron provided support both personally to teachers and through structured time for those teachers to work with the instructional coach who supported the teachers in a non-evaluative capacity (Ryan, 2018). It was her expectation all teachers move students who were on grade level one full year and those who were academically below grade level *more* than a full year (Gittens, 2018).

Finally, beyond academic expectations, Standmore adopted a Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) system to establish and enforce common behavioral expectations as well as a common way to support student behaviors (Gittens, 2018). Through the PBIS system, teachers were expected to address behavioral challenges within the classroom so that students were not unnecessarily removed from the academic environment. The PBIS system also held adults accountable to being fair and consistent in disciplinary practices for students who needed such support (Gittens, 2018).

**Collaboration.** Collaboration was not only present at both the district and school level, but also was described by the interviewees as a required part of their professional practice (Taylor, 2018). During the 2017-2018 school year, the district focused on collaborative leadership in their professional development (Taylor, 2018). They did this in various ways including setting aside professional development time at the beginning of the year to build a collaborative mindset amongst the district staff and purchasing texts on collaborative leadership for the staff. Additionally, the superintendent noted his belief that the mission and vision of the district is achieved with collaborative work (Taylor, 2018). These actions all support the leadership practice of establishing and conveying a vision. District leadership also noted the school's collaborative mindset in acknowledging the strong relationship between staff, the focus on successful and productive PLCs, and the continuous and positive feedback cycle.

Just as collaboration was important at the district level, school level leadership and staff talked about collaboration to such an extent that it appeared to be at least an expectation and at best a cultural norm at the Standmore School. We found when investigating the leadership practice of building professional capacity that teachers



collaboratively set goals with school leadership, the principal and instructional coach modeled collaboration when leading professional development and PLCs, the instructional coach worked with teachers to analyze data to support the students in their classrooms, and school leaders expected teachers to actively communicate with parents (Gittens, 2018; Reilly, 2018; Ryan, 2018). The actions demonstrated that the leadership practice of building professional capacity was present in the school. Because the culture supports building professional capacity, no one person or team would have been the lone reason that student achievement has improved. At Standmore there was a belief that as the capacity and skill set of all the teachers in the classrooms improved, so would student achievement.

An important part of the leadership practice of creating a supportive organization for learning is that decision-making is collaborative and leadership is shared. We found that Standmore school leaders used various tools to support their collaborative efforts, such as PLCs and lesson plans on a school-wide shared Google drive. Every school level staff person noted collaboration or working well together as important to his or her work at the Standmore School (Taylor, 2018). Many even noted that collaboration was one of the most important reasons for the success of the school. Another common theme noted was that because not all students received academic support at home, teachers sought ways for the students themselves to buy into their own learning objectives.

When considering collaborative efforts between Standmore and its community partners and parents, a number of practices were noted that supported the leadership practice of connecting with external partners. The community that surrounds a school is critical to the school achieving its student achievement goals and the actions at

Standmore demonstrated how the leaders leveraged this leadership practice. This leadership practice was supported by teachers working together and sharing information about students with one another. There was also evidence of collaboration with parents on student learning plans, although data supporting this practice was almost exclusively limited to improving student achievement (Gittens, 2018; Reilly, 2018). Some of the notable active collaborations included those with local educational institutions (nearby college student tutors and Big Brother Big Sisters), with local business partners (library restoration), and with the city and surrounding community on the playground development project (Reilly, 2018). It is also important to note, however, that the lack of data confirming collaboration from the viewpoint of external stakeholders was a limitation of the study since no parents and only one community representative were able to be interviewed.

In summary, we found that Standmore School leaders and teachers operated in a highly collaborative environment (Taylor, 2018). This study's findings show that all school leaders and five of the eight teachers interviewed said that collaboration was a key to the success of the Standmore School.

**High expectations.** There is a preponderance of evidence supporting the claim that Standmore set high expectations for staff and students. This condition, a practical application of the instructional focus found in the school's accountability plan, was found to be rooted in the principal's non-negotiable practice of setting ambitious yet reachable goals, a sincere and focused approach to holding students accountable for learning behavior while in school, and embedding a system of peer practice at the school that fostered high expectations (Ryan, 2018). Throughout the study it was clear that the

principal balanced high expectations for her staff with the value teachers provided with their instructional expertise, a condition originally found in high performing schools by Waters, Marzano & McNulty (2003). As part of these high expectations, the principal was clear with her staff that all students have the ability to learn and that blaming the students for lack of progress was not an acceptable practice at Standmore (Reilly, 2018). This foundation set the tone of high expectations for both staff and students at Standmore.

***Setting ambitious goals.*** The principal spent a large amount of her time assisting classroom teachers with developing and ultimately attaining their students' learning goals. These goals were derivative of the school goals that were developed by the principal based upon available student learning data. Each year a new school goal was developed and teachers were required to use their classroom student learning data to align their methods with desired results (Ryan, 2018).

At times it became overwhelming for teachers when they realized how ambitious the learning goals were, but when infused with motivation and inspiration from the principal and other members of the Instructional Leadership Team, the teachers and students succeeded (Gittens, 2018; Ryan, 2018). For instance, setting a goal for students who were on grade level that calls for less than 100% progress was viewed as failure (Gittens, 2018). Teachers and staff were not only encouraged and assisted by administration to reach the student achievement goals for their classrooms, but also relied on each other for motivation. They shared the instructional coach's resource room where the Instructional Leadership Team met as well as the grade level PLCs met. The walls in this room depicted the story of each student's progress and with it, the teacher's progress

in helping students reach their goals. Lastly, teachers were supported and motivated by the allocation of resources that were carefully targeted to the goals of improving student achievement. While the school was not overly saturated with technology or other supplemental instructional materials, the principal had secured what was deemed appropriate for helping students reach their learning goals. Further, she organized staff in such a way (Ryan, 2018) as to maintain a low average class size of 16.5 students and introduced a double block of literacy instruction.

***Focused approach to student learning.*** The study sought to explore effective leadership practices in a high performing, urban elementary school within a low performing school district. Much of the context preceding the study centered on the socioeconomic and racial identity of the students who attended this neighborhood school and their success in achieving at levels higher than similar schools in the district, a concept first reported by Milner, Murray, Farinde & Delale-O'Connor (2015). What was discovered was a set of beliefs that promoted the value of holding students to high expectations for learning regardless of their background, skin color or zip code. The message was clear from respondents that when students were in school, they were in school to learn (Gittens, 2018). And when the day began with the morning meeting at which all students and staff were present, students were being motivated to focus on learning for the day and goals for the future (Reilly, 2018; Taylor, 2018).

All staff including the superintendent, principal, and assistant principal, noted these high expectations for learning without excuses for students with difficult home situations (Gittens, 2018). Echoing what Milner (2015) first identified in studies of urban schooling, they expressed their belief that the focus on learning was a critical part of the

school's success and instead of using poverty or other deficit-laden approaches to helping students feel comfortable, they pushed students out of their comfort zones into learning zones.

***Embedded system of peer practice.*** The administration, faculty and staff members in this study demonstrated a passion for working with students and families. While it was not always explicitly stated, the data were clear in the stories relayed in the interviews and the context in which respondents spoke about their students that they found passion and enjoyment in their work.

There existed a healthy competition among teachers to reach their student learning goals, something that had been spoken about by several of the respondents (Ryan, 2018). However there was an underlying peer pressure to always be at your best when coming together in PLCs, lesson planning, scoring, and facilitation of school-wide committees (Ryan, 2018). Teachers appeared to want always to be prepared and to not let their team members down, holding each other accountable for completing that which had been mutually agreed upon. These were peer embedded norms of collaboration within the school and without them the team would not be successful in meeting their goals. Since the teachers knew the principal was holding them accountable to reaching their goals, there appeared to be tremendous motivation to work together and hold each other accountable.

Other embedded peer practice measures included maintaining contact with parents, especially for students considered to be at risk, and being willing to speak up when struggling with something that was holding back progress (Reilly, 2018; Ryan, 2018).

**Shared beliefs.** Most Standmore School personnel could not delineate a specific vision and mission statement for the school, yet many embodied a shared mission and vision in remarkably similar ways and were commonly driven by a belief system on how to best support student achievement (Taylor, 2018). These beliefs included notions that all students have the ability to learn, teacher actions drive learning, and parents are important partners in supporting student achievement (Reilly, 2018; Taylor, 2018). The school leader promoted the development of these shared beliefs through direct communication and modeled practice (Reilly, 2018; Ryan, 2018; Taylor, 2018).

***All students can learn.*** Standmore teachers consistently expressed the belief that all students could learn and the importance of setting high expectations. Many shared how the principal “relentlessly communicates” this belief both explicitly and through her practice (Ryan, 2018; Taylor, 2018). Examples included the continual use of data to track the academic growth of all students in PLCs and the development of inclusive, rigorous, and growth centered student learning goals tied to the teacher evaluation system (Gittens, 2018). By promoting the common belief that all students can learn, the principal worked to ensure that fewer students were left behind and that teachers accepted their own responsibility in promoting academic growth.

***Teacher actions drive learning.*** Informed by the premise that all students can learn, the teaching philosophy at the Standmore School was driven by personal responsibility and accountability. School staff members shared that the principal has zero tolerance for the practice of blaming kids and families for the lack of students’ academic achievement (Reilly, 2018). This sends the message that while students are in school, they are there to learn, and it does not benefit teachers to complain about matters outside

of their locus of control. Accordingly, the principal set high expectations for her staff to continue to build their instructional practice and to make constant adjustments when student growth becomes stagnant. This belief is even shared by the principal when interviewing prospective teachers as she provides specific warnings about how hard it is to work at the school and that there are no excuses for students to not learn (Ryan, 2018).

A focus on pedagogy was also demonstrated then the principal declared that being an instructional leader was the most important aspect of her job (Gittens, 2018). This was not only manifested by her willingness to work 1:1 with teachers struggling with specific concepts (such as literacy and math) but in how she modeled learning through her own professional learning and participation with staff during professional development events (Gittens, 2018). By promoting the shared belief that teacher actions drive student learning, the principal ensured that the most powerful lever in promoting student achievement remained activated and could dynamically evolve as student needs changed. While the teacher's role in student learning is central, the importance of communicating and partnering with parents was another shared belief held by staff members (Reilly, 2018).

***Parent communication and involvement important to support learning.*** The school leader actively promoted the belief that all parents should be involved and can positively influence student achievement outcomes. Several staff members shared that there was a clear expectation from the principal that parents were to be seen as invested partners in their children's education (Reilly, 2018). Some of these expectations surrounding parent communication were evident in staff newsletters and school structures such as PLC meetings (Reilly, 2018). Staff members shared that although communication

was most often triggered when students were having difficulty such as truancy, poor homework completion, or displaying challenging behaviors, it transcended notes or phone calls home. Some staff members shared that they also conducted home visits and took pride in the ability to garner parent participation in school-wide events (Reilly, 2018). By promoting the belief that all parents can be important and invested partners, the school leader disrupted a culture of blame and increased the likelihood of utilizing an important asset in promoting student achievement. However, the inability to confirm this practice with external stakeholders was a limitation of this finding.

**Cultural proficiency and color-blindness.** Although there was clear evidence of effective leadership practices and structures in place that supported academic achievement of urban students (Ryan, 2018), data also showed a lack of culturally proficient practices within the Evergreen Public Schools (Reilly, 2018; Taylor, 2018). In addition, there was evidence of color blindness throughout the organization, from the central office to the school level (Reilly, 2018; Taylor, 2018). Hitt and Tucker (2016) speak to the importance of considering context to improve the organization and they also address the importance of diversity from an asset-based perspective.

Ethnic and racial diversity was considered in obvious ways by the district, such as offering multiple languages on the district website and including multi-cultural and language reading books in the classrooms (Gittens, 2018). Additionally, the 2009 Family Involvement Plan talked about the importance of engaging all families. However, there was little evidence that school or district leadership thought about ethnic and racial diversity in an asset-based way (Reilly, 2018; Taylor, 2018). The general sense from the administration and teachers was that the school was able to reach their kids despite their



economic circumstances and conversations about race and culture were unnecessary (Reilly, 2018; Taylor, 2018). In addition, parental involvement was governed by a school-based agenda focused mostly on improving student achievement and there was limited evidence of shared decision-making outside of individual student success plans (Reilly, 2018).

Both the superintendent and the school principal valued a focus on providing opportunities for students living in poverty, but they had not addressed the role race and culture have in developing a student's capacity and the organization's ability to serve its constituents (Reilly, 2018; Taylor, 2018). This study found that interviewed district leaders, school leaders, and teachers did not appear to understand the importance of addressing race and cultural background as a means to improve student achievement (Gittens, 2018; Reilly, 2018; Taylor, 2018). Becoming culturally proficient requires that both the teacher and the student share and build knowledge together. Culturally relevant pedagogy involves using the "reality, history and perspectives of students" (Bartolome, 1994, p. 173). Within the district, there was a belief that because the student population is so racially diverse, there isn't a need to focus on race (Taylor, 2018). Instead of leveraging culture and race as a tool and a lens to better understand the urban students of color and to serve and enhance their skills as educators, district and school leaders and teachers appeared to rely on a typical stance consistent with being color-blind (Taylor, 2018).

As posited in Critical Race Theory, color-blind approaches deny educators and their students access to the benefits associated with the use of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) or multicultural pedagogy (Gay & Howard, 2000)

which allow for the inclusion of culture, background and identity in the classroom to improve achievement. To be culturally responsive means to practice validation, “to acknowledge the realities of inequity that impact students in and out of school” (Hammond, 2015, p. 92).

Recognizing race and becoming culturally proficient make one a better educator. As educational scholars Gay and Howard (2000) state, “developing skills...in multicultural pedagogy is consistent with the logical sequence of how pedagogical mastery is accomplished” (pg. 13). Standmore has done great work in helping students of color and students living in poverty improve academically. There was evidence of strong and consistent instructional practices coupled with high expectations (Gittens, 2018; Ryan, 2018) and this culture of high expectations was consistent with culturally proficient practices (Gay, 2000). However, Evergreen Public Schools and the Standmore School could do much more to achieve academic success for all students by embarking on a journey to have conversations about race and culture and creating programs and policies to benefit certain racial and cultural groups.

Urban students everywhere need leaders willing to confront inequity. This is one definition of transformational leadership. Transformational leaders, as defined by Leithwood and Jantzi (2006), build vision, develop their staff by offering intellectually stimulating learning experiences and create a collaborative school culture. The empirical literature also suggests that leadership is essential to instituting school-wide reform (Sanzo, Sherman & Clayton, 2011). If Evergreen Public Schools and the Standmore School want to prepare students for the future with the ability to participate in a global society, district leaders and school leaders could leverage transformative leadership

practices and embrace reform efforts to fight against color-blindness. This allows for the development of a culturally responsive organization that validates the real life experiences of students of color. These practices will reinforce the strong alliances with students and families and lead to improved academic outcomes.

### **Study Limitations**

The design and execution of this study resulted in a number of limitations primarily due to research timing and scope. The first limitation related to the district and school selection methodology. The school was selected using a purposeful selection methodology and was a Massachusetts designated Level 2 urban school in an urban district. The findings from this research apply to this school alone and may not be transferable to other districts or schools in the district, or more widely.

The second limitation related to our methods at the school level. We used document reviews and interviews at both the school and district level. The document review relied heavily on documents available publically. We had limited access to non-public documents and data. In selecting interview respondents, we employed purposeful methodology relying on support from the district. We were limited in our capacity to interview and interviewed only one community partner, eight school level personnel and three district level personnel. This small number of interviewees limits the perspectives garnered for the study. Furthermore, parents and students were not interviewed as part of this study. Perspectives from these groups would provide additional data.

Third, we did not collect data on how long each interviewee worked in the school and district or whether the interviewee had experience in other schools or under other school leaders. The context of an interviewee's experience would provide perspective on

how the interviewee understood the leadership practices present at Standmore.

Additional information about teachers who worked at Standmore before and after the present principal began her tenure in that role would provide further context regarding the before and after comparisons about the school and the leadership practices present.

Fourth, our study was conducted at a single point in time. When selecting a school for this study, we considered the success of the school using Massachusetts accountability data available for the 2015-2016 school year and we performed our data review and analysis in the 2017-2018 school year. While we believe many of the practices found support the success of the school, our study was limited by time and scope and was therefore unable to find a correlation between the success of the school and the leadership practices.

### **Implications for Practice**

This research study aimed to determine what leadership practices were present in a high performing, urban elementary school. The project was designed using the five individual studies of Hitt and Tucker's (2016) Unified Framework for effective leadership practices and each is represented in the school. Readers of this paper should rely on empirical research for an understanding of the relationship between the leadership practices found in the school and student outcomes. This was not the purpose of this study and therefore should not be entertained when referring to it; those findings are very different from those being reported in this study. However, because so many urban schools in Massachusetts have significant populations of traditionally marginalized students, identifying practices of successful urban schools and recommending a way to replicate those practices is one strategy for closing the statewide achievement gap and a

primary purpose for this study. As a result, below are some recommendations to organizations that wish to use this study in that fashion.

The first recommendation for any organization or individual seeking to use this study in its practice is to first develop a vision for learning and then broadly communicate that vision throughout the organization. Taylor (2018) defines vision as “how the organization achieves its mission” (p. 6). Since people will be chiefly responsible for delivering on that vision, organizations must clearly and relentlessly communicate the vision to them. Communicating comes in various forms and includes the effective hiring and management of the right personnel (Ryan, 2018), constant written and verbal information about the desired outcomes for students, the modeling and reinforcement of high expectations for staff and students alike, and the knowledge of effective instructional strategies and curriculum (Gittens, 2018). The vision is much more powerful when it has been developed in a collaborative fashion with internal and external stakeholders including parents and community members (Reilly, 2018), and therefore requires great effort on the part of the school leadership to consistently exemplify the tenets of the vision and engage everyone in the conversation who has a claim in the school. Only when this foundational cornerstone is laid can the organization begin to achieve higher degrees of success.

In this light, the Standmore School should more firmly expand its communication of the vision to more external stakeholders, especially its parents. There exists a gap in the data between the parent community and the school as evidenced by the fact that efforts to have educators identify potential study participants from the parent community were unsuccessful. While this is a limitation to this study, it possibly also signifies a

weaker connection between the school and parent community than what has been reported through the interview process with administration, teachers and staff (Reilly, 2018).

The second recommendation for any organization seeking to use this study in its practice is to embark upon a journey along the continuum of cultural competence (DeRosa, 2002) to understand its levels of implicit bias and institutional racism. As Taylor (2018) notes, students' rates of poverty in urban school districts seem to be given more attention than race, and when you talk about poverty in schools, you must talk about race (Milner, 2015). Taylor's research on Standmore shows that the organization promotes color-blindness (p. 9) by denying the importance of addressing race through specialized programs. Instead, there is ample evidence from the open-ended interviews that administrators, including those at the district office, teachers and staff are seeing and treating all students the same based on the high level of poverty and not considering the effects of race. This approach to working with students of color is not uncommon and is actually the third stage along the six-stage continuum of cultural competence (DeRosa, 2002). But the fact that this is not uncommon should not be confused with it being an accepted practice. It is the organization's ethical responsibility to address its bias by owning and changing it.

The Standmore School is trying to close the achievement gap in an earnest and productive manner by employing many of the practices that are included in the literature supporting effective methods for doing so. However, it is doing it by ignoring race, which only perpetuates how separate and unequal opportunities are for our children (Singleton, 2014). According to Taylor (2009), many other schools operate in the same fashion and

therefore this recommendation is essential to all organizations who seek to improve equity in learning opportunities for all students while remaining ethically tied to their vision.

A third recommendation for organizations wishing to use this study in its practice is to create a system for sustainability through a focused professional development model for school leadership based on the practices highlighted at Standmore. This recommendation is specifically for system leaders who wish to implement successful practices at other schools, build a pipeline of high performing leaders in all schools (Ryan, 2018), and ensure leadership practices are sustained in the wake of a leader leaving a school (Fullan, 2005). This particular recommendation is at the heart of this study and is based on the premise of ensuring highly effective leadership practices in all schools so that all students have the same robust opportunities for learning.

It is evident in the data from this study that Evergreen School District is a low performing district by virtue of the accountability results at many of its schools. The Standmore School, however, is not one of those schools and leads the district in student academic performance. Given that much of the student population and resources such as curriculum, staffing, and programming are similar throughout the district (Pascale, Sternin & Sternin, 2010), how did Standmore outperform the rest? While there are several explanations that are better left to the section for implications for research below, this study highlights the leadership practices at Standmore as one of those possible reasons. Therefore, maintaining those practices in the school if the current principal should leave, is tremendously important to the continued success of that individual school, as is the expansion of those practices to other schools so that other students can

have the same potential for success as Standmore students. This can only be accomplished through an organized program of leadership development in which the practices at Standmore are elementary to it and those in the program are held accountable to implementing those practices (Gittens, 2018). Evergreen should begin with preparing the current assistant principal at Standmore and expand training to other schools and prospective principals as well (Ryan, 2018).

### **Implication for Policy Makers**

The data depicted a moderate level of disconnect between the school district office and Standmore in terms of curriculum, resources, and leadership development. While this disconnect did not appear to debilitate Standmore in a significant manner, largely due to the strength of the school leadership and its efforts to engage the school district office, it is unknown if this gap exists between the district office and each of the other schools in the district. This combination of disconnected relations would have a profound effect on the provision of equitable learning opportunities for all students, especially if each school in the school district was relying on its own internal leadership to manage operations and resources. It is recommended that the connections between the school district office and the schools in the district be audited to understand where strengths and challenges lie in the relationship and ultimately to develop district policy to outline what those relationships shall look like. This is especially critical to have in place in the event school district and school level leaders exit the district.

### **Implications for Research**

This study sought to explore the leadership practices in a high performing, urban elementary school without the goal of determining the effects of those practices on



student achievement. This would appear to be a logical next step in researching this area of educational leadership and would build upon the body of work already available. It is important to remember, however, that leadership practices in an urban environment can and should be drastically different from those in other types of settings (Aveling, 2007; Benham K, 1997; Clotfelter, Ladd, Vigdor & Wheeler, 2006; Cooper, 2009; Khalifa, 2012). Understanding the correlations between the leadership practices at high performing urban schools and student achievement, particularly in districts where most schools continue to struggle, will provide important information to policy makers, district leaders, and principals in their work to implement more effective practices for better student learning outcomes.

A second area for research that would prove useful would be the exploration of the level of impact and frequency of each of the leadership dimensions in Hitt and Tucker's (2016) Unified Framework at Standmore. The research design would need to be able to quantify how each dimension played a role in improving student achievement and take into account the many variables that exist with school leadership (Saldaña, 2013). This study would be very useful in helping school leaders understand what practices work best and those that can be minimized, thus more narrowly defining what effective leadership for student achievement looks like.

Lastly, it would prove useful to replicate this study in several of the low performing schools in the district. A study of this type would shed light on the importance of the leadership practices in Hitt and Tucker relative to the student achievement at those schools. For instance, if the same leadership practices were found to be in some of the low performing schools, it would generate several questions about the

impact of the practices and the validity of the correlation between the practices and student achievement, and perhaps bring to light some of the risks associated with the practices. Overall, any contribution to the body of literature outlining highly effective leadership practices resulting in high levels of student achievement would be useful.

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## Boston College Lynch School of Education

### Appendix A

#### Consent Form

##### Introduction

- ☐ You are being asked to be in a research study. The researchers will investigate how leadership practices influence student achievement in The Canterbury Street School which is a school in the Worcester Public School District.
- ☐ We would like you to participate in the study because you 1) work in the school or its district or 2) you are a parent or other community partner to the school.
- ☐ Please read this form. Ask any questions that you may have before you agree to be in the study.

##### Purpose of Study:

The purpose of this study is to understand what your school and/or district has done to influence student achievement.

- ☐ People in this study are from your school and district or are parents or other community partners to the school.

##### What will happen in the study:

We hope you will participate in an interview or focus group at an agreed upon time. We expect this will take no longer than 2 hours. **The interview/focus group sessions will take place in a conference room in the school or district office.**

##### Risks and Discomforts of Being in the Study:

If you participate in this study the main risk is a breach of confidentiality. We will make every effort to ensure confidentiality. We will maintain your anonymity to the extent possible, **however, anonymity is not possible for focus group participants.** There are no other expected risks to participate in this study. This study may include risks that are unknown at this time.

##### Benefits of Being in the Study:

The benefits of being in this study are minimal. This study may help us understand what the leaders of your school have done to influence student achievement.

##### Payments:

You will receive a token of appreciation in the form of a **\$10** Staples, Dunkin Donuts or equivalent gift card.



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### Costs:

There is no cost to you to be in this research study.

### Confidentiality:

- ☐ The records of this study will be kept private. In any report we publish, we will make every effort to ensure your identity is kept anonymous. Research records will be kept in a locked file. Your identity will remain anonymous in any publications.
- ☐ All electronic information will be secured on password protected computers and will be shared carefully amongst researchers. Audio files will be protected and shared in the same way. All audio files will be erased once the research report is published.
- ☐ For the most part, only the researchers will have access to information. A few other key people may also have access. These might include government agencies. Also, the Institutional Review Board at Boston College and internal Boston College auditors may review the research records.

### Choosing to be in the study and choosing to quit the study:

- ☐ Choosing to be in this study is voluntary. Your participation will not impact current or future relations with the University or employment with your district.
- ☐ You are free to quit at any time, for whatever reason.
- ☐ There is no penalty or loss of benefits for not taking part or for quitting.
- ☐ You will be notified of any new findings from the research if they might make you decide that you want to stop being in the study.

### Getting dismissed from the study:

The researcher may dismiss you from the study at any time if it is in your best interests. For example if side effects or distress have resulted from your participation.

### Contacts and Questions:

- ☐ The researchers conducting this study are listed below. If you have questions or want more information, please contact any of the researchers via email. That researcher will arrange a time to discuss your concerns. **You may also contact the faculty advisor to the researchers conducting the study, Dr. Pullin via email, [pullin@bc.edu](mailto:pullin@bc.edu) or phone at (617) 552-8407.**
- ☐ If you believe you may have suffered a research related injury, contact one of the researchers via email.
- ☐ If you have any questions about your rights as a person in this research study, you may contact: Director, Office for Research Protections, Boston College at (617) 552-4778, or [irb@bc.edu](mailto:irb@bc.edu)



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### Copy of Consent Form:

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records and future reference.

### Statement of Consent:

I have read (or have had read to me) the contents of this consent form. I have been encouraged to ask questions. I have received answers to my questions. I give my consent to be in the Leadership Practices That Affect Student Achievement: School Leadership For Equity With Excellence study. I have received (or will receive) a copy of this form.

### Signatures/Dates

Study Participant (Print Name): \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Participant or Legal Representative Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

### List of Researchers

1. Nicole Gittens, Deputy Superintendent of Teaching and Learning, Brookline Public Schools; [gittensn@bc.edu](mailto:gittensn@bc.edu)
2. Tara Gohlmann, Chief Operating Officer, Boston College High School; [gohlmann@bc.edu](mailto:gohlmann@bc.edu)
3. James Reilly, Principal of Priest St School, Leominster Public Schools; [reillyjl@bc.edu](mailto:reillyjl@bc.edu)
4. David Ryan, Superintendent of Schools for Allentown, Chichester, & Epsom (NH) School Districts - SAU53; [ryandp@bc.edu](mailto:ryandp@bc.edu)
5. Kris Taylor, Director of Leadership Development at Boston Public Schools; [taylorlkx@bc.edu](mailto:taylorlkx@bc.edu)

## Appendix B

### Interviewees and Roles

Interviewee	Role
Kit	Superintendent
Charlie	Superintendent's leadership team
Dylan	Superintendent's leadership team
Pat	Site council member
Aron	Principal
Lee	Assistant Principal
Jesse	Teacher and Instructional Leadership Team member
Morgan	Teacher and Instructional Leadership Team member
Casey	Teacher
Sage	Teacher
Jamie	Teacher
Blake	Teacher
Chris	Teacher and Instructional Leadership Team member
Cody	Adjustment Counselor
Jordan	Instructional Coach

## Appendix C

### Open Ended Interview Protocol for School Level Personnel – A

#### *Question / Domain Alignment Key*

<b>BQ</b> = Background Question	<b>SO</b> = Supportive organization - Domain 3
<b>OQ</b> = Overarching Question	<b>HQ</b> = High quality instruction - Domain 4
<b>V</b> = Vision - Domain 1	<b>EP</b> = External partners - Domain 5
<b>BC</b> = Building capacity - Domain 2	<b>CRT</b> = CRT in education

#### **Background Questions:**

1. What is your position? How did you come to be in this role? (BQ)
  - a. What motivates you to do with work?

#### **Overarching Questions:**

2. Why is your school successful?
3. Are families and community partners welcomed at the school? If so what is their role? (EP)
4. How are decisions made in your school and what challenges do you face when making important decisions? (V, SO, EP, BC)
  - a. Can you provide a recent example?
  - b. Would you describe your school as sharing leadership?
  - c. Are decisions made by consensus, voting or by gathering input?

#### **Specific Questions:**

5. A mission statement calls out the reason the organization exist. A vision identifies how to achieve the mission. Are you familiar with the district mission and vision? If so, how do they impact your work? (V, SO)
6. Is there a school mission statement? If not, is there an implied school mission?
7. Is there a school vision statement separate from the mission? If so, what is it? If not, is there an implied vision for the school? (V)
8. Schools sometimes seek to include stakeholders in creating the mission and vision of the school, who helped shape your mission and vision? Did you or do you now someone who helped shape the district mission or vision? (V, SO, BC)
9. (Principal) How broadly is the school mission and vision communicated? How often, would you say you reference it? Do you intentionally reference it on a daily, weekly, monthly or yearly basis? (V)



10. (Teachers) How often would you say the principal discusses the school mission and vision or incorporates the school mission or vision into the work you do? (V)
11. Are there instructional goals or priorities? If so what are they and are they linked to the school mission and vision? How were these goals developed? Who had a hand in shaping them? (V, BC)
12. How often are goals and expectations communicated? (Principal) Are these goals shared outside of the school? If so, how and when? (V)
13. (Principal) How do you communicate instructional priorities? What practices do you rely on to build awareness of goals, expectations and instructional priorities? (BC)
14. (Teachers) How are goals communicated and evaluated? Can you provide specific examples? (V, SO, BC)
15. Do the goals/ instructional priorities change what people do on a daily basis? If so, can you provide an example? (V, BC)
16. (Principal) What behaviors do you observe within the school that are consistent with the goals, instructional priorities and core values? (V, BC)
17. (Principal) What do you believe is your role in implementing the mission and vision of the school and the district? (V)
18. Is trust included as a value in your school? How is it promoted by leaders and staff? (SO, BC)
19. Who other than you (principal)/who among you (teachers) takes the lead on implementing expectations? FOLLOW UP In what way? (BC)
20. How much time has been dedicated to PD? (SO, BC)
  - a. Who leads PD? (SO, BC)
  - b. Is PD differentiated to address all levels of readiness? (SO, BC)
21. Aside from providing professional development for implementing new practices, how do you generate a sense of responsibility among staff for student learning? (BC)
22. How do you know when a teacher is the right fit for your school? How do you address those who no longer fit?(BC)
23. Please describe how instructional time is protected. Can you think and list some of the ways you mitigate interruptions to instructional activities? (BC)
24. (Principal) As a school, do you engage in conversations about race? Can you share an example? What have you learned from these conversations? (CRT)
25. (Principal) One definition of equity is ensuring that every student receives the resources needed to support their academic achievement on a daily basis. Has there ever been a program to improve academic outcomes for a particular racial group? For

example, some districts may have programs to support Latina females who are English Language Learners or Black males with Individual Education Plans? Other districts may focus on improving the academic achievement of Black and Latino males. Has a program like this ever existed in your district, can you explain what this program is/was and what are/were the goals? Please describe. What is/was the reason for this focus? What are/were the goals and the reasons it was created? (CRT)

26. How have you built school policies that support this population of students? Is there consensus?
  - a. How have you encouraged faculty and staff to work for the wellbeing of this student population?
  - b. Are there practices in place to eliminate achievement gaps for this population of students?
  - c. How have you communicated your expectations for serving these students?
27. (Principal) Was there ever a time when there was pushback from a stakeholder group (teachers, principals, parents, students, school committee or community) regarding a certain program or policy? If so, can you describe what happened? What was the central issue they disagreed with? (CRT)
28. (Principal) What was your response? How did you specifically address the concerns? Can you share the practices you relied on to resolve the issue? (V)
29. (Principal) What was the conclusion? (V)

## Appendix D

### Open Ended Interview Protocol for Principal - Vision and High Quality Instruction Focus

#### *Question / Domain Alignment Key*

<b>BQ</b> = Background Question	<b>SO</b> = Supportive organization - Domain 3
<b>OQ</b> = Overarching Question	<b>HQ</b> = High quality instruction - Domain 4
<b>V</b> = Vision - Domain 1	<b>EP</b> = External partners - Domain 5
<b>BC</b> = Building capacity - Domain 2	<b>CRT</b> = CRT in education

#### **Background Questions:**

1. Can you tell us what your current role is and what brought you to this position?
  - a. What motivates you to do this work?

#### **Academic Achievement:**

2. Why do you believe Standmore is successful?
3. Why do you believe Standmore is able to be effective with the same population of students while other level 3 or level 4 schools in Evergreen, serving the same student population, is not as successful?
4. Based on your experience, what leadership practices seem key to creating a level 1 school?

#### **Building mission/vision at the district level:**

5. We were able to review the district mission statement. What do you believe is the essence of Evergreen's district mission statement? (Note: Why the organization exists?
  - a. Do you know how the mission was identified? Who helped shape or create it? Did you or do you know someone who helped create the district mission?
6. A vision specifically calls out how to achieve the mission. It can also be the shared purpose or any mutual understandings that drive the practices of members of the organization. What do you believe is the vision of Evergreen? (Note: Vision clarifies what the organization will focus on. The goals or specific practices in order to achieve the mission - Ex. what will Evergreen do to improve academic

achievement).

7. Districts sometimes engage stakeholders in the creation of the vision or shared understandings for how to achieve the mission. How was the district vision crafted? (Was this done collaboratively?)
  - a. Do you know how the vision was identified? Who helped shape or create it? Did you or do you know someone who helped create the district vision?
  - b. How often does the district refer to or reference the mission and or vision of the district?

**Building mission/vision at the school level:**

8. We were able to review the mission statement of Standmore. What do you believe is the essence of Standmore's mission statement?
  - a. How was the vision was identified? Who helped shape or create it?
9. A vision specifically calls out how to achieve the mission. It can also be the mutual understandings that drive the practices of the members of the organization. What do you believe is Standmore's vision? (Note: Vision clarifies what the organization will focus on. The goals and specific practices in order to achieve the mission - Ex. what will Evergreen do to improve academic achievement).
10. Schools sometimes engage stakeholders in the creation of the vision or the shared understanding of how to achieve the mission. How was the vision crafted? (Was this done collaboratively?)
  - a. Who helped shape or create it?
  - b. How often do you refer to or reference the vision?

**Communicating and implementing vision at the district level and at the school level:**

11. How is the district vision (shared purpose/mutual understanding/shared practices) communicated to school leaders? When? How often?
12. Would you say there are goals linked to the district mission and vision? How were they developed? Who had a hand in shaping the goals?
13. Does the district mission/vision inform instructional priorities at Standmore? Please explain. How are instructional priorities communicated to teachers?
14. Does the district mission/vision change what people do at Standmore on a daily basis? If so, can you provide an example? What behaviors do you observe within the school that are consistent with the district goals, instructional priorities and core values? How does the district mission/vision inform your practice?

15. How do you build support, enthusiasm or buy-in? How do you motivate others to stay true to the district and Standmore's mission/vision?
16. Core values are sometimes used to guide the work and inform decisions. Has the district identified core values? If so, do these values inform your daily work as a principal? Do the district core values inform the daily work of teachers? If so, what does that look like?
17. Has Standmore identified core values as a school that guide the work and inform decisions? If so, what does this look like? Can you provide an example?

### **Building Capacity:**

18. Is trust included as a value in your school? How is it promoted by leaders and staff?
19. Who other than you among you takes the lead on implementing expectations? In what way?
20. How much time is dedicated to PD? Who leads PD?
  - a. Is it differentiated to address all levels of readiness?
21. Aside from providing professional development for implementing new practices, how do you generate a sense of responsibility among staff for student learning?
22. How do you know when a teacher is the right fit for your school? How do you address those who are no longer a fit?
23. Please describe how instructional time is protected. Can you think of and list ways you mitigate interruptions to instructional activities?

### **Equity/Race:**

24. As a district, do you ever engaged in conversations about race? Can you share an example? What have you learned from these conversations?
25. As a school, have you ever engaged in conversations about race? Can you share an example? What have you learned from these conversations?
26. One definition of equity is ensuring that every student receives the resources needed to support their academic achievement on a daily basis. At Standmore, has there ever been a program to improve academic outcomes for a particular racial group? For example, some districts may have programs to improve outcomes for Black and Latino males or Latina females who are English Language Learners. Has a program like this ever existed in your district? Can you explain what this program is/was and what was/were the goals? Please describe the program. What was the focus? What

were the goals/focus and the reasons it was created?

27. How have you built school policies to support this population of students? What has been the response? Have you communicated your expectations for serving these students?
28. Was there ever a time when there was pushback from a stakeholder group (teachers, parents, students, school committee or central office or the community) regarding a certain program or policy designed to improved outcomes for a racial group? What was the central issue they disagreed with?
29. What was your response? How did you see the issue? How did your address the concerns?
30. How did you resolve the issue? What was the conclusion?

## Appendix E

### Open Ended Interview Protocol for School Level Personnel – B

#### *Question / Domain Alignment Key*

<b>BQ</b> = Background Question	<b>SO</b> = Supportive organization - Domain 3
<b>OQ</b> = Overarching Question	<b>HQ</b> = High quality instruction - Domain 4
<b>V</b> = Vision - Domain 1	<b>EP</b> = External partners - Domain 5
<b>BC</b> = Building capacity - Domain 2	

#### **Background Questions:**

1. What is your position? How did you come to be in this role? (BQ)
  - a. What motivates you to do this work?
2. Why do you think your school successful? (BQ)
3. What are the most important things your principal does (you do) to support student learning? (BQ, SO, HQ)

#### **Specific Questions:**

4. Talk about the district's and school's mission and vision and how they relate to your student achievement goals? How do your school's values and informal belief systems support the mission? (V, SO)
5. How would you describe the beliefs and values that drive and shape the work of your school?  
Probes: How do you communicate these values? How do these relate to the mission and vision of the school/district? (SO)
6. (Principal) How do you communicate student achievement goals?  
(Teachers) How are student achievement goals communicated and evaluated?  
Probe: Can you provide specific examples? (V, SO)

7. What resources do you have that are most useful to your work with the children?  
Probes: Professional development, teaching supports? Are there other resources you want but you are not getting? (SO)
8. What are the specific challenges of your school as you think about moving it forward? What are the specific strengths and how do you work with those strengths? (SO)
9. Can you tell us how you hold all students to the same standards? (SO)
10. How are important decisions made in your school and what challenges do you face when making important decisions? (SO, EP, BC)
  - a. Do you have a recent example of a decision and how you were included or not in that decision? (SO)
11. Do you feel that your opinion is valued in the school's decision making process? How have you contributed to decisions made by school or district leadership? (SO)

**A high-quality learning experience is said to make the difference in student achievement, with that in mind, please consider the following questions (HQ):**

12. How important is safety and orderliness to this school community?  
(Principal/Teachers)  
Why do you say that?
  - a. How are expectations around safety and orderliness conveyed to the school community?
  - b. What are examples of policies or practices that promote safety and orderliness?
13. How important is it for the school environment to reflect students' backgrounds?  
(Principal/Teachers) (HQ)
  - a. What are some ways that the school environment reflects students' backgrounds?
  - b. How are students involved in creating a school environment that reflects their backgrounds?
14. How is the curricular program developed and monitored at this school?  
(Principal/Teachers)
  - a. How involved are teachers in developing the school's curricular program?
    - i. Please talk about ways that teachers are involved in developing the curricular program.
  - b. How much time do you spend on monitoring the school's curricular program?
    - i. What do you do to monitor the curricular program?
15. How is instruction developed and monitored at this school? (Principal/Teachers)
  - a. Please talk about how instruction is developed and monitored at this school.
    - i. Are their specific expectations for instruction?



- ii. How are the expectations to conveyed to classroom personnel?
  - b. How much time is spent monitoring instruction at this school?
    - i. Who monitors instruction?
16. How is assessment developed and monitored in this school?
- a. Please talk about how assessment is developed and monitored?
  - b. How are teachers involved in the development of assessments?
  - c. How are assessments used to provide a high-quality student experience?
17. What do you consider to be a high-quality learning experience for students?
- (For teachers) How does your administration support teachers in creating these experience for students (SO)?

## Appendix F

### Open Ended Interview Protocol for District Level Personnel

#### *Question / Domain Alignment Key*

<b>BQ</b> = Background Question	<b>SO</b> = Supportive Organization - Domain 3
<b>OQ</b> = Overarching Question	<b>HQ</b> = High quality instruction - Domain 4
<b>V</b> = Vision - Domain 1	<b>EP</b> = External partners - Domain 5
<b>BC</b> = Building capacity - Domain 2	<b>CRT</b> = Critical Race Theory in education

#### **Background Questions:**

1. Can you tell us what your current role is and what brought you to this position?
  - a. What motivates you to do this work?

#### **Academic Achievement:**

2. Why do you believe Standmore is successful?
3. Why do you believe Standmore is able to be effective with the same population of students and other level 3 or level 4 schools, in this district, serving the same student population, are not as successful?
4. Based on your experience, what leadership practices seem key to creating a level 1 school?

#### **Building Mission/Vision:**

5. We were able to review the district mission statement on your website. What do you believe is the essence of Evergreen's mission statement? (Why does the organization exist?)
6. A vision specifically calls out how to achieve the mission. It can also be the shared purpose or mutual understandings that drive the practices of members of the organization. What do you believe is the vision of Evergreen? (Note: It clarifies what the organization will focus on. The goals. Specific practices in order to achieve the mission - Ex. what will WPS do to improve academic achievement - mission).

7. Districts sometimes engage stakeholders in the creation of the vision or shared purpose for how to achieve the mission? How was the vision crafted? (Was this done collaboratively?)

### **Communicating and Implementing Vision:**

8. How is the vision (shared purpose/mutual understanding/shared practices) communicated to school leaders? When? How often?
9. How is the vision communicated to other stakeholders? When? How often?
10. Would you say there are goals linked to the mission and vision? How were they developed? Who had a hand in shaping them?
  - a. How does the principal at Standmore communicate and drive those goals with her staff?
11. Does the mission/vision inform instructional priorities? If so, how were these identified and how were they communicated to principals and teachers?
  - a. How does the principal coordinate, lead, and/or deliver professional learning to her staff on a whole school level and individual level?
12. Does the mission/vision change what people do on a daily basis? If so, can you provide an example? What behaviors do you observe within the district/schools that are consistent with the goals, instructional priorities and core values?
13. How do you build support, enthusiasm or buy-in? How do you motivate others to stay true to the mission/vision?
14. Core values are sometimes used to guide the work and inform decisions. Has the district identified core values? If so, so these values inform the daily work of district leaders, school leaders and teachers. If so, what does that look like?

### **Equity/Race:**

15. As a district, do you ever engage in conversations about race? Can you share an example? What have you learned from these conversations?
16. One definition of equity is ensuring that every student receives the resources needed to support their academic achievement on a daily basis. Has there ever been a program to improve academic outcomes for a particular racial group? For example, some districts may have programs to improve outcomes for Black and Latino males or Latina females who are English Language Learners. Has a program like this ever existed in your district? Can you explain what this program is/was and what was/were the goals? Please describe the program. What was the focus? What were

the goals/focus and the reasons it was created?

17. How have you built district policies to support this population of students? What has been the response? Have you communicated your expectations for serving these students?
18. Was there ever a time when there was pushback from a stakeholder group (teachers, principals, parents, students, school committee or community) regarding a certain program or policy designed to improved outcomes for a racial group? What was the central issue they disagreed with?
19. What was your response? How did you see the issue? How did your address the concerns
20. How did you resolve the issue? What was the conclusion?
21. Which district leaders are essential for implementing the district priorities related to the district mission/vision? Can we interview these district leaders?

## Appendix G

### Open Ended Interview Protocol for External Stakeholders

#### *Question / Domain Alignment Key*

<b>BQ</b> = Background Question	<b>SO</b> = Supportive organization - Domain 3
<b>OQ</b> = Overarching Question	<b>HQ</b> = High quality instruction - Domain 4
<b>V</b> = Vision - Domain 1	<b>EP</b> = External partners - Domain 5
<b>BC</b> = Building capacity - Domain 2	

#### **Background Questions:**

1. What is your connection to school X? How long have you been part of the school community?
2. What motivates you to partner with this school community?

#### **Overarching Questions:**

3. Do you agree with the state's assessment that school X is a high performing school? Why or why not?
4. Is there a district mission and vision? Is there a school mission and vision? (V)
5. Was the mission and vision created with input from you or others? (V)
6. How would you describe the beliefs and values of school X? And how are these communicated?
7. Do you feel that your child's teacher gets the resources he/she needs in the classroom? The school? (SO)

#### **Specific Questions:**

8. Are students and families connected to community resources? (EP)
9. Are families and community partners welcomed at the school? If so what is their role?(EP)
10. Do you feel welcome, understood, and respected at the school? (EP)
11. How are decisions made in your school? Do you feel that your input is valued? (SO, EP)

12. Are family and community resources used? (EP)
13. What supports, if any, from the community, including families, do you rely on to support student achievement? If so, how does this occur? (EP)
14. Are families and community partners engaged at the school? (EP)
15. Are students and families connected to community resources? (EP)
16. Is the school or school leadership considered an active member of the community? (EP)
17. Do you feel school's goals are aligned with community needs? (EP)