

Leadership Practices that Affect Student Achievement: Facilitating High-quality Learning Experiences for Students

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BOSTON COLLEGE
Lynch School of Education

Department of
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Professional School Administrator Program (PSAP)

LEADERSHIP PRACTICES THAT AFFECT STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT:
FACILITATING HIGH-QUALITY LEARNING EXPERIENCES FOR STUDENTS

Dissertation in Practice
by

Nicole Gittens

with David M. Ryan, Tara Gohlmann, James M. Reilly and Kris Allison Taylor

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

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Facilitating High-Quality Experiences for Students**

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Nicole Gittens

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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 identified and explored the actions that a principal in a high performing, urban school that served a historically marginalized population took to facilitate high-quality learning experience for students. This study reviewed documents and interviewed school and district level personnel to learn whether or not the school leader engaged in certain practices. The study found that the school leader engaged in many practices that facilitate a high-quality learning experience including monitoring instruction, assessment and curriculum, as well as maintaining a safe and orderly

environment. Recommendations from this study include considering the diversity of students' backgrounds as a source of strength and not something to be ignored.

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for one anothers' areas of growth, showed up, volunteered and kept working until we were done.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Statement of Problem and Purpose.....	1
Context.....	4
Literature Review	6
Conceptual Framework.....	15
Chapter Two.....	24
Research Design and Methodology	24
Study Design	24
Data Analysis.....	36
Chapter Three.....	38
Problem, Purpose and Research Findings.....	38
Characteristics of Principal Leadership for Facilitating High-quality Learning Experiences for Students	40
Research Design and Methodology.....	50
Findings	51
Discussion.....	63
Recommendations	67
Chapter 4.....	69
Group Findings, Discussion, Study Limitations and Implications for Practice.....	69
Group Findings.....	69
Discussion.....	71
Study Limitations	84
Implications for Practice.....	85
Implication for Policy Makers.....	88
Implications for Research.....	89
References.....	91
Appendix A.....	107
<i>Consent Form</i>	
Appendix B.....	110
<i>Interviewees and Roles</i>	

Appendix C	111
<i>Open Ended Interview Protocol for School Level Personnel – A</i>	
Appendix D	114
<i>Open Ended Interview Protocol for Principal - Vision and High Quality Instruction Focus</i>	
Appendix E	118
<i>Open Ended Interview Protocol for School Level Personnel – B</i>	
Appendix F	121
<i>Open Ended Interview Protocol for District Level Personnel</i>	
Appendix G	124
<i>Open Ended Interview Protocol for External Stakeholders</i>	

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

Tables

Table 1.1	Hitt and Tucker’s Unified Framework.....	17
Table 2.1	2017 Student Race and Ethnicity Data.....	28
Table 2.2	2017 Selected Populations Data.....	29
Table 2.3	Four Year Standmore Accountability Levels and Performance...	29
Table 2.4	Alignment of Documents to Codes.....	32
Table 2.5	Interview Respondents.....	34

Figures

Figure 2.1	Research Design Map.....	31
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Chapter One¹

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 can truly achieve (Jager & Denessen, 2015; Milner, 2008). Other conditions that empirical literature links to improving student achievement

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

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 needs² that is out-performing schools with similar demographics within the same district. This phenomenon calls for attention and gives signs of

² 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: 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.

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) 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

Domains or Leadership Practices	Dimension Summary
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 Two³

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 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

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

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 in 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.

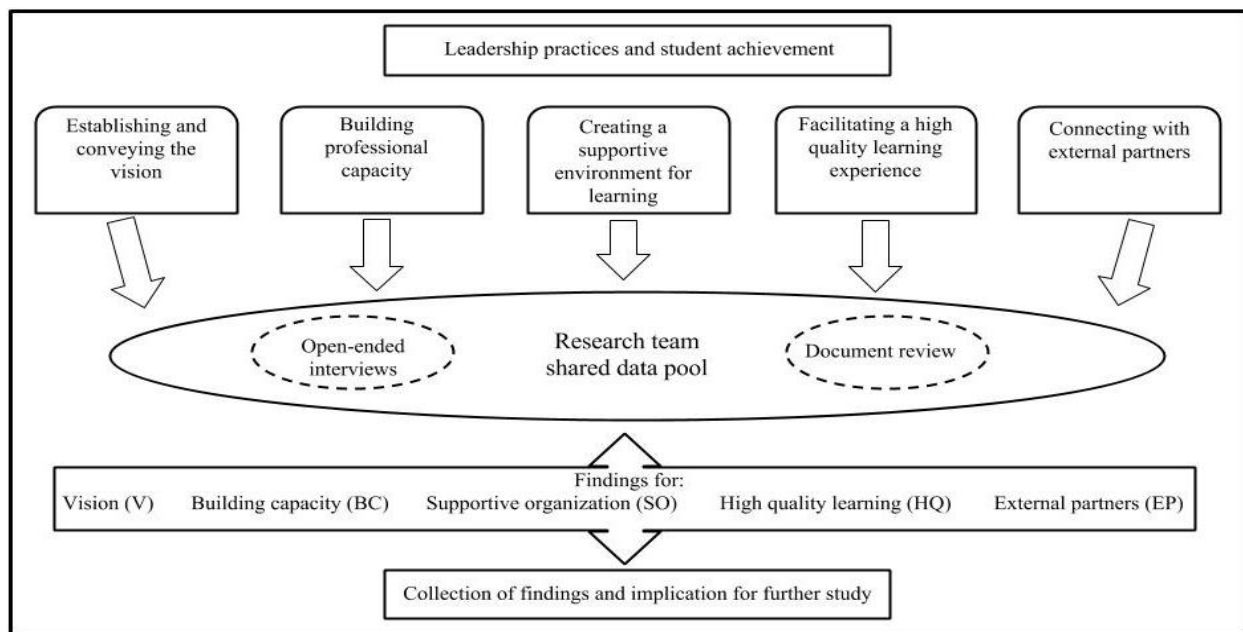


Figure 2.1. Research design map. This figure illustrates the research methods used and their connection to answering the research question.

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	

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 Three⁴

Problem, Purpose and Research Findings

According to data that is found on the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's (DESE) website, there are schools within each large urban district in Massachusetts that are not successful in educating marginalized populations (African-American, Latino, Special Education and English Language Learners). *Needs Improvement* and *Warning/Failing* classifications of school performance in areas of English Language Arts, Mathematics and Science assessments indicate this lack of success. The students in these schools are not growing academically at the same rate as their peers in other schools, nor are they reaching proficiency benchmarks as expected. According to DESE data, even schools experiencing general success are not having success with marginalized populations (MA DESE, n.d.). However, within each of the failing urban districts, there are schools experiencing success with their marginalized populations, according to both growth and proficiency-rate data. This is especially important because there are similar student demographics both in the schools that are effective, and in those failing to serve historically marginalized students.

Because the effectiveness of schools is crucial to student outcomes, it is necessary for both districts and principals to be decisive in the practices in which they engage, so that they can create effective schools for all students within that district. This study used the Unified Framework (Hitt & Tucker, 2016) as the common lens to gauge and understand these practices.

Research shows that “[t]he importance of school leaders and their daily practices...[are] receiving increased attention from policymakers and a host of other entities committed to improvement of PreK-12 education” (Hitt & Tucker, 2016, p. 531). And while Hitt and Tucker's

⁴ This chapter was independently written by Nicole Gittens.

work is a recent contribution to the field, the role of principal leadership on the effectiveness of schools has long been studied (Honig, 2012; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999; Schulte, Slate & Onwuegbuzie, 2010; Waters, Marzano & McNulty, 2003). Researchers have determined that principal characteristics, behaviors and actions have an impact on school effectiveness (Honig, 2012; Leithwood, et al., 1999; Schulte et al., 2010; Waters, Marzano & McNulty, 2003). More importantly, in a summary of 30 years of educational leadership research, Waters et al. (2003) conclude that there are some characteristics or behaviors of principals that are more impactful on the effectiveness of schools than others.

In their systematic review of literature on leadership practices that positively affect student outcomes, Hitt and Tucker (2016) lay out 28 practices in which effective principals engage. Their analysis generated five overarching categories under which the 28 practices are organized. Those categories are as follows: “(a) establishing and conveying the vision, (b) facilitating a high-quality learning experience for students, (c) building professional capacity, (d) creating a supportive organization for learning, and (e) connecting with external partners” (Hitt & Tucker, p. 542). Because Hitt and Tucker’s Unified Framework is fairly new, it is important to note that there is overlap in their findings and that of Waters et al. (2003) more established Balanced Leadership Framework. Namely, Hitt and Tucker as well as Waters et al.’s research have uncovered the importance of: order and safety, focus on curriculum and instruction, outreach to stakeholders, monitoring and evaluating instructional practice and the impact on students, and last but not least, setting a vision in schools that is successful. Despite the findings of the aforementioned researchers and many others, it has been found that most principals do not always engage in the areas that are expected (Blank, 2001). What is also unclear in the literature

is how to put all of these sets of knowledge together in order for school leaders to make the most impactful moves.

Literature on leadership practices in effective schools shows that school leaders engage in very specific practices that create conditions for positive deviation in student outcomes. These positive outcomes for marginalized students that some schools have been able to enjoy lead to the following research question:

Are there specific leadership practices present in a successful urban school that facilitate a high-quality learning experience for students?

Characteristics of Principal Leadership for Facilitating High-quality Learning Experiences for Students

A principal's performance as instructional leader has been found to be impactful on student outcomes, and thus the effectiveness of schools (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999; Hallinger, 2005; Honig, 2012). This study sought to gain understanding of whether conveying a vision, facilitating a high-quality learning experience, building professional capacity, creating an organization that is supportive of learning and connecting with external partners, as identified in Hitt and Tucker's (2016) Unified Framework, come together to positively impact student achievement in an *odds-beating* school. The team investigated and collected data on the practices of the principal as described in the categories set forth by Hitt and Tucker's Unified Framework. This individual study looked at the practices in which a principal engages that are categorized under the theme of *facilitating high-quality learning experiences for students* (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). Practices that Hitt and Tucker claim should be present when principals facilitate high-quality learning environments for students were looked for.

The literature on leadership of successful schools describes the practices of principals that have been found to be impactful in facilitating a high-quality learning experience for students. This literature provides a conceptual framework for this study of school leadership practices in one *odds-beating* school in an otherwise low-performing, urban district in Massachusetts.

School leaders need to set the conditions under which teachers are able to provide high-quality instruction for students (Hitt & Tucker, 2016) and for all stakeholders [to] maintain high standards (Levine, 1990). Principals have to prioritize instructional leadership in order to make sure that the school environment is focused on high-quality instruction (O'Donnell & White, 2005). While research does not show that a principal's direct involvement with instruction has an impact on student outcomes, it is apparent that principals impact students' academic outcomes by creating the conditions in which teachers and students can focus on academics (Hallinger, Bickman & Davis, 1996). As principals lead efforts to create a high-quality learning experience for students, researchers have found that supporting teachers with instructional practice, creating an environment that is conducive to learning, and creating a vision for instructional practice are among the most impactful moves (Heck, 1992; Hallinger, 2005; Grissom & Loeb, 2013; Katterfeld, 2013). Curriculum, scheduling and increased time on learning have a positive impact on student outcomes (Blank, 1987). Therefore, it is important that principals are involved in leading such efforts. Perhaps more importantly, it is necessary to point out that over the years, researchers have found that effective instruction, monitoring of instruction, student progress and increasing time spent focusing on instruction are directly linked to high-quality learning experiences for students (Heck, 1992; Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008; Reardon, 2011; McLeskey, Billingsley & Waldron, 2016).

Principals have influence over program quality through the school climate that they create. In fact, Hallinger, Bickman and Davis (1996) found that “principal[s] can have an indirect effect on school [success] through actions that shape the school’s learning climate” (p. 527). Sebastian and Allensworth (2012) assert that the baseline for quality instruction is instruction that is not interrupted. They find that quality instruction begins when students participate in classes by engaging with content. According to Sebastian and Allensworth, whether these interruptions are caused by school activities, announcements or student disruptions, they must be minimized. Further, Robinson et al. (2008) found that principals allow teachers the opportunity to focus on academics by protecting them from “undue pressure from educational officials and parents” (p. 664). Sebastian and Allensworth also found that when principals set the tone for the school-learning climate, student outcomes increase. They further state that “a strong learning climate in the school seems to be the most important way in which [principals] influence the average quality of instruction in the school” (p. 643).

Leaders of effective schools increase student outcomes through specific practices that create a learning-centered environment. Reardon (2011) found that the core components of learning-centered leadership showed that rigorous curriculum and quality instruction correlated to increased standardized testing scores. Specifically, in his study, Reardon found that the “increases for ‘rigorous curriculum’ and ‘performance accountability’ had noteworthy results” (p.75). Overall, “learning-centered leadership...enhances the prediction of student outcomes” (Reardon, p.80). The potential for increasing student outcomes is a direct result of principals being intentional about those aforementioned core components. The Unified Framework showed the same correlation to high standards for student learning.

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 (5) developing and monitoring the assessment program (pp. 556-558). The following sections will discuss the five areas that Hitt and Tucker (2016) maintain are most important for facilitating a high-quality learning experience for students.

Maintaining Safety and Orderliness. Hitt and Tucker state 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” (p. 556). Instilling safety and orderliness is not just setting arbitrary rules in place without considering the needs and challenges of students who attend the school. In their study of an urban school, Templeton and Johnson (1997) found that teachers who implemented strict classroom policies without considering the challenges students faced, experienced more resistance from students. They also learned that those teachers who had policies that expected students to behave responsibly but whose policies were not punitive made students experience more connection and greater gains in the classroom. Those teachers focused on both orderliness and psychological safety of their students. In the same research, Templeton and Johnson found that teachers needed support in learning how to work with more challenging populations. They found that as school leaders expected teachers to change the way they responded to students' behavior, teachers became resistant to providing the needed support to students, and this caused a “cycle of anger and aggressiveness between both students and teachers” (p. 45). Templeton and Johnson further found that those teachers who had the most positive teacher-student relationships were those who

“had the skill of not judging students based on their inappropriate behavior” (p. 46). Those teachers also did not take student “behavior personally but look[ed] beyond the behavior to try to find ways to help the child” (p. 46).

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, p. 274). 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 (which will be discussed in the *Personalizing the Environment to Reflect Students’ Backgrounds* section below). A caring student-teacher relationship is characterized by students not having to fight stereotype threat or low expectations and by students believing that teachers of the same ethnic make-up as them understand them personally. Students are also able to point to “authentic and aesthetic types of caring relationships” (Antrop-Gonzalez, 2006, p. 287). Students indicated that teachers cared for them beyond the academic setting showed authentic care, such as spending time on out-of-school outings that kept students from getting involved in gang activity. Students also suggested that teachers’ willingness to be humble and to learn alongside them showed authentic care. Anthrop-Gonzalez described aesthetic care as the kind of care that a teacher shows a student by expecting more of the student academically and providing students the support that they need in order to reach those academic expectations. Specifically, students pointed to aesthetic care when they saw that teachers held them to higher academic expectations, as well as provided them more opportunities for academic improvement (p. 287 – 288).

Antrop-Gonzalez (2006) also posited that schools that promoted safety had rules that minimized outside violent influences, such as gang-activity, so that students not only felt safe,

but trusted that their teachers were aware of what was happening in their neighborhoods. This had a positive impact on student outcomes. Beyond safety from violence, Gu, Sammons and Mehta (2008) found that having orderly and secure working environments allowed for teachers to feel that the school was moving in the right direction. Specifically, teachers felt a positive change was related to “reduced absenteeism and tardiness and an increase in motivation for learning among students” (p. 53) because of policies that were implemented.

Finally, and also important, Robinson et al. (2008) found that in higher performing schools “an orderly and supportive environment is...one in which staff conflict is quickly and effectively addressed” (p. 664). A principal who is skilled in [staff] conflict resolution is “strongly associated with student achievement” (p. 664).

Personalizing the environment to reflect students’ backgrounds. 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. They go on to say that “[e]ffective leaders assist teachers in identifying the diverse types of social and intellectual capital students bring with them to school” (p. 556). 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). Schulte et al. (2010) found that even more important than providing personally engaging opportunities for students, having a staff that reflects student demographics had a positive impact on student outcomes. They found that there was a positive correlation between the attributes of the gender of a school leader and the connections of both male and female students to that school leader as related to gender. Specifically, male students had positive connections with male school leaders and females had positive connections with female school

leaders. Additionally, Schulte et al. found that the ethnicity of a school leader and teachers played an important role in the outcomes of African-American and Hispanic students.

Antrop-Gonzalez (2006) found in his research 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 and provided them with more academic “chances”. Antrop-Gonzalez found schools that had success with marginalized students had formal curriculum including courses in African-American and Latino history and literature. He also found that U. S. History teachers took care to include works similar to Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States* and “specifically addressed African-American and Mexican historical issues” (p. 285). Students in those schools talked about the importance of “racial/ethnic affirmation” even if that affirmation presented an “alternative historical perspective” (p. 292) that did not show the United States in a positive light.

Developing and monitoring the curricular program. Hitt and Tucker (2016) state that “[e]ffective leaders focus efforts on the curricular program by requiring rigor and high expectations for all students” (p. 557). Specifically, Robinson, Lloyd and Rowe (2008) assert that leaders who monitor the curricular program come to consensus around curricular goals with their teaching staff. Robinson et al. believe that in addition to having high expectations for students and building consensus on the curricular program, instructional leaders communicate and monitor learning goals, align resource selection and allocation to priority teaching goals, and have direct oversight of school-wide curricular program. They also found that those school leaders who engaged in instructional leadership practices “[had the greatest] predictor of intellectual quality of student work in both math and social studies” (p. 658). Finally, Robinson

et al. (2008) found that those leaders of higher performing schools were more directly involved in coordinating the curriculum across year levels...includ[ing] such activities as developing progressions of teaching objectives” (p. 663).

Goldring, Huff, Spillane & Barnes (2009) found that once there is agreement on the curricular program, school leaders must also monitor that the agreed upon curriculum is being implemented. They go on further to say, “[procedural and declarative knowledge] is critical for school principals to practice [in order to] enable instructional improvement” (p. 219). Houtveen and van de Grift (2007) found that teachers in a particular school who implemented a regimented reading curriculum experienced better student outcomes than those teachers who did not implement the curriculum. They also found that those curricula that supported teachers in providing opportunities for students to demonstrate skills, promote mastery of skills, “give students increasing self-responsibility during the learning process” (p. 187), and allow students to “discuss ideas and insights” (p. 187) allowed for greater student academic gains.

Developing and monitoring the instructional program. Hitt and Tucker (2016) claim that [e]ffective leaders emphasize the instructional program through...devoting a large portion of time to...advancing teaching” (p. 558). Because most education reform has focused on the principal as instructional leader, the bulk of the principals’ work should rest in that arena (Hallinger, 2005). Instructional management, internal relations, organization management, administration and external relations are among the most important aspects of a principal’s job (Grissom & Loeb, 2011). Researchers have found that *odds-beating schools* have principals who are instructional leaders (Hallinger et al., 1996; Borko et al., 2003; Robinson et al., 2008). As mentioned in the previous section, instructional leaders must monitor the curricular program and be purposeful about material that is part of the formal curriculum. They must also be aware of

and research new approaches and bring those into the school (Gulcan, 2012). Gulcan also found that “teachers expect principals to assess lessons, design the school program and select materials for instruction” (p. 632). Robinson et al. (2008) found that impactful instructional leaders have “[d]irect oversight of curriculum through school-wide coordination across class...levels [that is] align[ed] to school goals” (p. 656). In order to create a learning environment that supports student achievement, school leaders need to have knowledge of instructional practices. According to Hallinger, et al. (1996), principals in higher performing schools “exercised more active instructional leadership” (p. 542). Additionally, they assert that teachers who perceive their principals to be strong instructional leaders are able to promote student achievement through their influence of the school-wide climate (Hallinger et al., 1996).

Gu et al. (2008) found that impactful principals created opportunities for teachers to collaborate around improving practice. In addition to providing opportunities for teachers to collaborate, O'Donnell and White (2005) found that teachers expected to “receive instructional expertise from principals” (p. 67). Those principals who were perceived to be able to provide instructional expertise to their teachers found increased student achievement. Principals who focus on instruction had such an impact that Heck (1992) recommended that policies that dictate how much time principals spend on instruction should be created. Heck also made the connection between positive student outcomes and quality of feedback that is provided to teachers. Katterfeld (2013) reported, “when the principal shows greater leadership of instruction...[there are] greater expectations for instruction [that is] aligned with...initiatives” (p. 353).

Developing and monitoring the assessment program. Hitt and Tucker (2016) found “leaders regard assessment as pivotal to the measurement of student progress” (p. 558).

Principals need 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 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. Additionally, Gu et al. (2008) found that those school leaders that had the greatest impact on students' outcomes monitor department or subject performance as well as set targets for improvement. Gu et al. also emphasize that those principals who were most successful set targets that are based on high standards. In working to meet those targets, students are regularly assessed and lesson plans are regularly discussed and monitored.

McLeskey et al. (2016) assert that schools should develop “authentic data system[s] to monitor student progress” (p. 65) and that data should be used to “focus on the needs of students and to “celebrate successes” (p. 65). Additionally, McLeskey et al. found that assessment data is best used to “have productive conversations with teachers, monitor groups of students, [and to] ensure high expectations for all students” (p. 65). Hoppey and McLeskey (2013) found that in order for assessment data to be useful, school leaders need to build in time to support teachers in learning how to make sense of data. Finally, in their 2006 report, Murphy, et al. found that useful assessment programs are comprehensive, formal and informal, and include student work products and standardized measures of progress (p. 15).

In the school that was studied, formal student assessment data is what determines the school's success and state classification. The school's MCAS data has separated the school from its underperforming peers. One goal of this research study was to learn if the school leader

believes that “assessment is pivotal to the measure of student success” (Hitt & Tucker, 2016, p. 558) and if the data that was derived from assessment is used to “make programmatic adjustments” (Hitt & Tucker, 2016, p. 558)

Research Design and Methodology

The group research study in which this study is incorporated is described in Chapters One and Two. This study included both school level and district level document reviews. It also included both district level and school level personnel interviews. School level personnel included administrators, service providers and classroom teachers. This slice of the study included the interview of Standmore’s principal, assistant principal, instructional coach, as well as four classroom teachers. Specifically, the study included questions that focused on the five aforementioned areas that, according to Hitt and Tucker (2016), facilitate a high-quality learning experience for students.

Data Collection. As described in Chapter Two, data collection included a document review of publicly available documents at the school, district and state levels. For this individual study, there were opened-ended interviews of aforementioned school-level personnel. Specific questions for the open-ended interviews can be found in Appendix E.

Data Analysis. The data analysis began by categorizing documents and interviews into the areas that corresponded with *Facilitating High Quality Learning Experiences for Students* (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). Those categories were added to an online data analysis tool and parts of interviews were added to the appropriate categories. That information was then downloaded into a spreadsheet where the data was further sorted and cross-referenced to look for patterns.

Findings

Maintaining safety and orderliness. The study at the Standmore School confirmed that Standmore had routines and expectations that supported maintaining safety and orderliness. Before the current principal, Aron, started at Standmore, the school was underperforming according to DESE measures. All of the school-based staff talked about a sense of safety and orderliness in one way or another as one of the positive aspects of the school. In particular, Jesse who was at the school prior to Aron becoming the principal, stated,

Structure is huge, and I would say that is one of the bigger things that Aron 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. Building community within our classrooms, showing each other respect. That was very big for Aron when she came into our building, which I thought was great.

In addition to rituals and routines that took place within the classroom at Standmore, students assembled on the school playground at the start of each morning. It was during this time that students met their teachers, lined up, said the Pledge of Allegiance and recited the daily mantra *The 5 B's* (Be Safe, Be Here On Time, Be Ready to Learn, Be Responsible, Be Respectful) and their college pledge, “People, people can’t you see education is for me. People, people don’t you know college is the way to go.” At least six staff members stated this daily ritual was an important part of the school community and helped to set the tone of the day (Jesse, Lee, Aron, Blake, Jamie, Chris).

There were also clear systems and policies in place that staff attributed to the orderliness of Standmore. Seven staff members (Jesse, Sage, Lee, Aron, Casey, Jamie, Cody) referred to the

presence of discipline—not in a punitive sense, but in a sense that “everyone, [both students and staff] knew the policies and what was expected of them. [They believed] this enabled classrooms to be a place of learning.” In addition to orderliness and safety of the building as a whole, many staff members talked about student and staff scheduling as a high priority at Standmore. Staff members talked about the importance of being able to be flexible so that students’ needs were the priority in scheduling classes and instructional time. However, one staff member saw scheduling expectations as another way to provide orderliness for students, “...you have your bell work or *To Do First* work on the board and [students] know exactly what's expected” (Sage).

Personalizing the environment to reflect students’ backgrounds. In addition to creating an orderly environment, Standmore staff and faculty worked to build an environment that was welcoming to families (who they see as partners in the work of educating children). Upon entering Standmore, one saw a welcome sign that displayed “welcome” in several world languages. When asked about whether or not their school reflected student diversity, three of the teachers who were interviewed did not seem to know how to answer the question. When asked more specifically if they had classroom materials and literature that depicted racial or ethnic diversity, all three said that they did have such materials in their classrooms (Jesse, Sage, Casey). While teachers stated that there were materials in the classroom that reflected diversity, staff was also very proud of the fact that they did not see students differently because they are all “poor” and that is what the staff focused on. At Standmore, they did not celebrate racial or ethnic diversity. Also, all staff members at Standmore were white, with the exception of two staff members who provided direct services to students even though Standmore’s student population was overwhelmingly black and brown. The findings did not show that there were any specific efforts at Standmore to recruit staff that reflected the racial and/or ethnic makeup of their

students. The staff also prided itself on making “parents feel comfortable and welcome in the school” as a way of being accepting of student backgrounds (Jesse, Casey, Cody). Generally the staff felt that personalizing the school environment to reflect students’ backgrounds was akin to celebrating heritage. Many interviewees referred to cultural celebrations, but this one response from the assistant principal, Lee, sums up the general sentiment of the staff:

I think that [students] see themselves more alike than they do different. Especially because they're young guys. No one's saying, "You're black," or, "You're Puerto Rican," they're all kind of at the same level. Most of our families are low income and no one kid stands out more than another. They all kind of look alike because they're all just low socio-economic status. We don't celebrate anything. Not Christmas or Hanukkah. The directive from the district is to "celebrate everything or don't celebrate anything." And we're just so busy, we don't really have the time. We do, however, celebrate student of the month.

This response along with the fear of addressing race and ethnicity because of the “current political climate of this country” was the reason that many staff members felt that it was good for them not to acknowledge students’ race and ethnicity. One staff member (Jordan) at the school and one member (Charlie) of central office talked about the ways that student background is viewed as important to the learning process. Sage spoke of district professional development about the importance of recognizing that students may not have background knowledge of some things that teachers may assume they know, and that should not be a sign of lack of intelligence. Kit talked about working with organizations in the community who serve both African-Americans and Latinos to help develop the district’s strategic plan.

Developing and monitoring the curricular program. Consistency in curricular programming for each grade level is viewed as important for the teachers at Standmore. With that in mind, teachers discussed that over the past several years, they have used curriculum as a resource and are free to do what they need to in order to make sure that students are meeting academic standards (Jesse, Casey, Jamie, Blake, Chris). Teachers stated that they felt that the principal trusted them to create curriculum. Jesse said,

Our principal trusts that we are good teachers and we have our PLC [Professional Learning Communities] meetings every Friday, 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" and she will allow us make the necessary adjustments.

In the interviews, all teachers with the exception of Casey, talked about the new math program that the district invested in and the mandate to follow the curriculum "to the letter" as being the wrong way to go for their student population. Teachers overwhelmingly felt that the math program did not address the needs of students and is more complicated than it is useful. Casey, who had a somewhat positive experience with the math program said,

I can definitely see things I love about it, some things that I'm not so happy about but I'm following it because that's what they want me to do, but I'm already hitting things I'm concerned about. Why are we teaching this before we teach that? It doesn't make sense to me but okay and there's some things I love.

While teachers felt that the principal would allow them to make the necessary adjustments to the math curriculum, when speaking to the principal, she stated that she expected teachers to use the math curriculum as designed so that the district could get a true sense of how well the program actually works. It is unclear if teachers thought the principal was open to them making adjustments because that had been a common practice in the past that would not apply to the current math program.

Aron talked about the district reacting to student data and implementing programs without warning. She stated,

Envisions Math came on quick. We did not know it was coming; it was kind of like jump in. We jumped into Envisions. There was district-wide training provided for teachers with Envisions, but I do not really think it was all that impactful.

The principal also stated that the weekly PLC meetings are used to

look at curriculum, and the standards and to figure out where students are, and where teachers need to go. We look to determine where students and teachers were successful, and where do teachers need work to improve student outcomes.

Aron believes that the PLC format provides structure for that kind of work, and it also conveys to the staff that this is important and that [administrators] are not going away.

Jesse, the kindergarten teacher said the following when asked about how the curricular program is monitored at Standmore,

If [the curriculum is] not working for our individual children, Aron will say, "I don't want you to do that. I want you to do what's going to work for your classroom, because we need to see growth". So, if a program is working wonderfully, then we are going to keep doing it. But, if it's not working than we are going to use it as a resource, and we are going to follow the common core, and we are going to follow our scope and sequence and we are going to move the students that way.

Jesse "loves curriculum development," so Aron's approach of "do what works for students" is an approach that works for her. On the other hand, Jesse spoke of teachers who wanted a very scripted program that would tell them what to do day in and day out. She also said that those same teachers struggled with creating and implementing curriculum and ultimately blame the program when students are not successful. Jesse said that those teachers would say, "Well I can't use the book because it's not working for the class, now what am I going to do?"

Lee, the assistant principal, talked about the guided reading program that is used at Standmore as being a great program and that the school had received all new materials to implement the program. She also said that reading and math were the programs that were supported by the district and the school and that for content areas like writing and social studies, teachers were on their own to figure out what to do and how to teach those subject areas. Lee also said that even though the district provided curriculum for math and reading, those curricula still do not meet the needs of all students or classrooms and that teachers still had to "dig in a little" to meet the needs of all students.

Finally, Aron and Lee both talked about the implementation of a new district-wide curriculum program that is being started at Standmore, AVID (advancement via individualized

determination). Both Aron and Lee looked forward to using AVID to support students in being organized. Aron stated,

We are starting with the basics [of AVID] where everybody has a binder, and folders, and homework expectations, and an agenda. Students will learn how to use the agenda better, and make it interactive. As part of the AVID program, parents are required to sign that their child's homework is complete and that is another way to get parents involved with their children and the school.

Developing and monitoring the instructional program. Standmore staff and faculty believed that it was important to be strategic in how they provided instruction to all students. The study showed that the principal at Standmore provided opportunities for teachers to meet weekly in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to consult with one another to improve student outcomes. During PLCs, teachers presented the challenges that they were having in supporting students in meeting academic targets. Teachers at Standmore were also expected to implement the mandated math curriculum in which the district recently invested. However, teachers were encouraged by the principal to make adjustments to the curriculum to meet the academic needs of their students. Additionally the PLCs created opportunities for teachers to check in with one another, and in effect, hold one another accountable for staying on pace with curriculum. Finally, the study found that teachers taught the same content at each grade level so that all students had a consistent experience by grade level. To insure that the curricular program was implemented as expected, the principal and other evaluators at Standmore spent time both formally and informally observing teachers. Teachers had to make lesson plans available at administrators' requests. The study's findings also indicated that the one instructional coach in the school

supported teachers in improving and implementing instructional practices. The instructional coach, Jordan, reported—as did teachers (Jesse, Blake, Casey) and administrators (Aron and Lee)—that she supported teachers by helping them look at data, and plan instruction and academic interventions. Jordan also modeled instruction for teachers and attended district level meetings and trainings so that she could learn new instructional practices and share those practices with classroom teachers. Aron also had Jordan lead faculty meetings in order to share instructional practices and to support teachers in using assessment data to plan to support students in meeting academic goals. When struggling to help students to meet academic goals, Jesse said that the instructional coach would ask, “have you tried A, B, or C with that student?” And Jesse’s response might be, “I didn’t. I am going to go back to my classroom and I am going to try that and I am going to come back next week and show you whether or not that worked.” Jesse also said that the instructional coach was “somebody that was willing to come in and model for teachers how to do an effective lesson and how to differentiate.” When Aron came into Standmore, she expected all teachers to have morning meeting in their classes to build community within the classroom. Blake said the when this expectation was implemented, Jordan modeled how to run morning meeting for all teachers by running a segment of the faculty meeting in a morning meeting format.

The teachers at Standmore discussed being observed regularly by both the principal and assistant principal. The principal also discussed the importance of frequent informal observations “to keep people on their toes”. She also talked about the importance of her not having a consistent routine so that neither teachers nor students could predict when she would show up to their classrooms. All teachers who were interviewed talked about the use of data to adjust their

instructional practice. They also talked about the structure of PLCs as being integral to their instructional practice and keeping them accountable to one another.

Beyond the principal and assistant principal observations, teachers felt very connected to their instructional coach. All of the teachers talked about how much they trusted their instructional coach, Jordan. When our study began, Jordan was on maternity leave. Each interviewee, including the principal and assistant principal could not wait for her return to work. They talked about being able to trust and depend on Jordan to support them with their instructional practice. Teachers described Jordan as “[being] willing to come in and model for teachers how to do an effective lesson, how to differentiate as far as not doing whole group [instruction] all the time, and how to make [instruction] more differentiated.”

Developing and monitoring the assessment program. At Standmore, curriculum and instruction is also monitored through student assessments. The study found that at Standmore, teachers used standardized assessments to measure student progress. According to Aron, all teachers were expected to use benchmark and common assessments for math and reading. Teachers also had data meetings during PLCs to monitor student progress and all teachers set goals for student achievement using the assessments mentioned above. Those goals that were set for students individually, and included all students making one or more years progress each school year. All teachers and administrators at Standmore expressed student goals as those goals that were made formally and were part of the teacher evaluation. Those goals that are part of the teacher evaluation are more general and apply to overall grade-level achievement. Jesse said this when thinking about how to set goals for students:

If [students] are below, we want to close the gap and make more than a year’s growth; those students have to catch up, so that is how we write the

goals. So, 100% of my kids in green (students on grade level) are going to make a year's worth of growth. Eighty percent, or some acceptable percentage of my red (significantly below grade level) and yellow (below grade level) kids will make more than a year's growth to close the gap in reading.

Teachers and administrators (Jesse, Blake, Casey, Lee, Aron) also talked about having to be flexible because both student and teacher schedules change regularly based on assessment data. The principal went further to say that, "the biggest job that [teachers] have is in kindergarten and first grade, or second grade, and even third grade—is making sure that we're getting [students] to the benchmark by the end of the school year". Lee gave an example of students being rescheduled as soon as they met their academic goal. She said,

If a student is [reading at level I], they are no longer in the H group. They need to get moving. For teachers it is a lot because the kids have those pretty little folders with stickers and everything is already planned for them. Sometimes teachers don't want the students to move, but we always remind them of the positive by reminding the teachers that they did their job and got the kid above the reading level.

To assess reading levels, Standmore teachers used Foundations (a phonics program), which requires that students be assessed every six weeks to monitor their progress on reading and comprehension.

Sage, the special education teacher, shared that she used assessments every month to make adjustments to her instruction and to support students on her caseload. She went on to say,

I'm always checking in to see where are they now, what is their grade level? If they came in at a B, where are they now, are they C, are they D? I ask myself what it is that I'm noticing is missing for the student. Then I'll go back and adjust what I'm doing to try to focus on comprehension or decoding of certain things, or whatever they can't do; then I'll focus more on that. I basically use what I see in my small group, then I'll also look at them and see that they're self-correcting; I'll see that they're using strategies that I taught them—that's how I assess my students.

Goal setting and additional findings. While researchers (Hallinger, 2005; Hallinger et al. 1996; Heck, 1992) found that goal setting by principals leads to student achievement, Hitt and Tucker's framework, does not address goal setting. Nonetheless, goal setting became a theme in the study's findings at Standmore. At Standmore, goals were driving teachers to support students in meeting academic expectations. Teachers at Standmore referred to goals that were as overarching as setting goals for state testing to as detailed as setting individual goals for student progress. When discussing goals in the broad sense, the staff spoke of goals as technicalities. Jamie said that she set goals based on the state assessment,

I write my goal for more or less the [state assessment] because it will tell me what areas they were weak in, so I just use that to set my goal for the spring.

Another teacher spoke of the support she gets in PLC. In an effort to help students meet benchmark goals, her colleagues will ask, "Have you tried A, B, or C?" If she hasn't, she reported,

I go back to my room and try those recommendations, go back to PLC the following week and show my colleagues whether or not their recommendations worked, and if they did not work, maybe there is something deeper going on with the student and we may need to implement a student support plan (SSP) and actually have a meeting and develop goals just for that one student.

At Standmore, an SSP involved a team of teachers meeting with a student's parents to set academic goals for the student and to let parents know the concerns that the team is seeing with the student. SSPs were done prior to referring a student for special education services. Because the study did not look at goal setting specifically, a next area of research for Standmore and Evergreen may be to learn more about how goal setting impacted the work that teachers do in connection to facilitating a high-quality learning experience for students.

Given the data that the study reviewed, the study's findings indicated that at this one particular successful school, the leadership practices that were in place were facilitating a high-quality learning experience for students. Of the staff members that were interviewed, there was overall agreement that the principal did focus on four of the five leadership practices as described by Hitt and Tucker (2016) that allows or compels teachers to facilitate a high-quality learning experience for students. The one indicator that the school leader at Standmore did not focus on was personalizing the school environment to reflect students' backgrounds. There were no specific efforts to leverage students' backgrounds from an asset-based standpoint. More specifically it appeared that the school leader as well as the teachers looked at students' backgrounds as something that the school helps the students to survive in spite of. In referring to students' backgrounds, Jesse said,

You give them what they need, and you move on. Because, they are here to learn, and I feel that is something that you know, in the past, we started started giving a lot of excuses or taking their background too much into consideration.

And while not seeing students' backgrounds as an asset (Taylor, 2018), the school leader and teachers at Standmore felt it was important to teach students no matter what their home conditions (Gohlman, 2018). The following statement from Jesse sums up the overall sentiment of the Standmore community,

Under the previous principal who was more old school, you would hear teachers say, "Oh poor Sally. She's this, she's that. Have her come sit in the office and be pitied." But, the reality was no, she needs to be in her classroom receiving instruction because that is why she is here right now.

Hitt and Tucker's (2016) framework indicates that in order for students to have a high-quality learning experience, school leaders should work to personalize the school environment to reflect students' backgrounds. Despite the school not having a staff or any traditions that reflected the backgrounds of the students at Standmore, staff were still able to make great gains with their students. However, the school might be more successful if the staff were intentional about making sure that the school community reflected the backgrounds of the student population.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to learn if the principal of a successful school in an underperforming, urban district engaged in certain practices that facilitated high-quality learning experiences for students by maintaining safety and orderliness, developing and monitoring the

curriculum and instructional and assessment programs, as well as ensuring that the school reflected student backgrounds. The study used Hitt and Tucker's (2016) Unified Framework as a lens through which to look at the principal's practice as it was connected to facilitating high-quality learning experiences for students. The study found that the principal of Standmore School engaged in the practices described by Hitt and Tucker with the exception of ensuring that the school reflected student backgrounds. While the practices that the principal at Standmore engaged in likely have created a high-quality learning experience for students, it seemed that the work that she did was because of self-efficacy and not because district leadership demanded those practices of their school leaders.

Prior to Aron joining the school, Standmore was a failing school according to DESE measures. The principal who was at the school before Aron believed that teachers should have the freedom to do what they wanted in the classroom (Jesse). There were no common expectations for curriculum, instruction or assessments. Students were expected to meet teacher standards. If students were unable to meet academic goals, their home life, or lack of parental involvement was blamed. The previous school leader's concern for the current condition of students' lives seemed to take precedence over that of the vision of their future and the impact that education could make on their future.

Maintaining safety and orderliness. At Standmore there is a sense of safety and orderliness that has been found to be important for the academic performance of historically marginalized students (Antrop-Gonzalez, 2006). Teachers at Standmore were able to speak cohesively about the systems that were in place from the whole school morning meeting to classroom morning meetings to the structure of lessons within each classroom, which were all seen as things that teachers felt added to a sense of order and consistency. Standmore had

implemented a Positive Behavior and Intervention System (PBIS) which helped with the principal's expectation that most discipline be handled within the classroom so that students are not separated from instruction (Aron). The principal expected to spend most of her time in the role of instructional leader and not be tied to her office with discipline issues (Aron). Additionally, the system by which teachers were expected to communicate with parents when students had academic or social challenges added to the environment of safety and orderliness.

Developing and monitoring the curricular program. Robinson et al. (2008) found it to be important for school leaders to build consensus and understanding of curricular goals and expectations with their teaching staff. Standmore's principal monitored the curricular program alongside the teachers. Professional Learning Communities met weekly and were non-negotiable at the school. Teachers knew that Aron would be at all of the PLC meetings which were grade-specific so that they could discuss their concerns and get support from her with implementing curriculum. Because of her participation in PLC meetings, Aron was able to know firsthand the challenges that her teachers faced in implementing curricula. She was also able to help focus the support that teachers received from the instructional coach. Teachers also reported that PLC meetings were used to calibrate practices across each grade level and were a way to help hold them accountable to one another and the goals that had been set (Jesse, Sage, Blake), which according to Robinson et al. (2008), is an important practice in which principals should engage.

Developing and monitoring the instructional program. According to both teachers and administrators (Jesse, Jamie, Chris, Lee, Aron, Jordan) at Standmore, the principal spent considerable time observing and providing feedback on instruction, which according to Hallinger (2005) is where principals who are instructional leaders must spend time. Aron also believed that her random classroom visits helped to create classroom conditions that are favorable for students

because staff members never knew when she would stop by, so they would try to stay at their best. Jesse talked about wanting to be prepared with lesson plans in the event that an administrator made an unannounced visit to their classrooms. In addition to formal and informal observations and feedback provided by administrators, Standmore teachers had access to an instructional coach who supported instruction by providing non-evaluative feedback, modeling instructional practices and developing curricula. Prior to Aron's arrival at the school, the previous principal spent very little time in the classroom and used the evaluation system as a formality and not as a way to build teacher capacity and improve instructional practice (Lee, Jordan, Jesse).

Developing and monitoring the assessment program. PLCs also allowed for teachers to work with one another to monitor student progress and to support each other with recommendations on how to support student progress in an effort to meet goals that have been set both for student progress and for teachers' evaluations. The Standmore principal's practice is in line with Goldring et al. (2009) who found that assessment can be used to create a learning culture that is aimed at student progress. Prior to the current principal, there were no expectations that teachers would use assessment data to build goals for students or for themselves. Assessment data was used to label student ability and not to learn about a student and to build student skills.

Goal setting. The study found at this particular school, goal-setting was also one of the catalysts for student progress. Goal setting was not specifically addressed in the Unified Framework as it relates to facilitating a high-quality learning environment for students, however, it is indicated in the section that is focused on monitoring the assessment program. At Standmore there was a core focus on goal setting—especially as it was connected to the teacher evaluation

process. Aron had created an environment that allowed teachers to monitor student outcomes and progress and expected that teachers set goals for all students which Gu et al. (2008) state is one of the greatest ways for school leaders to impact student outcomes. Teachers were expected to move students forward in their academic journey and to continue to build their academic skill. Teachers were expected to support students in reaching academic goals and if students struggled in meeting those goals, teachers were expected to find out why and try other approaches that would improve student outcomes (Jesse, Jordan, Sage).

Personalizing the environment to reflect students' backgrounds. Having a staff that reflects the demographics of the students can have a positive impact on student outcomes according to Schulte, et al. (2010). With the exception of the student adjustment counselor who identified as Latina and the cafeteria workers who also appeared to be Latino, all staff members at Standmore were white. Additionally, besides the books that teachers said were available to students, and the small welcome sign that read “welcome” in several world languages, there was no apparent attempts to personalize Standmore’s environment to reflect students’ backgrounds. It is important to note that the staff and school leadership felt that not focusing on any students’ backgrounds was a way to promote equity and to value every student’s background (Reilly, 2018).

Recommendations

Data from this study suggest that in order to support underperforming schools with the similar demographics as Standmore, district leaders need to ensure that all school leaders have the capacity to maintain safety and order. The interviewees spoke of both students and staff knowing what is expected of them each day. More importantly, the teachers who previously worked in other schools or who currently shared their time between Standmore and another

school were able to describe a sense of clarity at Standmore that was not felt under other school leaders.

District leaders can further support underperforming schools by ensuring that all school leaders have the capacity to develop and monitor instruction, curriculum and assessment. This includes making sure that school leaders can effectively set up structures and support principals in practices that will allow them the ability to focus on the areas that are most related to student academics. School leaders also need to be empowered to use data to inform decisions, instructional practices, and goal-setting for students.

While Standmore was not completely void of culturally proficient practices, according to Nuri-Robbins, Lindsey, Lindsey and Terrell (2012), it is important that school leaders have the capacity and understanding of the importance of building school communities that reflect the backgrounds of the students who attend the school. District leaders need to both support school leaders in doing this work and commit district resources to ensure that such work is prioritized and sustainable.

Finally and perhaps most importantly, school leaders need to have the capacity to support teachers and teacher teams in goal creation. Goals-setting at Standmore appear to be the basis by which teachers plan instructional, curricular and assessment practices that allow students to make measurable academic gains. Such gains have allowed Standmore to meet the criteria of a successful school according to Massachusetts DESE standards.

Chapter 4⁵

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 Gohlmann (2018) looked at how the leadership creates a supportive organization for learning. This study 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.

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

⁵ This chapter was jointly written by Nicole Gittens, Tara Gohlmann, James Reilly, David Ryan and Kris Taylor

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.

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 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

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
2. Tara Gohlmann, Chief Operating Officer, Boston College High School; gohlmann@bc.edu
3. James Reilly, Principal of Priest St School, Leominster Public Schools; reillyjl@bc.edu
4. David Ryan, Superintendent of Schools for Allentown, Chichester, & Epsom (NH) School Districts - SAU53; ryandp@bc.edu
5. Kris Taylor, Director of Leadership Development at Boston Public Schools; taylorkx@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

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

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

BQ = Background Question	SO = Supportive organization - Domain 3
OQ = Overarching Question	HQ = High quality instruction - Domain 4
V = Vision - Domain 1	EP = External partners - Domain 5
BC = 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

BQ = Background Question	SO = Supportive Organization - Domain 3
OQ = Overarching Question	HQ = High quality instruction - Domain 4
V = Vision - Domain 1	EP = External partners - Domain 5
BC = Building capacity - Domain 2	CRT = 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

BQ = Background Question	SO = Supportive organization - Domain 3
OQ = Overarching Question	HQ = High quality instruction - Domain 4
V = Vision - Domain 1	EP = External partners - Domain 5
BC = 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)