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# Perceived district-level leadership influences upon student achievement

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Perceived district-level leadership influences upon student achievement

by

Daniel T. Mart

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Education (Educational Leadership)

Program of Study Committee:  
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Ames, Iowa

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to understand district-level leadership's perceived influences on and barriers to improved student achievement. The following research questions were addressed: (a) How do superintendents view their influence on student achievement? (b) How do school board presidents view their influence on student achievement? (c) What do superintendents perceive are barriers to their influence on student achievement? (d) What do school board presidents perceive are barriers to their influence on student achievement?

Analysis of data this phenomenological study uncovered three themes: (1) alignment of the superintendent and board of education on student achievement goals, (2) continuous monitoring of progress toward the goals by the superintendent and board of education, and (3) significance of hindrances that prevented the district from making more rapid progress toward established goals.

The study yielded five conclusions: (a) superintendents and school board presidents agree that student achievement should be their primary focus and they must assume greater responsibility for improving student achievement; (b) the evolving roles and responsibilities of superintendents and board presidents require new skills and relevant training to develop these skills; (c) superintendents have positive views of their roles relative to student achievement which include: serving as educational leaders of the district, hiring quality personnel, reporting and interpreting student achievement data to the board, and monitoring progress toward district goals; (d) board presidents also have positive views of their roles in improving student achievement which include: setting and enforcing board policy, monitoring progress toward goals, and reducing their influence so educational leaders can do

their work; and (e) there are significant barriers to improving student performance, including limited school finances, varying student demographics, and punitive legislation.

Study findings suggest that the following actions would progress district leadership's work in addressing student achievement: (a) a cohesive definition of student achievement; (b) enhanced board professional development; (c) revision of state and federal legislative standards that punish school districts unable to meet unrealistic achievement goals and mandates; and (d) an understanding that the *right work* of superintendents and principals is leadership of student achievement efforts, not non-instructional management responsibilities.

## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

American public schools have long been viewed as an investment that fuels the engines of the nation's economic productivity and societal advancement. The catalyst for such investment is global competitiveness. Thus, improving our nation's public schools has become one of the highest priorities of all levels of government (Augustine et al., 2009).

Past reform efforts included *A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (U.S. Department of Education, 1983), a report that stressed the importance of quality teaching to improve student achievement. More recently, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2002), with its demand for increased academic standards, has infused a new accountability component into the education field.

With its emphasis on improving student performance, the NCLB Act has forced a review of all aspects of the educational system (Farkas, Johnson, Duffett, & Foleno, 2001). Key to assessing educational institutions and improving student achievement is determining the factors contributing to gains in these results. Leadership is second only to classroom instruction as a contributor associated with student achievement (Augustine et al., 2009; Leithwood et al., 2004; Marzano & Waters, 2009). Even though such factors as parental involvement, student's background, and school characteristics influence achievement, classroom instruction and leadership outweigh the impact of said factors upon positive student outcomes (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003).

An analysis of leadership has gained recent attention in the educational field because of such findings. Educational leadership is defined as those actions specifically geared to

impact student achievement levels (Witziers, Bosker, & Kruger, 2003). Heightened awareness has evolved around the development of school leaders possessing skill sets in effective instructional and learning practices (Augustine et al., 2009).

At the forefront of this leadership is that of the principal, referenced as school-level leadership in Chapter 2 of this dissertation. If a district is seeking systemic improvements, however, principals cannot solely focus on individual buildings. “Sustained” district-wide improvement is not possible unless the whole system works collaboratively towards a common goal (Fullan, 2002). This translates to an entire district effort instead of individual school efforts. This effort must be spearheaded at the district level by the superintendent and supported by the board of education; therefore, creating a desire to determine the roles and responsibilities of said parties (Farkas, Johnson, Duffet, and Foleno, 2001).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Current literature on student achievement is abundant with descriptive roles for teachers and building-level administrators, but little attention has been given to the responsibilities of district-level leadership in regard to student performance (Bridges, 1982). For example, Sparks (2003/2004) wrote:

Because of NCLB and state and school system initiatives, leadership development efforts in the past few years have often focused on raising test scores by instituting strong literacy and mathematics programs and by assisting principals to improve teaching in those areas. While those activities are worthwhile, unless school systems simultaneously address the complex and emotionally-laden interpersonal demands of

leadership, schools will be unable to sustain improvements in teaching and student achievement. (p. 1)

Such statements underscore the importance of principal leadership. In fact, research findings indicate that among school-related factors that are associated with student achievement, building leadership is second only to the quality of classroom teachers (Day, Harris, & Hadfield, 2001; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Marzano, 2003). While it is evident that the building-level administrator is critical to any school improvement initiative, what remains unclear is the role of the superintendent and the board of education in regard to sustained school improvement and student achievement results.

Of interest to this study are the roles of the superintendent and the school board in terms of student performance. Although much has been written about the superintendency, the literature primarily focuses on the areas of finance, diversity, and governance (Castagnola, 2005). Not until recently has there been interest in studying topics such as what strong leadership looks like in schools, districts, or states; how leaders can best influence learning; what training those leaders need to meet increasingly tough job demands; which state and district policies help leaders or get in their way; and what are the best ways to evaluate the behaviors and performance of school leaders so that effective practices are documented and rewarded while ineffective ones are remedied (DeVita, 2007, p. 5).

While the literature has identified three critical roles for the superintendent – managerial leader, political leader, and instructional leader – few studies have focused on the latter. Preliminary findings indicate that school districts are more likely to experience higher student achievement results if the superintendent is involved in the instructional

improvement process and regularly reports student achievement outcomes to the school board and district stakeholders (Boyne, 2004). Further, student performance results are beginning to be integrated into superintendent evaluations conducted by boards of education (DiPaola & Stronge, 2001).

Until recently, the primary role of the school board was governance, and individual members were content to keep their policy role separate from the daily school operations, student learning, and oversight of personnel (Alsbury, 2008). In an effort to understand more clearly the school board's role in student achievement, the Iowa Association of School Boards (IASB) implemented the Lighthouse Project (Delagardelle, 2007). Five distinct roles related to student achievement emerged for board members: (a) set clear expectations, (b) create conditions for success, (c) hold the system accountable to the expectations, (d) build collective will, and (e) learn together as a board team (Delagardelle, 2007, p. 7).

State and federal accountability reforms affirm the need for effective educational leaders and challenge them to improve student achievement for an increasingly diverse group of students (Glover & Levacic, 1996). In addition, the National Staff Development Council has recommended that district-level leadership become more actively involved with improvement of student achievement (Sparks & Hirsch, 2000).

While the literature to support these claims is quite abundant, what seems uncertain in the literature on student achievement are the roles and influences of district-level leadership; i.e., the superintendent and school board.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to understand district-level leadership's perceived influences upon student achievement. Specifically, the study focused on the perceptions of

Iowa superintendents and school board presidents who, though they may be far removed from the classroom, make important decisions that impact student achievement. The secondary purpose of the study was to understand the barriers that superintendents and school boards face when striving to increase students' academic achievement.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this investigation:

1. How do superintendents view their influence on student achievement?
2. How do school board presidents view their influence on student achievement?
3. What do superintendents perceive are barriers to their influence on student achievement?
4. What do school board presidents perceive are barriers to their influence on student achievement?

### **Methodology**

A qualitative research approach, specifically phenomenology, was used to carry out the study. A qualitative research design was warranted because the topic, research questions, and purpose of the study demand an in-depth approach (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). A phenomenological approach was used to understand the lived experiences of the participants, how participants made meaning of the phenomenon (Merriam, 2002) of district-level leadership upon student achievement, and how these meanings influenced their behavior (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Gubrium & Holstein, 1997; Maxwell, 2005).

For this study, I, as the researcher, was the primary data collection instrument. Using stratified random sampling techniques, I selected six districts (from among the 359 public school districts in Iowa) and a sample of 12 individuals (six superintendents and six school

board presidents from the same districts) who were currently serving in district leadership positions in Iowa school districts. The six public school districts randomly selected for the study met two criteria: (a) a four-year positive student achievement trend slope based on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS), and (b) student enrollment by strata.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face with the 12 participants. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Other data sources included relevant documents (e.g., minutes of school board meetings and ITBS and ITED scores) and field notes.

I collected and analyzed data concurrently (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Data were first coded using the open coding method. Opening coding is the “preliminary process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data” (Silverman, 2006, p. 96). Once recurring themes were identifiable, I used the focused coding method to develop themes and sub themes (Esterberg, 2002). Finally, I attempted to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings through triangulation (Denzin, 1989; Esterberg, 2002) and controlling for researcher bias (Silverman, 2006).

### **Framework**

The framework for this study is based on a meta-analysis of district-level leadership studies conducted by Marzano & Waters (2009). The framework (see Figure 1, p. 29.) depicts collaborative goal setting, board alignment, and allocations of resources as the essential foundational items required for district-level leadership to influence student achievement. Flowing from these actions are non-negotiable goals for instruction which support non-negotiable goals for achievement which in turn require constant monitoring (Marzano & Waters, 2009).



### **Significance of the Study**

There were several compelling reasons for conducting this study. First, standards-based reform across the United States gained momentum during the 1990s and has placed pressure on all levels of the public school system to improve student achievement results (Sullivan & Shulman, 2005). With a national focus on raising achievement for all students, there has been growing attention on the role of district-level leaders in improving the quality and outcomes of education (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007). Districts are searching for effective ways that superintendents and school boards can influence student achievement (Castagnola, 2005). Yet, there is a dearth of research studies to inform districts on topics such as what good district-level leadership looks like in schools, how leadership influences learning, and what training is needed to assist instructional leaders (DeVita, 2007). This study explored a substantive area about which little is known; namely, the perspectives of district-level leaders attempting to influence student achievement.

Second, the findings of this study, grounded in the data, may provide a meaningful guide for further conversation, reflection, and future research on how district-level leaders can positively affect student achievement in their schools.

Third, study findings may add to the body of knowledge by revealing barriers that district-level leadership face as they strive to influence student achievement.

### **Summary**

As part of current educational reform efforts, superintendents and school boards are being asked to take on the daunting task of improving student achievement in their districts. In this chapter a rationale for conducting this research study was presented, and an overview

of the study design was provided. Issues introduced in this chapter will be addressed in more detail in the following chapters.

## CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Improving student achievement has become the central goal of American public school reform (Sands, Guzman, Stephen, & Boggs, 2007). At the local level, responsibility for reaching the goal has been conferred on building principals and classroom teachers and, more recently, on superintendents and school board members.

This chapter presents a review of selected literature related to factors that influence student achievement, including educational reform legislation and student, family, teacher, and principal factors. Given the purpose of the current study, particular emphasis is given to district-level leadership factors that influence student achievement. The literature review concludes with the findings of a meta-analytic study (Marzano & Waters, 2009) on the roles of effective district-level leaders that positively effect school achievement. The study's findings serve as a framework for the current study.

### **Accountability and Standards-based Reform Efforts**

The improvement of the nation's public schools has become one of the highest priorities among the three levels of government – federal, state, and local (Augustine et al., 2009). Recent state and federal legislation mandate the use of student test scores to assess the quality of educational programs in individual schools and the quality of school districts (Elmore, 1999-2000). However, reform emphasis on student results did not come to the forefront until the 1960s when the late Robert F. Kennedy, then a senator from New York, added an amendment to the Title I section of the 1963 Elementary and Secondary Act, requiring greater attention be given to student assessment and results (Sirontnik, 2004). Kennedy's action, resulting in a shift to greater accountability for efficient and equitable use of federal funds and greater emphasis on student performance, laid the foundation for

standards-based educational reform in the United States (Gutzenhauser & Hyde, 2007). Since that time, many educational reform efforts have required measurement of student learning. For example, *A Nation at Risk* (U.S. Department of Education, 1983) reported that the American public school system had fallen behind, thus endangering America's competitiveness in the global economy (Felner et al., 2008). The scathing report called for measurable goals and rigorous standards for what students should know and be able to do and triggered additional reform legislation. Enactment of the *Educate America Act of 1994*, *Goals 2000*, and *Improving America's Schools Act* increased the use of rigorous and measurable standards to improve academic performance (Felner et al., 2008). More recently, the *No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act* (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2002) went far beyond previously established standards to include "standards for assessment, curriculum, instruction, teacher licensure, and parent involvement" (Sands, Guzman, Stephens, & Boggs, 2007, p. 324) in an attempt to raise achievement scores for all students.

Once the standards for student outcomes had been established, ensuing reform efforts targeted classroom instruction. Over the past 20 years, test-based accountability has led to increased pressure on schools, particularly teachers and building principals, to affect higher levels of student learning (Sahlberg, 2010). In recent years, attention has focused on district-level leadership (i.e., superintendents and school board members) and the influence they can exert to increase student learning (Glover & Levacic, 1996; Sparks & Hirsh, 2000). This topic will be addressed in detail later in this chapter.

Increasing student achievement is at the center of all school reform efforts (Sands, Guzman, Stephen, & Boggs, 2007). A review of the literature on standards-based reform

illustrates how progressively and deeply standards have been used to raise student achievement in American public schools. Accountability for improving achievement has fallen on teachers, principals, and building-level leadership.

### **Student Factors that Influence Student Achievement**

Student achievement is a complex construct that is influenced by a multitude of factors. Low academic performance is the most important predictor of a student being labeled at-risk or dropping out of school (Boon, 2008). This section of the literature review focuses on three student variables that impact this performance: motivation, home environment and school setting.

#### **Motivation**

Besides cognitive ability, there are other student factors associated with academic achievement; namely, motivation and environment (Boon, 2008) that are so closely intertwined that it is difficult to discuss them separately,

Motivation is a driving force (Romando, n.d.) that influences essential school products such as student effort, work quality, test scores, grades, and school completion (Pintrich, 2003). Successful learners are organized, set goals for themselves, seek assistance when appropriate, and manage their time, all of which assist in promoting their own personal drive (Sands, Guzman, Stephen, & Boggs, 2007) and academic development (Usher & Pajares, 2008). Students' perceptions of their ability and likeliness for success influence their motivation (Hardré & Sullivan, 2008).

#### **Environment**

Environment, at first glance, may not seem to be a student factor. However, it is so closely related to motivation (which is a student factor) that it is discussed here. A majority

of a child's life is spent at home (Urdan, Solek, & Schoenfelder, 2007), and parents and others residing in the home are the earliest (and primary) influences on a child's motivation (Lumsden, 1994). One of the most important environmental influences on a child is the family's socioeconomic status. Children reared in low socioeconomic conditions tend to perform lower on achievement tests than their more affluent counterparts (Tajalli & Opheim, 2004). However, home environment is more important than parental income and education to the success or failure of a student (Marzano, 2003). In support of this conclusion is the finding that when children from a nonsupportive academic home environment were exposed to a supportive home environment, overall test scores improved (Okpala et al., 2001).

In addition to the family's financial status, children are influenced by their parents' or caregivers' style of raising them. Nurturing activities (or lack thereof) provided throughout the educational process directly impact student effort and, therefore, achievement (Fehrmann, Keith, & Reimers, 1987; Sands, Guzman, Stephen, & Boggs, 2007).

As a child progresses through an educational program, the quality of parental involvement is influential. Active involvement has been associated with increasing student motivation and engagement (Brewster & Fager, 2000). Further, children of parents who are actively involved in their child's education achieve at higher rates than children of parents who are less involved or uninvolved in their child's education (Englund, Luckner, Whaley, & Egeland, 2004). The parent's monitoring of a child's activity both at school and outside of school shows the child that the parent cares (Rath et al., 2008). Creating a connection with the school by knowing the child's teacher or teachers, communicating with these teachers on a regular basis, keeping abreast of homework and grades, being apprised of the child's

behaviors, and participating in school activities provide parents with academic monitoring avenues that positively impact the child's success (Rath et al., 2008).

Parents' expectations are another important component of student motivation. Conversations about school activities and educational expectations/goals (both PreK–12 and post-secondary) underscore the importance of education and lead to increased student motivation (Fehrmann et al., 1987; Israel et al., 2001). The educational attainment level of the parent or parents contributes greatly to communication efforts and overall educational expectations. Parents of students qualifying for free or reduced priced meals report having lower educational expectations, being less involved in the child's education, and being less involved in their child's social activities than higher income parents (Jacobs & Harvey, 2005).

Students reported that their families are most helpful with their school experience when they set high expectations, monitor homework and grades, and are willing to discuss events pertaining to the child's daily life. (Sands, Guzman, Stephen, & Boggs, 2007).

Some students are positively motivated by their home environment, causing them to achieve in ways that will make the family proud, repay the family for sacrifices made for their education, meet the high expectations of the family, or break the family cycle such as poverty (Urdan et al., 2007).

### **School Setting**

Home is not the only environment that impacts a student's motivation. The overall school and individual classroom atmospheres play vital roles as well. The psychological setting of a school; e.g., the perceived safety and the conditions for learning, can influence a student's motivation to learn and ultimately impact achievement (Maehr & Midgley, 1991).

Teachers impact the classroom environment which in turn impacts student performance. When students feel that the teacher promotes competition and rewards rather than mastery of concepts, the desire to succeed by some students is diminished (Bong, 2008; Maehr & Midgley, 1991). Further, this belief by students impacts time spent on homework and ultimately the students' overall grades (Thomas, 2002). Conversely, when students feel their teacher cares about them by treating them with respect and getting to know them, they feel obligated to perform at their best (Sands, Guzman, Stephen, & Boggs, 2007).

In summary, student motivation, home environment and school setting influence student success in the educational arena. A student's academic behavior, influenced by home and school environments, impacts the likelihood of educational success. In general, students' ability and motivation take them on one of two paths: one of at-riskness or one of resilience (Boon, 2008) in which academic success prevails even when other factors such as socioeconomics and family structure would predict otherwise (Gordon-Rouse, 2001).

### **Family Factors that Influence Student Achievement**

In addition to student factors, family factors contribute to a student's success or lack thereof (Boon, 2008). Family influence on a student's academic success encompasses variables related to the overall development of the child; e.g., ethnicity, family structure, socioeconomic status, and parental involvement (Gonida & Urdan, 2007; Jacobs & Harvey, 2005). These influences can be divided into two categories: (a) economic capital, (Myrberg & Rosen, 2008), and (b) cultural/social capital (Israel, Beaulieu, & Hartless, 2001).

Economic capital includes influences associated with income. In the education sector, the socioeconomic status of students is primarily determined by household income.



Students who qualify for free or reduced price meals are designated as low socioeconomic status. Low socioeconomic status is directly related to student success. When poverty threatens family stability, children suffer (Jacobs & Harvey, 2005). For example, Okpala, Okpala, and Smith (2001) found that fourth graders who qualified for free or reduced priced meals scored significantly lower on mathematics tests. One possible explanation for their low performance could be a lack of educational materials in the home (Myrberg & Rosen, 2008; Okpala et al., 2001). Another explanation might be that socioeconomically disadvantaged children experience many unmet needs that lead to feelings of hopelessness, an inability to change the cycle, and negative behaviors (e.g., violence, apathy, and depression) that put their academic future at risk (Lambie, 2005).

Cultural or social capital, the second category of family influences, refers to the structures and processes “which condition the environment for educational achievement” (Israel et al., 2001, p. 45). Beginning at birth, the first major influence upon a child is the family structure; i.e., the number of adults and siblings residing in the household (Israel et al., 2001). Children being reared in single-parent households tend to score lower than their counterparts living in households with two adults (Jacobs & Harvey, 2005). A possible explanation is the lack of monitoring of the child’s activity outside of school by single parents. Findings indicate that youth living with at least one biological parent and another adult in the same household were 3.5 times as likely to be monitored (Rath et al., 2008). Parents who know how the child spends time when he/she is not at home not only demonstrate their concern for the child’s well-being (Rath et al., 2008) but also impact the child’s motivation, effort, and achievement (Brewster & Fager, 2000; Fehrmann et al., 1987).

Further, since children tend to socialize with peers who hold similar beliefs, it behooves parents to know the child's friends (Rath et al., 2008).

Parental involvement in the child's school life is another family factor that influences student achievement. It is important for parents and school officials to discuss ways that learning can be supported in the home (Brewster & Fager, 2000). The most obvious area is homework, which positively contributes to achievement (Fehrmann et al., 1987). Parents affect learning directly by assisting with homework completion and/or monitoring its completion progress or indirectly by placing constraints upon television viewing time (Fehrmann et al., 1987). Parents model the importance of education by creating a place at home for studying and by designating a certain time for homework (Patton, 1994).

Another component of successful homework completion is providing the resources required to complete the schoolwork (Marzano, 2003; Patton, 1994). This component may cross over between the arenas of economic capital and cultural/social capital. In regard to economic capital, the ability to provide homework resources is dependent upon the family's financial resources. In the arena of cultural/social capital, the family belief system contributes to decisions made about use of resources. Providing a home library, for example, may indicate the family's high regard for the children's literacy development (Myrberg & Rosen, 2008).

The number of siblings in the family structure is another influence on student achievement. As more siblings are introduced into the family makeup, adult family members have less quality time to spend with individual children, thus reducing the amount of parental influence on the children and ultimately their school achievement (Israel et al., 2001).

Compounding this scenario is the related issue of *drop out* siblings. A child's risk of poor

academic performance and/or the possibility of dropping out of school altogether increases when a sibling failed to complete formal education (Israel et al., 2001).

From the literature, it is clear that a family's economic and cultural/social capital influence their children's educational achievement as measured by test scores, grade average, and graduation rates.

### **Teacher Factors that Influence Student Achievement**

Another factor that influences student learning is the classroom teacher. A plethora of recent research findings indicates that (a) teaching is the leading factor influencing student learning (IASB, 2008; Kemp & Hall, 1992; Vitaska, 2008), and (b) the quality of the classroom teacher is the most important school factor leading to improved achievement levels (Goldhaber & Anthony, 2004; Haycock, 1998; Marzano, 2003). Research findings uncovered three teacher-characteristics that contribute to student success; namely, teacher disposition/behaviors, classroom management, and instruction.

In general, teachers who genuinely care about students (disposition) and who also demonstrate a deep commitment to their content area are viewed as most helpful (Sands, Guzman, Stephen, & Boggs, 2007). Thus, teachers who want to improve achievement must address students' social and emotional needs in conjunction with their academic needs (Brigman & Campbell, 2003).

One of the initial factors observed by students entering the classroom is the teacher's disposition. "Students desire authentic relationships where they are trusted, given responsibility, spoken to honestly and warmly, and treated with dignity" (Poplin & Weeres, 1994, p. 20). Positive teacher attitudes, such as enthusiasm instead of moodiness, anger, or hostility (Sands, Guzman, Stephen, & Boggs, 2007), contribute to student success

(Cornelius-White, 2007). Teachers who get to know students' individual needs also influence student success (Sands, Guzman, Stephen, & Boggs, 2007). In schools considered to be ineffective, students report that their teachers do not care about them (Potter, Reynolds, & Chapman, 2002)

A second factor impacting the learning success of students is the teacher's ability to manage the classroom. Students seek an orderly environment (Potter et al., 2002) that is conducive to learning (Jansen, 1995; Marzano, 2003) and within which instructional objectives are clearly articulated (Jansen, 1995) and high expectations for both academic performance and student behaviors are established (Potter et al., 2002). Briefly stated, effective classrooms have established rules and procedures as well as consequences for violations of these (Marzano, 2003).

Classroom instruction is the final but primary educator characteristic discussed in the effective teaching literature. In the past, teachers did most of the talking while students simply listened. The profession was reputed to be *simple and straightforward*; students learned if the teacher simply taught from the textbook and made sure students paid attention (Wilson & Peterson, 2006). Recognizing that such learning was stifling to the student's mind and imagination, educational reforms switched foci and began focusing on the development of attributes such as student empowerment, independence, and inquiry within the context of group learning (Zimiles, 2007). This pedagogical change, coupled with a focus on student outcomes, led to a major transformation of teaching and learning (Potter et al., 2002) that goes well beyond simplistic changes in the curriculum (Goldring, Porter, Murphy, Elliott, & Cravens, 2007).

At the foundation of instruction is the content knowledge of the teacher. Findings of several research studies indicate that the greater the teacher's subject-specific knowledge the higher the students' achievement results, especially for students in middle school and high school (Haycock, 1998). Unfortunately, teachers possessing strong content knowledge are not always teaching in the most needy classrooms. Teachers in poor or minority districts are more likely to be uncertified (Haycock, 1998) or teaching outside their field(s) of preparation (Jerald & Ingersoll, 2002).

Quality teachers are well versed not only in subject content but also in effective pedagogical strategies. They make class activities interesting and fun but also meet individual student needs (Stronge, 2002) by creating lessons using games, giving students choices, and placing students in groups to learn from one another. Such teaching techniques increase student interest and motivation to learn (Sands, Guzman, Stephen, & Boggs, 2007). Moreover, students' perceptions about the quality of their teachers can impact achievement and growth. Students who rated the quality of their teachers more positively had higher growth rates and higher achievement in mathematics and science (Heck & Mahoe, 2010).

Given the importance of teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical practices, it is imperative that schools provide quality professional development that helps teachers improve their teaching as well as students' learning. Effective professional development is based on students' needs, addresses teacher content knowledge, is linked to standards, and includes opportunities for teachers to discuss instructional practices and ways to improve them (Reichardt, 2001). However, teachers are not the only ones responsible for student achievement. Other stakeholder groups; i.e., students and parents (Potter et al., 2002),

building principals, and district-wide leaders; i.e., superintendents and school board members (Marzano & Waters, 2009) must contribute to the improvement of student learning.

In summary, an abundance of recent research findings accentuate the importance of quality instruction on student achievement. In fact, the impact of a high quality teacher can be profound. When all else is equal, a student with a very high quality teacher will achieve significant gains in grade level equivalency (sometimes even a full year's growth) while a student with a low quality teacher will achieve minimal gains. Teaching is indeed the leading factor impacting student learning (IASB, 2008; Kemp & Hall, 1992; Vitaska, 2008).

### **Leadership Factors that Influence Student Achievement**

As the previous section described, when it comes to improving student achievement there is no substitute for a highly skilled teacher (IASB, 2008; Kemp & Hall, 1992; Vitaska, 2008). This section of the literature review reports on the influences of school leadership (defined as principals) and district leadership (defined as superintendents and school board members) on student achievement.

Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2004; Vitaska, 2008; Waters & Marzano, 2006). In fact, the effects of leadership, both direct and indirect, account for roughly 25% of all school effects on student learning (Leithwood et al. (2004).

Accountability laws such as the No Child Left Behind Act (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2002) forced school leaders to refocus their energies on student-based results. Leadership is the linchpin that brings together the facets of school improvement reform efforts (DeVita, 2007). There are no *leader-proof*

reforms and no effective school reform efforts without good leadership (DeVita, 2007).

“Leadership provides a critical bridge between most educational reform initiatives and having those reforms make a genuine difference for all students” (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 14).

### **Role of Building-Level Leadership on Student Achievement**

The role of the school principal has evolved from one of building manager and disciplinarian to that of instructional leader (Vitaska, 2008). Although the principal retains responsibility for building operations and discipline, he/she is “at the heart of school capacity” (Fullan, 2002, p. 16) and, as such, leads efforts to improve the quality of instruction which then translates to gains in student achievement (Newmann, King, & Youngs, 2000). In the capacity of instructional leader, the principal has responsibility for creating a shared vision and building consensus around school improvement issues, establishing a culture of learning, providing compelling reasons for students to want to learn (Southern Regional Education Board, 2001), and modeling for, coaching, and developing teachers’ knowledge and skills (Fullan, 2002; Southern Regional Education Board, 2001). School Administrators of Iowa (2008) described the principal as one who “provides leadership, supervisory, and administrative skills that will promote the educational development of each student” (p. 21).

To determine the degree of influence building leaders had on student learning, Andrews and Soder (1987) assessed the leadership qualities of 33 school principals and then placed the principals into categories labeled *strong*, *average*, and *weak*. The researchers then reviewed reading and mathematics scores on the California Achievement Test over a period of three years, 1982 to 1984. Results on both the reading and the mathematics tests indicated that students attending a school considered to have a *strong* leader significantly outscored

their counterparts attending a school with a perceived *weak* leader. Even more impressive were the results of students qualifying for the free meal program in the strong administrator's school. Free lunch students in a *strong* administrator school made gains in reading of 59 points over a two year period. In comparison, their counterparts in a *weak* administrator school only made gains of 11 points during the same two-year period. In math, the comparison was a staggering 60 point gain in a *strong* administrator school compared to a 9 point loss in a *weak* administrator school.

“Characterizing instructional leadership as the principal’s central role has been a valuable first step in increasing student learning” (Fullan, 2002, p. 17), but it is not enough. To make a larger impact on student learning, principals must strive for deeper learning which involves problem solving and thinking skills in all curricular areas. As the instructional leader, the principal establishes the expectations for continuous improvement by actively engaging in staff development. Through this involvement, the principal becomes an active participant in the improvement of classroom learning (Andrews & Soder, 1987).

Providing instructional leadership is a crucial characteristic of effective school leaders (Marks & Printy, 2003). To meet the demands of this role, principals need additional professional development so that they are able not only to observe quality teaching practices but also practice them (Farkas, Johnson, Duffett, & Foleno, 2001). Principals, therefore, need to be seen as the lead learner in their respective buildings.

### **Role of District-Level Leadership on Student Achievement**

Only recently have district-level leaders (defined here as superintendents and school board members) been expected to assume responsibility for student achievement. In the past, they relegated this responsibility to building principals who were viewed as the key to



improved student achievement (Farkas, Johnson, Duffett, Foleno, & Foley, 2001) and classroom teachers. However, *sustained* district-wide improvement is not possible unless the whole system works collaboratively toward a common goal (Fullan, 2002). The superintendent should act as the catalyst for the improvement efforts with unwavering support from the board of education.

While not completely ignored, school district leadership is comparatively unstudied when compared to building-level leadership (Crowson, 1992). In simple terms, “not much attention has been paid to the superintendent’s influence on outcomes” (Grogan, 2000, p. 120). The following section describes the literature on district-level leadership that is relevant to the current study.

### **Role of the Superintendent**

The last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century saw many vigorous efforts to rethink and improve education for America’s children and youth. There were countless attempts to improve public schools ranging from new state standards for student achievement, including high-stakes testing, to charter schools. But one important dimension was largely overlooked: school district leadership, governance, and teamwork (Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000, p. 1). Not until the educational reform efforts of the 1980s were enacted did researchers begin to examine what an effective superintendent *looked like* in regard to student achievement and school improvement. The importance of the superintendent’s evolving roles was captured by Carr (2005):

Traditionally the job of the superintendent was to manage the district well: to make sure the budget balanced, the buildings and grounds were in good shape, and the buses ran on time.... Today, the role of superintendent is considerably more

challenging and certainly changing. (Raising the bar, 2007, p. 1) A CEO doesn't do the work of a salesman. Neither does a superintendent try to teach kids. But unless each of these institutions is focused at the top, those who are in the trenches cannot do their job—whether it's making a profit or educating the next generation. ( p.14)

Much of the prior research on superintendents was related to governance issues, finances, and management—roles that do not directly impact student achievement (Castagnola, 2005). Bredson (1995) attributed the lack of instructional leadership by the superintendents to “time constraints, role overload, the press of other priorities, and lack of personal interest in curriculum and instruction” (p. 17). As a result, superintendents had only superficial involvement (e.g., verbal support and delegation of responsibilities) with instructional matters. Farkas (2001) added that “to survive administrators must manage the politics, the daily pressures, and the mandates of their district” (p. 11). It seems that if superintendents are to accomplish all their responsibilities strong leadership from all facets of the district will need to rise to the occasion (Iowa Association of School Boards, 2007).

To help superintendents understand their new role as instructional leader, the Lighthouse Project (IASB, 2007) studied high achieving districts. Findings indicated these districts were characterized by:(a) leaders who pursued high and equitable achievement goals for all groups of students; (b) the courage to acknowledge poor performance and the will to seek solutions; (c) a superintendent and other leaders at the helm who developed and nurtured widely shared beliefs about learning, including high expectations, and who provided a strong focus on results; (d) schools that emphasized the achievement of every student in every classroom and took responsibility for that performance; (e) staff who not only wanted their students to graduate from high school but also to leave high school fully prepared to be

successful in college; and (f) consistently high expectations for all students, regardless of students' prior academic performance. The responsibilities for superintendents embedded in these findings are a sea of change for today's superintendents.

Recently, the research trend has been to provide a correlation between district-level leadership and the academic achievement of students. At the crux of the research are those attributes that an effective superintendent possesses that can be correlated to student achievement. A later section of the literature review titled Effective District Leadership Behaviors provides detail on this topic.

Leadership is the key conduit among the various school reform efforts to improve student achievement (DeVita, 2007). "When the superintendent is involved in the reform effort, accountability is automatically built and work is taken more seriously" (Carr, 2005, p. 14).

### **Role of school board members**

Research studies on the influence that school board members have upon student achievement is almost nonexistent (Alsbury, 2008). Traditionally, board members maintained a strict separation between their policy role and other school operations (e.g., instruction and personnel issues) and thus had little or no interaction with the daily workings of the school building (Alsbury, 2008). For example, roles typically designated to school board members include: (a) selecting, working with, and evaluating the superintendent; (b) serving as advocates for all children and school personnel by adopting *kids first* goals (goals that focus on the needs of students first), policies, and budgets; (c) maintaining fiscal responsibility with the authority to appropriate local funds necessary to support the board-approved budget; (d) delegating to the superintendent the day-to-day administration of the school district,

including student discipline and all personnel matters; and (e) evaluating their own leadership, governance, and teamwork for student achievement. (Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000, pp. 17-18). Thus, the research literature on the role of school board members has focused primarily on school governance.

Recently, however, a growing recognition of the changing responsibilities of school board members has emerged:

A school board is entrusted with one of the most important responsibilities that can be assigned to any group of citizens—that of helping to shape the education of the community’s young people. Public schools across the country are being asked to raise the bar of academic achievement while remaining good stewards of the public’s investment in education. That responsibility demands sound knowledge in several areas including leadership, school improvement, school finance and others. (IASB, 2009, p. 14)

The Lighthouse Project (IASB, 2007) studied the beliefs of the superintendent and school board members about their roles and responsibilities for improving student achievement. Five distinct roles of school board members emerged for improved student learning: (a) set clear expectations, (b) create conditions for success, (c) hold the system accountable for the expectations, (d) build collective will, and (e) learn together as a board team (IASB, 2007, 2009).

In order to bring student achievement to the forefront of district discussion, boards of education should implement the following recommendations: (a) set the direction, with emphasis on student achievement, for the board and district; (b) seek balance of current and long-term systems goals; (c) implement a vision focused on teaching and student learning,

and (d) strive to get the community involved and *on-board* with the board's vision (Ward, 2004).

Given the changing roles of school board members, it is vital that board members and candidates seeking membership on the board understand their roles and responsibilities in order to function as a collective, forward moving unit. Too often candidates pursue the position of school board member to *fix* what they perceive is broken or to advance a personal *platform* or *agenda*. These platforms and/or agendas obstruct the real purpose of the board of education: to promote student achievement (Ward, 2004).

### **Joint Superintendent/School Board Leadership**

“A superintendent and school board can't sing two different tunes and then expect the public to hum along” (Petersen, 2002, p. 168). This statement by a school board president supports a key research finding: In high-achieving districts, the superintendent and board of education learn, collaborate, and lead as a team (IASB, 2007).

Traditionally, the joint work of the superintendent and school board included: advocating for the high achievement and healthy development of all children; providing educational leadership for the community, through vision and long-range planning; creating strong linkages with social and community agencies; setting policies and annual goals tied directly to the district's vision and long-range plan for education; approving an annual school district budget; ensuring the safety and adequacy of all school facilities; providing resources for the professional development of teachers, principals, and other staff members; periodically evaluating its own leadership, governance, and teamwork; and overseeing negotiations with employee groups (Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000, p. 19). While this is an impressive list of work mutually shared by the superintendent and board, it does not state

explicitly one of their most important roles; namely, active participation in raising student achievement.

In addition, district-level leaders sometimes encounter difficulties working collaboratively to fulfill their joint responsibilities. For example, school boards are dominated by laypersons who feel comfortable with budgets, facilities, buses, and personnel matters but lack knowledge of and interest in instructional matters for which they being held accountable (Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000). Given these board attributes, the superintendent who wants a satisfactory performance review is forced to focus time and attention on providing board members with the financial materials they need to fulfill their responsibilities. That leaves less time for the superintendent to devote to instructional matters. It is apparent the superintendent and board of education must develop trust and mutual understanding of their roles and responsibilities if they are to succeed in raising student achievement.

Questions about the joint work of the superintendent and members of the school board will be further addressed in the next section of the literature review.

### **Effective District Leadership Behaviors**

Marzano & Waters (2009) conducted a meta-analysis of research studies on district leadership behaviors. Their findings, graphically displayed in Figure 1, describe five district-level leadership responsibilities aimed at improving student achievement: (a) ensuring collaborative goal setting, (b) establishing nonnegotiable goals for achievement and instruction; (c) creating board alignment and support for district goals; (d) monitoring achievement and instruction goals; and (d) allocating resources to support the goals for achievement and instruction (Marzano & Waters, 2009).

The Marzano & Waters (2009) model serves as (a) a new paradigm of effective district-level leadership roles for improving student achievement, (b) the theoretical framework for the proposed study, and (c) a foundation for future research.

In the following section of the literature review, each of the model's five district-level responsibilities is described followed by the discussion of other relevant literature.

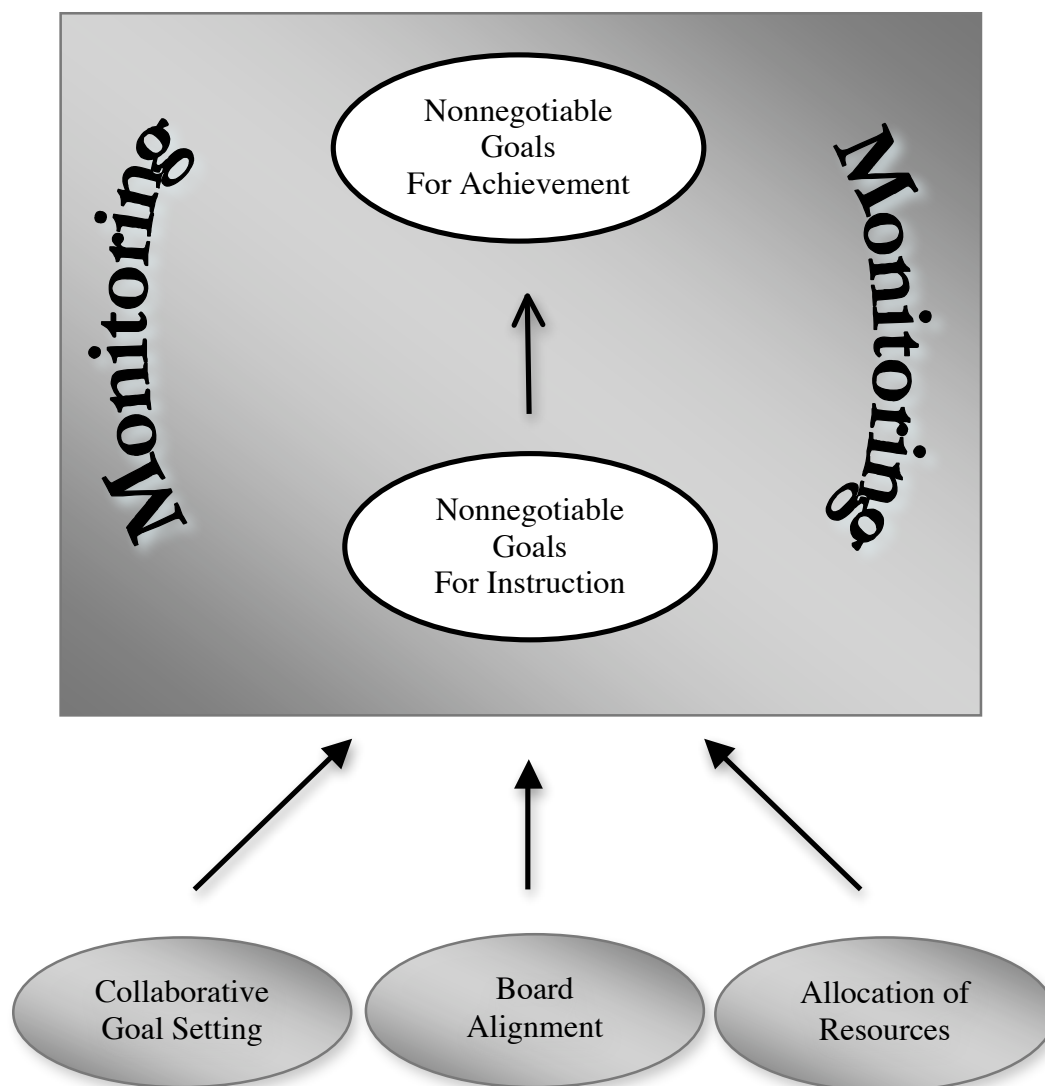


Figure 1. Relationship of Collaborative Goal Setting, Board Alignment, and Allocation of Resources with Nonnegotiable Goals for Achievement and Instruction (Marzano & Waters, 2009).

### **Responsibility #1: Ensuring Collaborative Goal Setting**

According to the model, effective leadership involves all key personnel, from school board members to principals to central office personnel, in the formation of the district's goal-setting process. The intended outcome is a set of common goals that will improve student achievement (Marzano & Waters, 2009).

The authors of the model, Marzano & Waters (2009) emphasize the importance of district goals, rather than school goals:

While it is true that schools are unique and must operate in such a way as to address their unique needs, it is also true that each school must operate as a functional component of a larger system. It is the larger system – the district – that establishes the common work of schools within the district, and it is that common work that becomes the *glue* holding the district together (Marzano & Waters, 2009, p. 90).

An historical look at the topic of goal setting revealed that the process of collaborative goal setting to improve student achievement is not new to the field of education. In Iowa, for example, school districts are required to conduct ongoing and long-range needs assessments that ensure involvement of and communication with the local community regarding its expectations for adequate preparation for all students as responsible citizens and successful wage earners (Iowa Legislature, 2009). The legislative mandate ensures that district goals pertaining to student achievement are set collaboratively with input from a broad spectrum of stakeholders. Shared leadership also forces schools and districts to involve stakeholders in establishing of beliefs regarding educational practices, defining expectations, and reviewing organizational structure and culture (Neuman & Simmons, 2000).



One of the beneficial consequences of collaborative goal setting is a persistent and public focusing of attention on learning and teaching (Copland & Knapp, 2006; IASB, 2007; Neuman & Simmons, 2000). Another benefit is that the larger community is informed of what is going well and what needs to be tweaked (The Wallace Foundation, 2009).

### **Responsibility #2: Establishing Nonnegotiable Goals for Achievement and Instruction**

Marzano & Waters' (2009) model emphasizes that the collaborative goal setting process (responsibility #1) must result in goals that are nonnegotiable; that is, there is an expectation from all levels of leadership that these goals will be acted upon. To meet this responsibility, district-level leaders set “specific achievement targets for the district as a whole, for individual schools, and for subpopulations of students within the district” (Marzano & Waters, 2009, p. 6).

Based on their study results, the researchers concluded that nonnegotiable goals for achievement and nonnegotiable goals for instruction are defining features of effective district leadership and should serve as the centerpiece of a comprehensive district reform effort (Marzano & Waters, 2009). Achievement is represented at the top of this model, meaning that student achievement is the “ultimate and superordinate end product” of the district’s reform efforts (Marzano & Waters, 2009, p. 23). The step below achievement in the model is the process of instruction. “Effective instruction is considered causal to enhanced student achievement and therefore critical to the process” (Marzano & Waters, 2009, p. 23).

### **Responsibility #3: Creating Board Alignment with and Support of District Goals**

According to the model, in effective districts, the board is in agreement with the nonnegotiable goals established for instruction and achievement and, more importantly, provides the necessary support by making them top priority (Marzano & Waters, 2009). One

of the recommendations stemming from the model is that district-level leadership must maintain a united front. This does not limit the number of initiatives that a district may undertake; rather, the board of education has the responsibility to assure the new undertaking aligns with the approved goals.

The Marzano & Waters' model supports the findings of other research studies. For example, findings from IASB's study of districts that made significant gains in student achievement indicate that school board members consistently supported district goals by "making a firm commitment to overcome the status quo, seeking equity and excellence, and actively working to build commitment to that vision, even in the face of barriers" (IASB, 2007, p. 9). By adopting student learning goals and policies, boards serve as advocates for all children, teachers, and other staff (Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000). A board and superintendent must vow to remain on the improvement course. Any waivering by either party sends a disturbing message of noncommitment (IASB, 2007).

#### **Responsibility #4: Monitoring Achievement and Instruction Goals**

The model (Marzano & Waters, 2009) requires monitoring of the nonnegotiable goals. For example, regular classroom visits aid in the monitoring of progress for the building-level leader. At the district level, the superintendent must ensure that each school or building principal is monitoring progress towards the targets (Marzano & Waters, 2009). The literature review uncovered other studies and theories related to the monitoring of goals. Results of one study stated the role of the principal in monitoring progress at the school level is to model commitment to school goals by articulating the vision of instructional goals and setting clear performance standards for instruction and teacher behavior in order to attain the stated goals (Andrews & Soder, 1987). Another study described the monitoring role of the

central office: “to serve and support schools” (Carr, 2005, p. 14) which leads to student success. One of the monitoring roles of the board of education is to receive and review the agreed upon data in order to keep abreast of progress (IASB, 2007). If not monitored continually, district goals will become no more than simple statements discussed at professional development occurrences and highlighted in written documents (Marzano & Waters, 2009).

### **Responsibility #5: Allocating Resources to Support the Goals for Achievement and Instruction**

In their meta-analysis, Marzano & Waters (2009) uncovered a common trait among high performing districts regarding the allocation of resources. These districts ensured the schools within the district possessed the necessary resources (e.g. money, personnel, and materials) to successfully implement the reform initiative. Much of the resource allocation supported the professional development efforts for teachers and principals.

A review of other literature described the resource allocation roles of school leaders at the building and district levels. At the school level, the principal, acting as the resource provider, takes action to secure personnel and resources within the building to achieve school’s vision and goals (Andrews & Soder, 1987). These resources may be in the form of materials, information, or opportunities, with the principal acting as a *broker* securing them at an appropriate (or acceptable) price (Copland & Knapp, 2006).

At the superintendent level, the issue of resource allocation can be a double-edged sword. On one side, the superintendent is expected to undertake greater responsibility for teaching and learning. On the flip side, results of a survey conducted by Bredson (1995) indicated that budgets and school finance remain the most important items in the

superintendent's performance reviews. Therein lies the delicate balance. At the school board level, the most significant method of support is the allocation of resources (IASB, 2007). The success of the district is largely dependent upon the school board's appropriate allocation of resources. By supporting the district's achievement goals with funding (rather than with words), the board of education proves its commitment to the district's achievement and instruction goals.

### **Additional Findings/Recommendations**

In addition to the framework described above, the meta-analytic study by Marzano & Waters (2009) and a review of the literature yielded additional factors that influence student achievement. These outliers include: defined autonomy, longevity of the superintendent, the relationship and involvement of the superintendent in the community, and the relationship between the superintendent and board of education.

#### **Defined Autonomy**

Defined autonomy can be described as selecting the *right* work to do in the improvement process (Marzano & Waters, 2009). At the heart of school improvement is knowing the *right* thing to do, not simply working harder (Elmore, 2003). Marzano & Waters (2009) assert that in a high-reliability district, the *right* work has been defined at the district level and outlined for each school within the district.

Research findings indicate that the leadership should be distributed or balanced among a group of stakeholders to do this *right* work (Neuman & Simmons, 2000). Board members, central office personnel, building-level administrators, and teachers all play various roles in distributed leadership that influence the expectations for achievement (Elmore, 2004). Leaders maximize their actions by mobilizing effort along multiple

pathways that lead to student, professional, or system learning, and by distributing leadership among individuals in different positions (Copland & Knapp, 2006).

### **Longevity of the Superintendent**

While researching effective district leadership behaviors, Marzano & Waters (2009) uncovered what they referred to as a *bonus finding*; namely, student achievement was significantly impacted by the tenure of the superintendent. Implications of this finding are two-fold. To increase student achievement and ensure consistency in leadership for school improvement initiatives, boards of education must (a) select individuals with effective leadership attributes to serve as superintendent, and (b) provide the necessary supports to retain the superintendent in office.

The recommendation resulting from the Marzano & Waters (2009) study is admirable particularly in light of recent dismal public stories regarding the tenure of the superintendent. Cooper, Fusarelli, and Carella (2000) reported the longevity of male superintendents in their current position was 7.57 years compared to only 5.01 years for their female counterparts. In urban districts, the average tenure of superintendents is two to three years. Given this finding of the Marzano & Waters (2009) study, one has to wonder the degree to which student achievement has declined in affected districts. When turnover at the helm occurs, improvement or reform efforts tend to diminish or stall completely due largely to the uncertainty of school personnel as to whether current initiatives will be supported by the new leader (Metcalf, 2007).

### **Relationship/Involvement of the Community**

The literature reported findings of other studies that addressed the relationship of the superintendent and the community. Results indicate that the community expects the

superintendent to exhibit high morals. In the first days of the superintendent's tenure, the community scrutinizes his/her morals (Crowson, 1992). With these early *testings*, patrons of the district begin establishing their individual support levels of the superintendent.

In his/her role as district leader, the superintendent may be involved with community organizations apart from the school. Even though the superintendent's roles with these organizations are not directly related to student outcomes, he/she may pay a price if district goals are not given some attention at community functions (Crowson, 1992). Constituents must have confidence in the leadership at the district level before they will approve levies and/or additional taxes. The superintendent's involvement with and actions in the community are fundamental to building such confidence.

### **Superintendent/Board Relationship**

One important aspect that has not been mentioned is that of the superintendent and board relationship. Due to the subjective nature of this relationship, previously mentioned research did not elaborate on the importance of this relationship. In their study, Cooper, Fusarelli, and Carella (2000) found that superintendents rated the item "My relationship with the school board is critical to me in making important education decisions" at the level of 4.66 on a five-point Likert scale. This rating reinforces the significance superintendents place on their relationship with the board of education. A superintendent can be placed in a compromising position as he/she aspires to enhance student achievement while trying to please his or her employer, the board of education (Marzano & Waters, 2009).

## Summary

This chapter examined extant research on factors that influence student achievement, the centerpiece of all school reform efforts (Sands, Guzman, Stephen, & Boggs, 2007). The review of literature began with an exploration of the influence of educational reform reports and legislation on student achievement. Since the 1960s, several standards-based reform initiatives have been enacted to raise student achievement in American public schools. For several years, accountability for improving student achievement fell primarily on teachers and building principals. In recent years, however, attention has focused on district-level leadership (i.e., superintendents and school board members) and the influence they can exert to increase student learning (Glover & Levacic, 1996).

The next areas explored in the literature review were the student, family, teacher, principal, and district-level leadership factors that influence student achievement. Even though factors such as student motivation, parental involvement, and home and classroom environment influence student achievement, classroom instruction and leadership outweigh the impact of all other factors on student outcomes (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003).

Teaching is the leading factor influencing student learning (IASB, 2008; Kemp & Hall, 1992; Vitaska, 2008), and the quality of the classroom teacher is the most important school factor leading to improved achievement levels (Goldhaber & Anthony, 2004; Haycock, 1998; Marzano, 2003). Teacher characteristics that influence student achievement include: disposition, classroom management, and instruction (i.e., content knowledge and pedagogy).

The literature reported that school leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2004; Vitaska, 2008; Waters & Marzano, 2006). In fact, the effects of leadership, both direct and indirect, account for roughly 25% of all school effects on student learning (Leithwood et al. (2004). The building principal is the one who “provides leadership, supervisory, and administrative skills that will promote the educational development of each student” (School Administrators of Iowa, 2008, p. 21).

For purposes of the current study, particular attention was given to district-level leadership factors on student achievement. Only recently have district-level leaders been expected to assume responsibility for student achievement. This may explain, in part, why few studies have been conducted on the relationship between district-level leadership and student achievement (Crowson, 1992).

What is known from the review of literature is that sustained district-wide student achievement is not possible unless the whole system works collaboratively toward a common goal (Fullan, 2002). This means that superintendents must spearhead improvement efforts and school board members must back them. District-level leadership is the conduit among the various school reform efforts to improve student achievement (DeVita, 2007). High-achieving districts have at the helm, superintendents who take seriously their role as instructional leader; e.g., they are personally involved in supervision and evaluation of principals (Murphy, Hallinger, & Peterson, 1985). “When the superintendent is involved in the reform effort, accountability is automatically built and work is taken more seriously” (Carr, 2005, p. 14).



Research studies on the influence that school board members have upon student achievement is almost nonexistent (Alsbury, 2008). In fact, board members are not usually thought to influence student achievement (Alsbury, 2008). Board members, committed to maintaining a strict separation between their policy role and school operations, report spending little or no time in school buildings. These board attributes contribute to strain between the superintendent and board members who have joint responsibility for improving student achievement. If district-level leadership is to succeed in raising student achievement, it is apparent the superintendent and board of education must develop trust and a clear understanding of their distinct and joint roles and responsibilities.

The chapter ended with discussion of how a model of effective district-level leadership serves as a framework for the current study. Derived from a meta-analytic study of district leadership behaviors, the model described five district-level leadership responsibilities aimed at improving student achievement: (a) ensuring collaborative goal setting, (b) establishing nonnegotiable goals for achievement and instruction; (c) creating board alignment and support for district goals; (d) monitoring achievement and instruction goals; and (d) allocating resources to support the goals for achievement and instruction (Marzano & Waters, 2009).

The purpose of this review of related research was to provide a foundation for variables expected to emerge from the phenomenological study. The limited number of research studies relating to district-level leadership factors that influence student achievement is one indicator of the need for further research in this area.

### CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

This study, based in the constructivist paradigm, used a phenomenological strategy to understand superintendents' and school board presidents' perceptions of and experience with district-level leaderships' influence on student achievement. Greater insight into these perceptions could lead to changes in district-level leadership practices and ultimately to improved achievement results.

This chapter describes the research paradigm, approach, and design that were used to achieve the purpose of the study.

#### Constructivist Paradigm

I used a constructivist paradigm to investigate and understand the perceptions of superintendents and school board presidents regarding their influence upon student achievement. Constructivist researchers focus on understanding and reconstructing (a) the meanings that people (including the researcher) hold about the phenomenon being studied (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Merriam, 2002), and (b) how these meanings influence their behavior (Maxwell, 2005). Constructivists create knowledge through interaction between the researcher and respondents (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), using dialogue and interpretation (Esterberg, 2002; Gubrium & Holstein, 1997) as the primary methods of investigation. Finally, constructivist researchers return frequently to the source of data, asking what it meant to the creator and trying to integrate that with its meaning to the researcher (Rudestam & Newton, 1992). Thus, for this study, I conducted in-depth interviews with six superintendents and six school board presidents, collected documents, and continually scrutinized these data in an attempt to understand and construct meaning of participants' perceptions of their influence on student achievement.

### Qualitative Research Approach

Past studies of the effects of leadership on student outcomes have been primarily quantitative in nature (Barker, 2007). Three years ago, in fact, I myself conducted a quantitative study on the leadership responsibilities of superintendents and school board presidents that impact student achievement (Mart, 2007). For the study, 45 superintendents and school board presidents in Northwest Iowa completed a self-report questionnaire of 23 items. Questionnaire items, based on the findings of Waters and Marzano (2006), investigated how consistently superintendents and school boards performed five district-level responsibilities that positively impact student achievement.

For this study, my original intent was to expand upon the findings of my previous research by querying all superintendents and school board members in the state of Iowa. However, I discovered that responses to questions posed in the original study could not be quantified. That is, the questionnaire items dealt more with the *experiences* of the superintendents and board presidents than the *effectiveness* of those experiences.

Thus, for the present study, I chose a qualitative research approach because qualitative methods are especially useful in discovering the meaning that people give to events they experience (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Polkinghorne, 1991). In addition, qualitative data, consisting of words (rather than numbers) and emphasizing people's *lived experience*, are well suited for this purpose (van Manen cited in Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Specifically, I used the phenomenological method to understand how participants make meaning of the phenomenon being studied; i.e., district-level leadership's perceived influence on student achievement. Phenomenology is effective in studying a small number of subjects for a period of time to identify the core of their experiences with the phenomenon

(Creswell, 2003) and produce patterns and identify relationships of meaning that build new knowledge (Moustakas, 1994).

Qualitative research methods used for this study included: stratified random sampling, open-ended interviewing, and systematic and concurrent data collection and data analysis procedures. Specifically, the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to analyze the data and discover the meaning that district-level leadership perceived their influence had on student achievement. A review board agreed with the purpose and procedures for this study (see Appendix D).

### **Research Design**

This section describes the study's participants; the role of the researcher; the collection, management, and analysis of data; and steps taken to establish trustworthiness.

#### **Participants**

In order to be considered for the study, an Iowa school district (from among 359 public school districts in Iowa) had to attain a four-year positive student achievement trend slope based on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS). The data source for the trend slope information was the Iowa School Board Association (IASB), which determined the median and average combined slope for reading and mathematics for students in the graduating classes of 2014, 2015, and 2016. The mathematics and reading slopes for the class of 2014 were determined using the percentage of students proficient on the reading comprehension and mathematics total sections of the ITBS over the course of the students' fourth through eighth grade years. These students are currently in ninth grade. The slopes for the class of 2015 were determined using the percentage of students proficient on the reading comprehension and mathematics sections of the ITBS over the course of their third through

seventh grade years. These students are currently in eighth grade. The slopes for the class of 2016 were determined using the percentage of students proficient on the reading comprehension and mathematics total sections of the ITBS over the course of the students' third through sixth grade years. Presently these students are in the seventh grade. Once a list of all eligible districts was compiled, six public school districts were randomly selected within the established enrollment strata described next.

For my sample, I used a stratified random sampling to select six districts from those achieving a four-year positive student achievement trend slope based on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) to study. This method of sampling divides the population into smaller groups called strata that share a specific characteristic or attribute; in this case, they shared similar student enrollment numbers based on the certified enrollment of the districts as of October 2009. Three enrollment bands, corresponding with the certified enrollment numbers utilized by the Iowa Department of Education (2009) were used. Stratum one included those districts that had a certified enrollment of 599 students or fewer. Stratum two included districts with enrollments between 600 and 2,499 students. The third stratum included the remaining districts that have student enrollments greater than 2,500 students. Two districts from each stratum were randomly selected to participate in the study.

During face-to-face visits with the selected participants, I informed them of the purpose of the research study and provided them with two documents which I reviewed with them: (a) an interview guide that included an introduction to the study and the demographic and research questions that would be asked of those who agreed to participate in the study (see Appendix B), and (b) a consent form that they were asked to review and sign if they agreed to participate in the study (see Appendix C). Prospective participants were informed

that if they participated in the study, the interview would last approximately 45 to 60 minutes and they would receive a written transcript of their interview as well as a copy of the final written report of the study.

These 12 individuals became the study participants and were assigned pseudonyms to protect their anonymity and to ensure their information remained confidential throughout the research process.

### **Role of the Researcher**

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary research instrument. What the researcher brings to the investigation from his/her own background and identity should be treated as his/her bias (Maxwell, 2005). Since qualitative research is interpretative research, researcher biases, beliefs, and assumptions can intrude into the analysis of data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Social researchers should attempt to neutralize or bracket their biases through full disclosure (Altheide & Johnson, 1994; Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman, 1987).

As the researcher for the present study, I acknowledge that my personal and work background may influence my interpretation of data. The following paragraphs disclose my background experiences, which may impact my interpretation of how superintendents and board presidents perceive their influence on student achievement.

In my tenure as a superintendent of schools in three different Iowa public school districts, I have worked closely with presidents and members of school boards. In all three districts, student achievement – successes and failures – was a continuous conversation. After receiving the results of the ITBS and ITED tests, we had moments of celebration and moments of frustration. My six years of experience as a member of a district-level leadership team have contributed to my beliefs about the influences leadership has on student

achievement. Prior to the superintendency, my experiences as building administrator, curriculum director, technology director, and classroom teacher contributed to my interpretation of district-level leadership and their influences on student achievement.

In addition to these professional experiences, my personal background may affect and/or bias my approach to this study. I have lived my entire life in the state of Iowa. Until recently, I lived within 20 miles of my birthplace. Even now, my residence is within 200 miles of my parents' farm where hard work, dedication, and education were emphasized. The "Corn-fed Iowa Boy" connotation may constitute a bias during this study.

### **Data Collection**

While data collection and data analysis activities were intricately woven together throughout the phases of this study, for the sake of clarity, they will be described separately. The data sources for this study were interviews, document review, and field notes.

#### **Interviews**

The primary method of data collection was qualitative interviews. There were three persuasive reasons for using interviewing as the primary data source for this study. First, qualitative interviewing is appropriately used when "studying people's understanding of the meaning in their lived world" (Kvale, 1996, p. 105). In fact, interviewing is the best technique to use "to find out those things we cannot directly observe...feelings, thoughts, and intentions (Merriam, 1998, p. 72). Second, qualitative interviews result in *thick descriptions* of the subject being studied (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Third, interviews allow for *triangulation* of information obtained from other sources (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

For this study, I conducted all the interviews with the superintendents and board presidents. Participants were contacted by e-mail and/or telephone to set up a mutually

convenient time to conduct the interviews. The superintendents were interviewed in their respective district offices while the board presidents were given a choice to interview at the district office or another location in their community. All interviews were conducted face to face because this approach is most conducive to finding out what is in the participants' minds and gives added confidence that results have a strong handle on what "real life" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 10) is all about. In order to improve the credibility of study findings, participants' experiences were explored in depth during interviews that lasted approximately one hour (Rudestam & Newton, 1992).

As a first step in the interview process, I reminded participants of the purpose of the study, research procedures, expected benefits, their right to withdraw from the study at any time, and protection of confidentiality. In an effort to develop a good rapport with respondents and to demonstrate familiarity with the topic (Creswell, 1994), I identified myself as a doctoral student, as well as, the superintendent of a school district in Iowa.

With participant approval, I audio recorded the interviews to ensure a complete transcript (Merriam, 1998; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). I also took handwritten notes during all interviews, enabling me to track key points to return to later in the interview or to highlight ideas of particular interest or importance.

I used the semi-structured interview approach to carry on conversations that would elicit rich data that could be used in qualitative analysis (Lofland, 1971). Semi-structured interviews give participants more room to answer in terms of what is important to them (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and to control the introduction and flow of topics (Mishler, 1986). Although the interviews were semi-structured in the early stages,



they became more structured in the later stages of triangulation and member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The interviews began with “How long have you served the district as superintendent or board president?” This question provided background knowledge about the interviewees, as well as, established a tenure baseline. Further questions in the areas of experience, motivation, and leadership allowed the respondents to expound on such experiences. The remaining questions focused on district demographics and the research questions at hand. All questions were framed in a manner to provide participants with the flexibility and freedom to explore the phenomenon in depth (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Open-ended questions were used throughout the interview to encourage participants to talk freely and respond openly to queries (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Kvale, 1996). Probing questions were used, when necessary, to encourage participants to elaborate on or clarify a response (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

The audiotapes were carefully transcribed verbatim in a Word document by a hired transcriptionist because accurate transcripts “are necessary for valid analysis and interpretation of interview data” (Mishler, 1986, p. 50).

### **Documents**

Although interviews were the primary method of data collection, I also collected and reviewed documents. Document review was used to clarify or substantiate participants’ statements (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). From each participating school district, I obtained the past six years of student achievement scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) and the Iowa Test of Educational Development (ITED) accessed from the Iowa Department of

Education (2005-2010). I used the data from these documents to “furnish descriptive information, verify emerging hypotheses, advance new categories and hypotheses, offer historical understanding, or track change and development” (Merriam, 1998, p. 126). The documents, like interview transcripts, were coded, analyzed, and interpreted (Merriam, 1998).

### **Field Notes**

Field notes served as the third data source for the study. Field notes were made following each interview. The field notes were typed directly into a computer file. In typing the field notes, I used the format suggested by Bogdan and Biklen (1982). On the first page of each set of notes, I included the date and time as well as a title that indicated the content of the notes. I also left ample margins for notations and coding. The field notes included my observations of the setting, particular events, and study participants (Bogdan & Biklin, 1982). I also listed questions about methodology; speculations about emerging themes, connections between/among data; and points of clarification (Bogdan & Biklin, 1982).

### **Data Management**

All the transcribed interviews, handwritten notes, documents, and field notes were divided by interviewees and placed in a three-ring notebook. Original and back-up copies of all transcripts were stored on electronic media. This allowed for viewing electronically in addition to physically. All data were stored in a filing cabinet in my home office.

I kept the original data intact and manipulated copies of the data during the analysis process. I also established an indexing system for keeping track of codes (Levine, 1985). All data will be destroyed within six months of dissertation approval.

## Data Analysis

With qualitative research studies, there is a continuous interplay between data collection and data analysis (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). For this reason, I began analyzing data soon after the first interview in order to facilitate later data collection (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Analysis occurred in three phases. First, I reviewed the interview transcripts several times, searching for “recurring regularities” (Merriam, 1998, p. 180). Using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I worked back and forth among transcripts until categories emerged that were consistent, yet distinct (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). I named these categories, coded the transcripts, and placed sections in labeled folders representing each category (Bogdan & Biklin, 1982; Merriam, 1998). Second, I brought together the coded interviews, documents, and field notes and looked for relationships within and across the data sources. As tentative categories emerged, I tested them against the data (Merriam, 1998). Finally, I integrated and refined the categories until three themes solidified (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

## Establishing Trustworthiness

Reliability is an area for which qualitative research is sometimes criticized. In general terms, reliability refers to the extent in which research findings can be replicated. Denscombe (2002) emphasized that in social research two main questions need to be addressed when determining reliability: (a) Are the data valid?, and (b) Are the methods reliable?

To increase the trustworthiness of the study’s findings, I employed strategies suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985). I decreased threats to *credibility* (quantitative researchers would use the term *internal validity*) by triangulating data. To increase

*dependability* (called *reliability* in quantitative research), I provided an audit trail by describing in detail how data were collected, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the inquiry (Merriam, 1998). I used rich, thick description (Merriam, 1998), thus enabling other researchers to make decisions about *transferability* (known as *external validity* or *generalizability* in quantitative research). To increase *confirmability* (known as *objectivity* in quantitative studies), I attempted to control for bias by constantly comparing data, searching the literature for examples of the phenomenon, obtaining multiple viewpoints (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), searching for negative instances of the phenomenon, and checking and rechecking data (Marshall & Rossman, 1989).

Given the importance of triangulation and transferability in qualitative research studies, these concepts are addressed in more detail in the next sections of this chapter.

### **Triangulation**

Triangulation of data is of critical importance to trustworthiness of qualitative studies. As the study unfolds and particular pieces of information come to light, steps should be taken to validate each against at least one other source (e.g., a second interview) and/or a second method (e.g., an observation in addition to an interview) (Denzin, 1989; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Using a second source or a second method may produce more accurate, comprehensive, and objective findings (Silverman, 2006).

In this study, superintendents and board presidents were asked identical questions during the interview in order to triangulate their responses. For example, each participant was asked: “What do you see as the superintendent’s role in improving student achievement?” and “What do you see as the board’s role in improving student achievement?” In addition, historical documentation (i.e., ITBS and ITED scores), schools and districts in need of

assistance lists (Appendix F), district demographics (Appendix F), board participation in professional development opportunities (Appendix G), and board meeting minutes were used to triangulate the superintendents' and board presidents' responses to questions about student achievement in their respective districts.

### **Transferability**

Transferability is a “process in which the researcher and the readers infer how the findings might relate to other situations” (Denscombe, 2002, p. 148). The researcher can increase transferability by the use of thick description that “captures the various angles and the multiple levels that comprise the complex reality of social life” (Denscombe, 2002, p. 150). Merriam (2002) argues for “providing enough rich, thick description to contextualize the study, such that readers will be able to determine the extent to which their situation matches the research context” (p. 31).

To ensure transferability of findings from this study to other settings with similar contexts, this study provided a description of each aspect of the research, including the setting in which the inquiry took place and the processes observed in the setting. This will enable readers to determine whether the results of the study are transferable.

### **Limitations**

Three limitations of this phenomenological study related to the sample. First, data for this study were collected from district-level leaders (i.e., superintendents and school board presidents) who were currently serving in these capacities. The results of the study only apply to the population investigated and should not be transferred to other school leadership. Second, the number of participants in the study was small: six superintendents and six school board presidents. A larger pool of participants may have produced different or additional

themes. Third, the study focused exclusively on district-level leadership in the state of Iowa. Results may be transferred to this one Midwestern state.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations describe how the study has been narrowed in scope (Creswell, 2003).

The primary delimitations of this study are:

1. The sample consisted of six superintendents and six school board presidents who agreed to participate in the study.
2. Qualitative data collection techniques included semi-structured, face-to-face interviews and compilation of relevant documents.
3. Questions pertaining to student achievement during the interview process were stated in terms of ITBS and ITED results even though districts utilize additional measures of student achievement. Narrowing the scope provided common language among all participants.

### **Summary**

This chapter described the methods and procedures used to investigate the perceived district-level leadership influences upon student achievement. The study was based in the constructivist paradigm and used qualitative research methodologies. Data sources included in-depth interviews, documents, and field notes. The constant comparison method was used to analyze data. The chapter concluded with a discussion of the procedures used to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings.

Chapter 4 presents the research findings. Chapter 5 discusses the findings of the study, offers conclusions, raises questions, and presents implications for further research.

## CHAPTER 4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

The primary purpose of this study was to understand superintendents' and school board presidents' perceived influences upon student achievement. The secondary purpose of the study was to understand the barriers that superintendents and school boards face when striving to increase students' academic performance. By listening to and analyzing the experiences of these district-level leaders, I hope to provide valuable information that will guide education departments at the national, state, and local levels in the following three areas: professional development, legislative action needed to overcome barriers to increasing student achievement, and supports needed to effect improved student achievement results.

### Background

The six public school districts randomly selected for the study met two criteria: (a) a four-year positive student achievement trend slope based on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS), and (b) student enrollment by strata. The data source for the trend slope information was the Iowa Association of School Boards (IASB), which determined the median and average combined slope for reading and mathematics for students in the graduating classes of 2014, 2015, and 2016. The sample was determined by using a stratified random sampling process to select the six districts from those achieving a four-year positive student achievement trend slope based on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS). Three enrollment bands, corresponding with the certified enrollment numbers utilized by the Iowa Department of Education (2009) were used. The three strata were: (a) certified enrollment of 599 students or fewer; (b) certified enrollment between 600 and 2,499 students; and (c) certified enrollment greater than 2,500 students. Two districts from each stratum were randomly selected to participate in the study.

The superintendents and board presidents from these six districts were interviewed regarding their perceptions of (a) their influences upon student achievement, and (b) barriers to increased student achievement in their districts. Superintendents were interviewed in their respective district offices during the course of a typical workday. Board presidents were given a choice; three board presidents chose their place of employment for the interview while the others selected the district administration office.

Interviews in the district administration offices were either held in the superintendent's office, a conference room, or the board room. Observation notes revealed little evidence of student achievement discussions in two of the three locations. Superintendent offices were lined with bookshelves containing various leadership, curriculum, and instruction books; however, there was no apparent display of student achievement definitions or results anywhere in the offices. The conference room was also barren of such work. The only hint of student achievement discussions was observed in a board room setting, where two white boards had percentages written on them. The superintendent verified these as percent proficiencies for ITBS and ITED results. At the previous board meeting, the superintendent reporting having led a discussion about the current year results on the ITBS and ITED assessments.

All six of the superintendents interviewed were male with years of experience ranging from less than one year to 20 years. The experience of board presidents ranged from less than a year to 17 years while their overall participation on the board of education varied from two to 20 years. Only one of the six board presidents was female. A semi-structured interview process was utilized for each of the twelve participants.



## Study Findings

Three themes emerged from the data relating to the research questions:

1. Alignment of the superintendent and board of education members in terms of the district's student achievement goals.
2. Monitoring of progress toward student achievement goals by the superintendent and board of education.
3. Hindrances that prevented the superintendent and board of education from making more rapid progress toward the accomplishment of the established goals.

Themes #1 and #2 address Research Questions 1 and 2 of this study: How do superintendents and board presidents view their influence on student achievement? The final theme in the findings addresses Research Questions 3 and 4: What do superintendents and school board presidents perceive are barriers to their influence on student achievement?

The following sections illustrate how these emergent themes associated with the research questions. Each research question aligns the emergent themes by three participant categories: all participants, superintendent participants, and board president participants.

### **Theme #1: Alignment of the superintendent and board of education members in terms of the district's student achievement goals.**

Theme #1 related to the first two research questions: how do superintendents and board presidents view their influence on student achievement? The association of the themes with the research questions are discussed by all participants initially and then by superintendent participants and board president participants following theme #2.

### **All participants**

From participants' responses, three subthemes related to alignment emerged: (a) definition of student achievement, (b) goal setting, and (c) resources.

**Definition of student achievement.** In order to understand the influences that superintendents and board presidents have upon student achievement and the barriers they face in their attempts to increase student achievement, interviewees were asked if district leaders held a common understanding of the term *student achievement*. When superintendents were asked, "Has your district defined student achievement?," the responses were quite varied, but three threads ran through the discussion: district mission, goals or beliefs about student achievement, and standardized test scores. For example, Superintendent N, unable to provide a formal definition of student achievement, described his district's mission and operation:

I don't know that we have a pat definition for student achievement. I think the general mission is *know the students* and then help *grow the students*. I think this is how we would define success and also our operation...how we do things, and so I think for us it [student achievement] is really about growth more than a set number. We ask, 'Are kids growing?' But as for a hard definition of student achievement, no, we don't have that.

Superintendent N added that certain programs within the district have specific criteria in place for measuring student growth for participating students. "TAG (talented and gifted) has defined those [assessment measures] within their program as have the At-Risk and Iowa Core programs. How do we know that students are growing? Not just by ITBS scores, but other ways, as well." Superintendent N further elaborated on the "other ways" as ACT

scores, growth scores on the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) assessment and formative assessments given by individual teachers.

The five remaining superintendents tended to define student achievement in terms of standardized test results and using those results to set goals for improving student performance. For example, Superintendent P, like Superintendent N, talked about student growth when asked about student achievement but added that standardized scores help the district measure that growth. He defined student achievement as “the ability to show that students have improved from one particular area to the next. We can show; we can document improvement [with standardized test scores] in whatever area that we choose.”

Superintendent O, when asked if his district had a common understanding of student achievement, responded, “Each year after we analyze the ITBS and ITED scores, the board sets achievement goals for the next year.” He explained:

They [board members] typically follow a cohort group [of students]. So in setting goals, they do not say, ‘Next year's fourth graders will be better than this year's fourth graders.’ Instead, they say, ‘This year's fourth graders will achieve at a higher level next year because their performance this year was low, and we want to see some improvement.’

Comments from Superintendent L indicated that he believed that the federal government provided the definition of student achievement: “Clearly the government defines student achievement as a standardized test.” Superintendent P concurred with Superintendent L, adding that the federal government defined *lack of progress* toward improving student achievement as either a School In Need of Assistance (SINA) and/or a

Persistently Low Achieving School (PLAS). He seemed upset by these definitions, perhaps because the middle school in his district has been designated both a SINA and a PLAS.

Superintendent K discussed the impact of community expectations upon the definition of student achievement in that district. He believes the community measures the district's success not only by test scores but also by the numbers of graduates who pursue post-secondary education:

We are very proud of the fact that 80% of our kids go on to post-secondary education and that a large number of our kids go to Ivy League schools and other top notch four-year programs all over the country. So that's clearly a metric of success defined by the community.

Superintendent K also added that student achievement is measured not solely by academic success but by student success in other arenas:

We also focus on other things that you would not consider to be part of the academic milieu. I mean we talk about: how many kids are in the all state orchestra and band, and how many debate awards do we win? How many football championships do we win, and how many wrestlers get crowned state champions? So, for our district and community, some of the measures of student success are test scores, athletic endeavors, and the non-athletic extracurriculars, but also the number of our graduates who pursue post-secondary education.

The board presidents' responses to the question of a shared definition of *student achievement* were less varied. Rather than defining the concept, these six individuals tended to describe the evolving process used by their district to assess students' academic performance. For the most part, current practice in these districts involves three steps: (a) the

superintendent and a core committee of teachers and counselors analyze standardized test score data; (b) results are reported to the board; and (c) based on the results, board members set goals aimed at improving student achievement. However, this process has not always been the norm as Board President X revealed. In his district, 2010-2011 was the first year board members actively worked on developing student achievement goals. In the past, achievement goals were recommended by the superintendent and rubber-stamped by the board. After they were approved, the goals were set aside, and nothing more was done with them. Board President X noted, “we [the district] would set our achievement goals every year. None of us [school board members] knew what the goals were, and we were not engaged [in the goal setting process].” All that changed when a new superintendent arrived. Currently, district leadership is focused on annual goals and how to achieve them. According to Board President X, “[Our new superintendent] has brought a lot of things together for our board members, and now our board thinks about how we want to do some different things such as being proactive in establishing board goals...”

In Board President Y’s district, student achievement goals are defined by standardized test results. “This year we set a goal of having 80% of students proficient on their test scores.” The district established this goal for the content areas of reading, mathematics, and social studies and used the ITBS and ITED as measurement tools. A similar response was heard from Board President W. For these two districts, the goal is increased numbers of students proficient in the core curricular areas.

Board President U defined *student achievement* a little more broadly than standardized test scores. “You have to understand the potential of each kid and then help each kid get to the level that’s right for them [*sic*].” At the same time, however, Board

President U acknowledged federal and state mandates for student achievement. “You do have to understand that there is a ‘benchmark’, whether it is ITED scores or something else, that is considered *success* in the eyes of the federal and state governments, and you surely want to hit those numbers.” In summary, Board President U defined student achievement as, “Kind of a balance between the potential of the kids and the numbers that you are being asked to measure against.”

Board President V also focused on *student growth* as part of the definition of student achievement by reporting the questions that are asked around the board table:

When we look at the definition of student achievement, we are concerned about whether the students have shown growth. The next question is ‘How do we know?’ If we compare performance plans with assessment results and see that students are showing growth, then we conclude the district must be doing the right thing. If students are not showing growth, or more significantly, if their scores are declining, then, something needs to change.

Board President V indicated that answers to the aforementioned questions lead the district to establish “quantitative student achievement goals” approved by the board.

Board President Z added another perspective on student growth.

Our district works this way. The board of education sets end goals for the district – where we want to be, where we expect to be. Right now all of the end goals that we have defined are in academic areas; that is, reading, writing, mathematics, social studies, and science. Then we charge district administration to develop/implement a plan to accomplish the stated ends. We [board members] want to see steady growth over time in those designated areas.

This section described the varied responses to the question surrounding student achievement. Interviewees' replies ranged from the simple answer of standardized test scores to more complex discussions about overall growth in academics. Yet another interviewee purported that student achievement in and of itself should encompass all areas of academia (e.g. fine arts, athletics, and post secondary placements). The underlying theme suggests that a common definition to student achievement was not evident in the participating districts. The question becomes one of whose responsibility is it to determine a clear definition.

**Goal setting.** Across all six participating districts, it was evident that school board members' level of involvement in establishing student achievement goals was superficial at best. In most districts, board members took no responsibility for developing student achievement goals. They simply approved the goals presented to them either by the superintendent or some type of school improvement committee. In all six districts, administrators at all levels worked with teachers to uncover areas of strength and weakness. However, Superintendent N commented that, in his district, there is a slight difference between the process used by elementary and secondary buildings:

Goal setting is a lengthy process. We have teachers who really look at the Iowa Test of Basic Skills data and DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) data at the end of the year on *Data Day*. They talk about what is working at their grade level and what the district needs to do to keep building upon that. Then all the elementary teachers discuss which content area had the lowest test scores and whether that area should be the focus for the next year. They also talk about the professional development that will align with the selected content areas. Goal setting at the

secondary level takes a different approach. Rather than focusing on content areas, secondary buildings may concentrate on grade level performance. In addition, secondary buildings may include a goal on students' college readiness.

Participants in all six districts described a goal setting process that was based on results of the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills and Iowa Tests of Educational Development. Five of the six districts reported establishing goals based simply on the percent of students considered proficient on the two standardized tests. However, Superintendent P explained that in his district the administrative team and teachers analyze student growth as well as proficiency.

We look at student growth and student proficiency. Even if our students are not *proficient*, are they showing growth? Conversely, when we look at the scores of students who are and always have been proficient, we sometimes find their growth rate is not at the level that it should be.

Superintendent P felt the need to dig deeper than simple proficiencies because the district has a building labeled both SINA and PLAS, and SINA and PLAS regulations require buildings with these designations to look beyond superficial percentile rankings to a growth model for student achievement.

In all six participating districts, conversations about student achievement were continuous throughout the year. Once standardized test results for the current school year had been analyzed, goals for the upcoming school year were drafted either by the district's curriculum, instruction, and assessment department found in the larger districts or by the district leadership team in smaller districts. This rudimentary document was then taken to



the school improvement advisory committee for input and review before being presented to the board of education for final approval.

**Resource allocation.** The third and final subtheme related to alignment is resource allocation. In the educational arena, resources include money, curricular supplies, technology, and human capital. Findings of the study indicated that school board members rely on recommendations from the superintendent when they allocate resources for student achievement programs and initiatives. In other words, for board members budget allocation really meant, “supporting the superintendent’s proposal.”

Superintendent L reported that board of education members ask questions about the proposed budget item, but their role typically has been to approve the requested resources.

If I say I need X, Y, and Z for professional development, board members ask what X, Y, and Z are, how we would pay for them, and where they fit into the budget. I respond by describing the plan of action, the amount of time needed to complete the plan, and estimated costs. Usually, board members ask questions about the proposed plan and budget, and then they approve them.

Superintendent N echoed a similar pattern. He stated that historically board of education members have relied upon and generally approved budget recommendations from the superintendent. Recently, he has observed a change in board behavior: “The dynamic is changing. Board members are now asking more questions about resources and resource allocation. I attribute that change, in part, to the implementation of the Iowa Core.” I interpreted Superintendent N’s response to mean that additional staff or additional professional development would be needed to meet the requirements of the Iowa Core; therefore, adding additional costs.

Board President U confirmed what Superintendents L and N stated; that is, the superintendent recommends a budget, and the board of education approves it. “We [board members] have never had an in-depth discussion on budget details.” Three of the four remaining superintendents and board presidents reported similar budget process relationships between the superintendent and board members.

In District C, however, the process is slightly different. The district has adopted the Carver Policy Governance Model (Carver & Carver, 2011) that requires the board to speak for the interests of the community since the community is, in fact, the owners of the school district. Thus, the board must find out what the community wants and expects from the district. A second component of the Carver Governance Model is the ends/means distinction. According to the model, the three *ends* in a school are: (a) which students (b) should acquire what knowledge (c) at what cost? The *means* are the school’s professional and technical activities; e.g., choice of reading program, teacher’s credentials, and classroom management. To establish *ends policies*, the board seeks and uses input from the community. To establish *means policies*, the board uses input from school personnel. Even though it is not officially required by board policy, the budget process is open to the public, and the community is involved in the process. According to Superintendent K:

Operating under the Carver Policy Governance Model, we believe that the community needs to be involved in the policy-making process. To prepare for public input, at board meetings we clearly define policies related to both ends and means. Then we hold public meetings and invite community input on both ends policies and means policies. Even though means policies are technically outside the community’s purview [according to the Carver Governance Model] and are not supposed to be

discussed with the public, the community expects to be part of the process. So the role that the community plays in the means policy process is *receiver of information*.

Even though District C seeks community input on policy issues, the policy discussion is driven by the superintendent. The board of education simply listens and then approves the recommendation. This process was common theme across all six participating districts.

**Theme #2: Monitoring of progress toward student achievement goals by the superintendent and board of education.**

Theme #2 also related to the first two research questions: how do superintendents and board presidents view their influence on student achievement? The association of the themes with the research questions will be discussed by all participants initially and then by superintendent participants and board president participants.

**All participants**

This theme is discussed in two parts as it relates to research questions 1 and 2: (a) student scores and (b) changes in student demographics.

**Student scores.** Superintendents and board presidents alike discussed the use of standardized test scores as the primary method of monitoring progress toward student achievement goals. However, each of the superintendents discussed at least one additional measure (beyond standardized test scores) that their district used to assess student learning. That may have been the case because as Superintendent P commented, “We have so much more data now than we had before.” The superintendent commented on the district’s use of MAP assessment data as an additional avenue to interpret growth in student achievement. The MAP assessment is given to students at least twice a year--in some grade levels, three

times per year. Another piece of data the district relies heavily on for student achievement reporting is their own locally developed reporting system. Superintendent P was quite anxious to discuss this data reporting tool that was developed by district personnel. Teachers enter classroom assessments on a weekly basis into the locally-developed database. Varying reports are producible, displaying growth in individual student achievement using district criteria. The combination of the MAP data and local achievement data gives the district additional information about student achievement that cannot be gleaned from a standardized test given once a year.

All six superintendents and all six board presidents reported that the superintendent was in charge of presenting student achievement data to the board of education; however, the superintendent had assistance from curriculum leaders, building principals, or the assistant superintendent in assembling the data. Superintendent L commented on the process in his district:

Our school improvement coordinator collects all sorts of student achievement data, and we generally try to share the data with the board a couple of times a year; for example, sometime in the fall and then some time late spring – after we've had a chance to analyze them.

In his district, Superintendent N's goal was to provide data on a monthly basis to enable the board to monitor progress on student achievement constantly and consistently.

We report to the board each month on our progress toward the board's student achievement goals. For example, we describe what the teachers are doing in professional development and how this professional development supports student learning. When we have analyzed the Fall DIBELS [a data system that measures

literacy] scores, we present the results and connect the results with the quality of instruction. Frequent reporting and discussion of test results enable us to monitor progress throughout the year instead of just at the end of the year.

Board President U confirmed Superintendent L’s testimony, stating:

There is a pattern every year whereby the superintendent or his designee presents student achievement data to the board. So at one board meeting, we’ll discuss the results of a particular test that the students took. At another board meeting, a representative of the SIAC [School Improvement Advisory Committee] will present a report on what the committee has been doing, and board members will ask questions and comment on the report. Board discussions of student achievement goals and results are definitely driven by the superintendent who provides the information. I don’t necessarily know if that’s the best way, but if the superintendent did not provide the information, we probably wouldn’t have the best information.

Board President V feels the monitoring process is a “two way flow of information.”

This “two way flow” begins with the district’s leadership presenting student achievement results and then the board members’ asking clarifying question in order to monitor progress toward district goals.

They [district leadership] report to the board the results of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and the No Child Left Behind lists, for example. They interpret the results for us, pointing out how students are doing. If students are not achieving well in a certain area, then district leadership informs us of their plan to correct the problem.

Following these reports, the board has opportunities to provide input, give direction, and make suggestions.

Board President V affirmed that monitoring is not a one-shot deal. As he stated, “[Monitoring] really is done almost monthly. Constant monitoring has become part of our routine, and so – at each meeting we talk about some component of student achievement.”

Board President Y indicated a more active role for board members. “We [board members] request test results and ask questions of the staff at board meetings.” He is troubled by their district’s SINA label and indicated that board questions are often directed toward that label:

What do we need to do to get off that watch list? Are you [district leadership] doing what's necessary? Are the test scores where you want them to be? What things need to change to make sure the students’ test scores improve? But the discussion is about more than getting off the watch list – it is also about making sure the kids are educated.

Board President F indicated that his district monitors student achievement progress not only by discussion at board meetings but also by visiting each building:

One of our board goals is to travel to every school or center every year. During the site visit we [board members] are given reports of how students in that building are performing. We just made a site visit yesterday morning to [an elementary school] and the principal there provided detailed information on student achievement. The second way we monitor student achievement is through district leadership’s presentations. We have not had a formal PowerPoint presentation lately, but I think that is because we discuss some aspect of student achievement almost every month.

Monitoring of student scores was an area that all six board presidents appeared to be comfortable in discussing. These individuals understood the numbers and percentages

associated with student achievement. They knew how to read the data to determine progress. The board presidents depended on the superintendent or his designee to present this information for monitoring purposes.

The monitoring by boards of education appeared to be more of a formality than true involvement or immersion in the data. Board President U stated, “That would be information that [the superintendent] is providing to us whether it's the test results or different results.” Board President V supported the prior statement by saying, “They (the administration) report back to us the results of Iowa Tests of Basic Skills and No Child Left Behind progress.” In District C, the board of education establishes the reports they deem necessary to monitor progress. The board president commented, “We have a list of reports that we have identified that this information is we want to receive on an annual basis to monitor the progress. Results such as our ITBS and our ITED’s and our ACT are part of that.” Once again, it is the expectation that the superintendent assimilate such data.

The superintendent, school improvement director, principals, or lead teachers disaggregated the standardized test results and assembled them in a presentable fashion. Boards generally seemed to be uninvolved in mining the data to determine results. Board President U summarized the thought process behind monitoring, “bottom line, we rely on the superintendent to provide all this (achievement data and data interpretation) for us (the board members).”

**Changes in student demographics.** Four of the six participating districts had at least one building labeled SINA (see Appendix F for details.). A recurring theme across these districts was their increased attention to the achievement levels of subgroups of students. For

example, in Superintendent L's district, the non-English speaking population within the community has exploded. In some classrooms, English Language Learners comprise over 70% of the population. The superintendent described the increase in the number of minority students:

Our enrollment is about 56% minority now with about 54% being Latino. The elementary schools are about 70% minority students to 30% white students, so I don't know if I would call them *minority* students now. Enrollments have actually flipped the other way around. When I started teaching here which would have been in late 1980s, we had a few Asian students, about two to three percent of the population. Now our minority population is roughly 56%, so a dramatic change has occurred in the past 20 years.

Superintendent L also noted that as the minority population increased so did the percent of students qualifying for the free or reduced breakfast and lunch program. In his district, the percent of students on free and reduced breakfast and lunch is "65.6% district wide, so we're high." The superintendent monitors achievement scores for students qualifying for both the ELL and free and reduced lunch programs and found a correlation in student achievement results in both subgroups. Thus the district had to find new ways to reach students with language barriers and low family income.

In Superintendent P's district, too, low test scores among the students who qualified for free or reduced lunch led to the elementary building's being labeled as SINA and PLAS. He reported that the current economy in the nation and the state have impacted his district:

When I first came here, we didn't have any building that had 50% or more of students qualifying for free or reduced priced breakfast or lunch. Currently one of the



elementary buildings is at 50 %. I attribute some of that increase to the economy.

Being a county seat town, I would assume that, unlike other communities, we have housing available for low-income people, which may be a factor in our increased population of students from low-income families.

Like Superintendent L, Superintendent P also found a correlation between achievement and two student subgroups in his district. As the number of students qualifying for free or reduced price breakfast or lunch increased, so did the number of students qualifying for special education services. “Typically students moving into the district are on the low socio-economic side. We also have more special education students than TAG students moving into the district.”

The one remaining district in the study found no correlation among achievement scores and subgroups of students. However, this district had a number of buildings on the SINA list. One of the SINA buildings had a large population (70%) of non-White students; another had a large population of ELL students; while the third building had a large population of students from low socio-economic families. The district continually monitors student enrollments because student achievement scores can be drastically impacted by either growth or declines in population of any one of the subgroups. All six participating superintendents hinted at being highly alert to changes in subgroup enrollments.

### **Superintendent Participants**

Each of the six superintendents interviewed for this study reported on his perceived influence on student achievement in the district. Responses indicate that superintendents influence student achievement through vision/setting expectations, alignment of curriculum

and professional development with district goals, personal and active involvement in student achievement, and employment of quality personnel.

**Vision/setting expectations.** Two superintendents reported being the visionary for the district and therefore the individual primarily responsible for plans and decisions related to student achievement. Superintendent L acknowledged that he is the “head conductor of everything” in the district. Superintendent N acknowledged, “I kind of have my nose in everything.” He added that a superintendent’s primary objective is to “look at the big picture” and “constantly question and challenge” the work that is being done in the name of continuous improvement. Superintendent L echoed this, saying, “Influencing student achievement requires me to ask the right questions and to ask those kinds of questions regularly.”

A third superintendent, Superintendent P, stated that his influence upon student achievement revolves more around *expectations* than on an overarching vision. For him, the biggest factor is “the expectations that a superintendent has for the staff.” He sets these expectations and then requires staff members to monitor and measure results. Superintendent P’s practice may be precipitated by the SINA designation in his district and the sense of urgency “to get off the list” and away from the negative connotations associated with being on the list.

**District alignment.** Another superintendent professed his belief that “district alignment” is his greatest influence on student achievement. When Superintendent P commenced his tenure in the district, each elementary building (there are six elementary buildings in the district) had its own curriculum and professional development; thus like grade levels in different buildings did not receive like curriculum, and the teachers did not

receive like professional development. Consequently, students were not guaranteed a consistent curriculum as they progressed through the grade levels. Superintendent P recognized that a common foundation had to be developed, stating, “Out of necessity, we became much more aligned. Now like grade levels are taught identical curriculum, and like grade level teachers receive the same professional development, which is aligned with district goals.”

**Personal and active involvement.** The fifth superintendent perceived the superintendent’s active role in student achievement as positive. Other superintendents reported having their *noses* in student achievement, but Superintendent O was entrenched in it.

I also serve as curriculum director, so I actually look at student achievement data. I attend our district’s data days, which in other districts might be a role normally assigned to the principal. I’m responsible for filling out the APR [annual progress report] and all the state reports.

This involvement evolved out of necessity. Superintendent O works in a small rural district where it is common for the superintendent to have other assigned positions such as curriculum director, technology director, or principal.

**Hiring quality personnel.**

Four of the superintendents commented on the importance of hiring quality personnel in the pursuit of improving student achievement. Superintendent K proclaimed his greatest influence in the student achievement arena is the hiring of great teachers and administrators. Due to its size and ability to pay good salaries, the district attracts quality applicants.

A large part of it [influencing student achievement] has to do with the quality of the teaching population. We are a very attractive district. We have the highest salary schedule in the state. As a place to live, our community has a very high quality of life, and so we receive applications not only from beginning teachers but also from veteran teachers. Therefore, we can be very picky, very choosy about who comes to teach here. Also, once people come here, they don't leave, so we have stability in our teaching force. The same thing applies to our administrators. We can be very selective about our administrative staff, and because of that I think we've got a lot of leverage in human capital, and that makes us perhaps better positioned to deal with the changing demographics [in the student population].

Superintendent K also emphasized the importance of quality personnel as a critical component to student performance at the classroom level.

The greatest leverage lies in the classroom with the kids. If you look at the Education Trust work with Katie Haycock, you learn that a kid who has a good teacher three years in a row is, at minimum, a year ahead of the kid who has had a mediocre teacher for three years in a row. Because we've got such a good staff here, I think we are far better prepared to deal with changing demographics.

### **Board President Participants**

In general, participating board members indicated they influence student achievement by establishing district-level goals, monitoring progress toward the goals, and allowing administration and staff members to do their work without board interference.

**Establishing district-level goals.** All six board presidents agreed that they influence student achievement by establishing district-level goals. Board President Z stated this board

role very succinctly; “The board sets expectations related to the *ends* [i.e., which students should acquire what knowledge at what cost].” Board President L added:

I think one of the first board roles is to have an understanding of student achievement; that is, an understanding of what we are trying to accomplish. Then the board needs to set the standards and make sure that we have the right people; that is, the right administrators and staff members, in place so we can reach the standards.

**Monitoring progress.** All six participating board members also referred to their role of monitoring progress on policy goals. Board President W commented:

Our [the board of education’s] role is to make sure checks and balances are being carried out. We monitor to ensure administrators are doing everything possible [to improve student achievement]. We check to see if administrators and teachers are looking at new programs that are available and at new teaching methods that need to be explored. [The board] is sort of a big brother. We are making sure that administration does everything possible to make sure the kids are successful.

**Getting out of the way.** Board President W summed up the belief of all six board of education presidents when he stated the board’s role – after establishing district-level goals – was “staying out of the superintendent’s business [and allowing him/her] to get it done!” Members of boards of education are, for the most part, lay people who have little or no educational experience other than having been a student at some point in their lives. For this reason, they may understand their proper role is to trust the experts (i.e., administrators and teachers) to carry out board district-level goals and policies.

Themes #1 and #2 related to the first two research questions: how do superintendents and board presidents view their influence on student achievement? The following section

discusses the association of the themes with the research questions first by all participants, then by superintendent participants and finally by board president participants.

Theme 1 presented the three subthemes that emerged from the superintendent and board president participants which related to student achievement and alignment: (a) definition of student achievement, (b) goal setting, and (c) resources. A truly aligned definition of student achievement appeared to be a missing component in five of the six districts. Congruent answers between superintendent and board president were apparent in only one of the districts interviewed. All six districts varied as to their definition of student achievement.

Goal setting for student outcomes appeared to be a constant conversation in all six districts. In all cases, much of the work was done behind the scenes and then presented to the board of education for final approval. None of the board presidents indicated a role in establishing the specific goals.

The final subtheme related to the alignment was resource allocation. Once again superintendents and board members revealed that resource allocation was a rubber stamp process. It is the superintendent's responsibility to develop and/or secure needed funding to enhance student achievement. The board's role is to grasp an understanding of how various initiatives or professional development impacts student achievement and approve the presented budget for such.

Theme 2 highlighted the monitoring of progress by superintendents and school boards towards established goals. There were two parts discussed: (a) student scores and (b) changes in student demographics. The primary method for districts to monitor goals was through the results of standardized test scores. Superintendents and board presidents used

these test results as a measure to determine: (a) overall student proficiency and (b) overall district improvement in student achievement.

Another aspect of the monitoring process was related to student demographics. Districts - superintendents in particular - watched various subgroup populations. If certain subgroups were rising in population, then certain supports may have been needed in order to offset any potential decreases in student achievement. This was especially true for the districts having SINA or DINA designations.

The six superintendent participants revealed their perceived influences on student achievement to be: vision/setting expectations, alignment of curriculum and professional development with district goals, personal and active involvement in student achievement, and employing quality personnel. The superintendents related their work to that of a CEO of a major company, but in their world CEO stands for Chief Education Official. Similar to the business world, the superintendent is expected to set the vision for the district and set the expectations for achieving this vision. Superintendents shared these expectations are accomplished via the alignment of curriculum and professional development, being personally active in the school improvement, and hiring the right people to get the work done.

Board president participants alleged they influence student achievement by establishing district-level goals, monitoring progress toward the goals, and allowing administration and staff members to do their work without board interference. Boards of education approve the student achievement goals on an annual basis. They expect the superintendent to provide updates regarding the progress on the established goals. Even though the boards of education were involved in both establishing district-level goals and

monitoring them, their involvement stopped there. All board presidents alluded to the fact that the superintendent is the educational leader for the district; therefore, the board needs to stand aside once the district-level goals are set and allow the superintendent to do the job he or she was hired to do.

**Theme #3: Hindrances that prevented the superintendent and board of education from making more rapid progress toward the accomplishment of the established goals.**

The final theme connected to the final two research questions: what do superintendents and school board presidents perceive are barriers to their influence on student achievement? The connection of the themes with the research questions are discussed initially by all participants once again and then by superintendent participants and board president participants.

**All participants**

This theme, based on the responses from all participants, is discussed in three parts: (a) changing the mindset, (b) legislative mandates, and (c) parental/community involvement.

**Changing the mindset.** In three districts, the superintendents perceived that *mindset* can impede growth in student achievement. In one district, it was staff mindset; in the second district, it was community mindset; and in the third, it was societal mindset.

Superintendent N does not want his district to settle for *good*; he wants the district to strive for *great*. Not everyone agrees with this goal.

For us, a barrier to improvement was our thinking that we were a good district, and as Collins said, ‘Good is the enemy of great.’ For a lot of people--especially staff members, good was good enough; test scores were good, and the district was meeting the state trajectory.



For Superintendent N, however, *good* translates to *status quo*, and “the status quo really has been our biggest obstacle to progress.” He had to work hard to convince staff members to change their mindset.

We had to change our understanding of what *progress* means. Continuous improvement is scary to some staff members, but I've told them often that the only constant is change. Nothing in the classroom stays the same for teachers.... Every year they have different kids with different needs. Each year the curriculum and instruction need to be adapted in order to meet the needs of the students. For example, one group of kids requires an extra week to learn how to multiply fractions. Well, okay, see how the teacher just modified the curriculum there. Convincing teachers to let go of some of their long-held beliefs about teaching has been one of my biggest challenges.

Superintendent N added that staff and board members' unwillingness to take risks is sometimes driven by finances.

At a time when school funding is sub par, no one wants to waste vital dollars. There is a mindset that we should take fewer risks because, well, financially if the new initiative doesn't work and we are out of money, then what happens? What some educators and board members do not realize is that failure is also a learning opportunity. We may lose a \$1,000, but you know we may gain some helpful insights, too.

Board President V observed that the biggest obstacle to improving student achievement in his district was the resistance of the community and school district to embrace change. The central issue was changing demographics. Because the community

contained three packinghouses, a number of non-white workers had moved into the community, creating language and cultural challenges. Although change was inevitable, there was substantial resistance. “Nobody likes change. Everybody hates change.” For the community, the focus had to be on how to integrate the newly transplanted workers into the community. For the school district, goal setting had to focus on how to integrate the children into the school system and how to educate them. In time, appropriate goals were developed and communicated to all vested parties. According to Board President V, the message, repeated frequently, was: “This is what we [community and school] need to do; here is how we’re going to accomplish it, and we’re going to do this as a team.”

Superintendent K perceived there was another mindset to change; i.e., “equal is not always equal.” This societal mindset revolved around struggling students who needed additional academic support:

If you look at the deficit base within which some students operate, I think you can clearly make a case that we are not serving students well who need the greatest amount of help. People sometimes look externally and say, ‘Look at how those charter schools are working around the country.’ And they single out programs such as the Harlem Children Zone or the KIP academies. What they do not know is that those schools have the kids from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. They have them every other Saturday. They don’t offer the array of electives that we do. In fact, they require kids to take only reading, writing, and math until they perform at grade level. Kids are not allowed to take art, music, and gym and all kinds of other things until they know how to read, write, and do math.

Superintendent K's remarks address the question: What is the purpose of public education? The goal of present-day public education in the United States appears to be: develop a well-rounded student. Superintendent K questions the wisdom of that goal:

One could argue that you're not going to raise a well-rounded child if you don't give him/her exposure to many academic areas and extracurricular activities as they are growing. However, I think you can make the converse argument that graduating students who can't read, write, or do math at grade level sets them up for a lifetime of failures. Now you bring out the scales of justice and say to your third graders who are reading at the kindergarten level, 'I'm sorry you're not going to have music because you need an extra reading intervention.' 'You're not going to have art because you need an extra math intervention because you're not functioning at grade level.' 'I can't have you finishing third grade below the third grade reading level.'

Superintendent K was adamant that students falling into the subcategories of the socio-economically poor, special education, or English language learners should not receive an *equal* education.

By state law, special education kids must have music class; ESL kids must take art class; poor kids must have PE. For me, the issue is: Is it really fair to those kids to treat them equally with the other kids? I'm not sure I know the answer to that yet, but I think one can make the argument that it's not fair!

At the heart of Superintendent K's arguments are these questions: (a) is it time to revisit America's mindset that the goal of public education is to develop well-rounded students? (b) Should all students be treated equally, or should some requirements be waived for disadvantaged students in an effort to treat them fairly?

At the heart of this section is changing the mindset about and within education. No longer can districts continue to remain status quo. Districts and communities are being asked to think differently about education. This may be due to financial constraints or a more worldly view of wanting students to be able to complete globally.

**Legislative mandates.** According to six of the 12 interviewees, a significant obstacle to attainment of student achievement goals is the No Child Left Behind legislation. Even though the intent is commendable, the punitiveness of the law often stymies districts' student achievement efforts. For Board President V the federal legislation is an example of inappropriate involvement at the national level. "I honestly think that the federal government has no business sticking their hands into local school districts. We have a state department of education, as does every state, for purposes of overseeing the educational process." Superintendent B embraced this when he stated, "the philosophy of how we're educating students should have been left at the state and local level, not at the federal level." Superintendent K relayed his thoughts about the legislation:

I'm fully supportive of No Child Left Behind in the sense that I think it's inherently important that we disaggregate achievement data by socio economic status, by minority status, and by English as second language status – as required by the law. We need to know how all students, including poor, Hispanic, and second language students are performing. If we don't know, if we don't desegregate data, then we could very easily overlook those kids.

Prior to No Child Left Behind, districts often lacked information about students in subgroups. In districts where standardized test results were high, subgroup data were often

ignored. The overall proficiency rating overshadowed the performance of some subgroups.

For these reasons, Superintendent K believes that the law helps level the playing field:

[Senators] Miller and Kennedy were right to push No Child Left Behind as a civil rights bill because we were ignoring kids in some subgroups. In a district like ours, with so many kids succeeding, it's pretty easy to miss the kids who aren't.

On the other hand, the legislation includes provisions for punishing schools that do not meet requirements. Board President X bemoaned, “there is *[sic]* too many demographics that weigh on (impact) student achievement with the NCLB law.” For example, test scores of a small number of students (30) who do not perform at established levels results in the building’s being labeled a School In Need of Assistance even though the rest of the student population may be performing well above established levels. Superintendent K described the unfairness of this provision of the law:

The problem with it [the law] is if there is a sufficient number of students who are failing in a particular cluster in that cell, they reach the reportable number, and the building is placed on the watch list. Even though a small number of students is failing, that doesn’t mean the entire building is failing nor does it mean the district is failing. However, with such a narrow data point, the building is painted a failure.

Superintendent K realizes that when a building is placed on the SINA list, public perception is that the entire building is failing when in actuality it is likely a small number of students who are not performing at established levels.

I think a building being placed on SINA is a disservice to the general public. I think it is a disservice to the teachers in that building and the students in the building. I think it's a disservice to the neighborhood.

In fact, it is more than a disservice. Once a school has been labeled SINA, its resources are often in jeopardy because the law allows parents to transfer their children to another school building within the district that is not a SINA building. Superintendent K described the problem:

Once a school is designated SINA, the parents become frightened. They open enroll their kids into a non-SINA building in the district. The SINA school must pay for transporting the children to their new school. Such a use of resources doesn't help kids at all. In fact, the law causes SINA buildings to use money that would be better spent on other things.

The No Child Left Behind legislation conceivable was intended to guarantee quality education to all students. It forced districts to not just focus on the total proficiency rating but delve into the sub group populations within the district, as well. The frustration lies with the harshness of penalties bestowed on districts or schools when acceptable progress is not accomplished. Superintendent D lamented, "It forces us to teach to the test (ITBS and ITED) instead of our local curriculum."

**Parental/Community Involvement.** Superintendent L reported that lack of parental and community involvement is an obstacle to increased student achievement in his district. " "

The largest barrier we have is the fact that our community isn't engaged. The reason I say that is that research indicates that parent involvement is very important to students' success in school. Yet, the parents in our district are not very involved.

Superintendent L speculated on reasons parents may not be actively engaged. "Our community either has faith in us or figures they pay us to educate their children." He supported this statement by acknowledging that he has received comments that it is his job to

be the educational leader and the community expects him to do his work without meddling from them.

Even though Superintendent L was the only interviewee to discuss explicitly the lack of community involvement, four additional superintendents and five board presidents alluded to low attendance at board meetings. They attributed the lack of attendance to one of two attitudes – apathy or support for what the district is doing. All participants leaned toward the latter, stating they had received few phone calls or emails expressing criticism of the district or its actions.

I just think people are so busy, I want to say self-absorbed, but that might be a little bold.... A lot of my families are working two jobs, and I won't say they don't have time for their kids, but I've walked through the plants [packing plants], and these aren't easy jobs!

From his remarks, it is apparent that Superintendent L attributes the lack of parental involvement to family poverty and the demanding nature of jobs in the community. Parents working two jobs have very little time to help their children with homework or other educational activities let alone attend a meeting at school. Further, some parents, because of the type of work they perform, are simply too exhausted to be involved with their children's education.

### **Superintendent Participants**

Superintendents in the study did not report any additional barriers to their influence on student achievement. Their responses supported the comments of the full participant group.

### **Board President Participants**

In addition to what already has been noted, the participating school board presidents discussed a variety of additional barriers to student achievement. Five of the six interviewees responded that school finances were the major impediment to improved student achievement. Other perceived barriers were: (a) demographic barriers, (b) communication, and (c) board unity.

**Finances.** Public schools are asked to raise student achievement levels while maintaining transparency and financial responsibility of the taxpayers' investment (IASB, 2009). However, board presidents participating in this study perceived under-funding of districts as the primary obstacle to improved student achievement. They lamented the difficulty of raising test scores without the dollars required to support student achievement efforts such as professional development of teachers, support staff, and administrators. Board President Y commented on the continuous worry about adequate funding:

It's tough. When there is that constant fear in the background [about school finances], it has a negative impact on student achievement. For example, when teachers are afraid of losing their jobs, the consequences just permeate the school and the classroom.

Adequate funding for education is a constant conversation among educational proponents. This year that conversation has elevated in intensity in response to the educational funding freeze proposed by the Governor of Iowa. Districts will be forced to prioritize spending due to increased costs and lack of sufficient revenue to offset them. This prioritized spending will have an impact at the classroom level, as well. Lack of sufficient



funds for such items as professional development or implementation and maintenance of effective programs or initiatives has a negative effect on student growth.

Board President V stated, “Funding is always an issue.” Board President U concurred:

The more tools you have at your disposal, the easier it is to impact student achievement. With tight finances, you have to give up some things. Will you give up professional development? If you do, how will teachers get better? Will you forgo the purchase of proven curricular materials? Selecting what to do with limited funding – that’s a challenge!

For Board President Z, whose district experiences increasing student enrollment every year, the finance issue is slightly different. Board President Z complained, “School funding in Iowa is not *on-time funding*. Districts receive per pupil funding based on the previous year’s enrollment. Being a district that’s grows by a 100 to 200 students a year, we always face that challenge.” The challenge for the district is how to hire additional staff or purchase adequate resources for these new students when per pupil funds for them are not received until 12 months later.

Providing sufficient funding for education may be a never-ending saga. As districts have to prioritize funding, it will become critical to fund those initiatives or areas that have the greatest potential for success regarding student achievement. Not doing so could have a negative impact on student achievement.

**Changing student demographics.** Half of the board presidents participating in this study (three of six) were concerned with student demographic shifts within their communities. These districts (B, C, and E) have an increasing number of students qualifying

for free or reduced price meals. In fact, two of these districts are well above the state average for the number of qualifying students (see Appendix F). Even though the third district is below the state average, there are deep pockets of poverty within the district.

Districts B and C also experienced increases in their English language learner (ELL) population. The influx of non-English speaking students into District B forced the district to implement programs to teach English as a second language and stymied student achievement results. In District C, these students flowed into some buildings in greater numbers than in other buildings, causing individual buildings, rather than the entire district, to address ELL needs. Further, in order for ELL students to be successful on standardized tests, they first need to understand the language. Inability to understand English caused an immediate drop in the number of proficient students and resulted in SINA and DINA designations for both districts. In both districts, through professional development, teachers and administrators have been trained on how to work most effectively with these students. All three board presidents admitted they were struggling to meet the needs of increasing numbers of diverse learners. Board President Z summed up the quandary by asking, “How can we best address the needs of our students who aren’t achieving, and how can we know if progress is being made? In addition, how much of the decrease in student achievement correlates with the change in student demographics?” None of the board presidents claimed to have an answer to the demographic or subgroup achievement gap, but all are quick to point out it is a constant conversation at the board table.

**Communication.** Three board presidents highlighted how communication was an obstacle in their respective districts. Board President X emphasized the need to increase communication with parents because a district cannot bridge achievement gaps without

support from the home environment and uninformed parents cannot provide support. The first step, according to this board president, is to keep parents informed of their child's academic progress, thus allowing them to take more responsibility for the child's learning.

If a child falls behind, the parent needs to be involved and accountable. Teachers need to communicate to the parents what the child should be doing and what homework needs to be done. We [the district] have to increase the communication and encourage parents to become more responsible for their child's learning.

In Districts B and C, this issue was not how to increase communication but simply how to communicate to an increasing population of non-English speaking parents. Board President V related his view not only as board president but also from his role in public safety:

It's been a struggle...communication. If I can't communicate with you, if I can't find a way to communicate with you, how do I reach you? We've got to get that line of communication open either teaching you the English language, or finding a way to communicate with you in your native language in an effort understand each other.

He emphasized this is not only significant to student achievement but for the community as a whole. Both Board President V and Board President Z highlighted the various avenues to provide communication to the non-English speaking parents and patrons within the district: notices printed in several languages, using translation services for communication, district webpages that can be translated into various languages, and providing personal translators during important meetings (e.g. parent/teacher conferences, discipline matters, and special education meetings).

**Board unity.** The importance of boards working together was implied by all of the board presidents. Board President Y emphasized, “we (the board) accomplish our goals much quicker if we work together versus wanting to accomplish personal agendas.” One board president described how the lack of unity can become a barrier to student achievement.

When board members seek school board membership to accomplish their own personal agendas rather than the education of students, board divisions are likely to occur and impede district progress especially in the area of student achievement. Further, dissension among board members often leads to loss of public confidence. Conversely, when a board is unified, the beneficiaries include both the students and the community. Board President W acknowledged the importance of a united board, “For the first time our board is actually here for the kids, for the educational system.” He continued:

We [the board of education] want to educate children. We need tax revenues in order to do that. For the first time in my tenure, our board, with a united front, has been straightforward, upfront with the public regarding the need for a tax increase and the uses of those monies. The public now trusts this board to know what is best for children. They are behind us and tell us, ‘If this costs me 20 cents more in taxes, that’s okay because I know my children are going to get a better education.’

The experience of this board president highlighted the positive impact of a united board of education. When a board acts in such a manner, their actions underscore their common goal of providing a quality education for the children of their public school district.

The third and final theme related to the final two research questions: what do superintendents and board presidents perceive are barriers to their influence on student achievement. This theme presented the hindrances the superintendents and board presidents

perceived to inhibit a more rapid progress towards accomplishing the established goals. Interviewees discussed four main barriers: (a) finances, (b) changing the mindset, (c) legislative mandates, and (d) parental/community involvement. Finance was at the center of each discussion. Superintendents and board presidents reported the feeling of being strapped by lack of sufficient funding in order to make more rapid progress. In many instances, district leaders discussed establishing funding priorities in order to accommodate the lack of adequate finances.

Changing the mindset of educators and community members was highlighted as an obstacle to advancing student achievement. Superintendents were discouraged by the lack of risk taking on the part of teachers. Classroom instructors were unwilling to “stick their necks out” and risk potential failure even when district leadership encouraged such action. Outside of the brick walls of the school, community members do not necessarily embrace change. This change may be in the form of something different for their children educationally or the changing of demographics within the community. Change is acceptable as long as it happens to the next person.

A third obstacle to improving student achievement at a more rapid pace was legislative mandates. Superintendents and board presidents, alike, bemoaned the No Child Left Behind legislation. Each felt the intent of the legislation was commendable; however, the consequences for not meeting the established legislative expectations were discouraging to staff and community.

A final obstacle was lack of parental and community involvement in education. The apathy of the community could be the positive result of trust bestowed on the school board and superintendent. The patrons have confidence in the leadership and elected officials of

the school district to place the children's best interest at the top of every decision. Another possible hypothesis is the lack of time parents have for such involvement. This is especially true in the low socioeconomic households. Many of these parents are working two jobs to support their families.

School board president participants discussed a variety of difficulties they perceived to slow progress with student achievement. Five of the six interviewees replied that school finances were the major impediment to improved student achievement. Other perceived barriers were: (a) demographic barriers, (b) communication, and (c) board unity.

The present condition of finances in Iowa schools is bleak. Districts are forced to prioritize spending at a time when accountability for student achievement scores is at an all time high. Difficult budgeting decisions are occurring at board tables in order to deal with increasing costs but decreasing revenue.

Board presidents discussed issues with overcoming ever-changing student demographic barriers within their districts. Participants reported the difficulties associated with increasing subpopulations: English Language Learner population, free and reduced meal price participants, and those qualifying for special education services.

Linked to the demographic barriers is communication especially for the districts with a growing population of non-English speaking families. Affected board presidents expressed the difficulties providing two-way communication for this population.

Finally, board presidents alluded to the importance of working as a team. Educational goals are accomplished at a more rapid pace if the board works together. Dissention among board members can lead to lack of confidence among the constituency.

## Summary

In this chapter I presented the findings of the study that are based on the analysis of interview transcripts and review of relevant documents. Findings were discussed in three parts that correspond with the major themes that emerged from the data: (a) alignment of the superintendent and board of education members in terms of the district's student achievement goals, (b) monitoring of progress towards student achievement goals by the superintendent and board of education, and (c) hindrances that prevented the superintendent and board of education from making more rapid progress toward the accomplishment of the established goals.

In the first section, the alignment of the superintendent and board president in terms of student achievement goals, discussion focused on (a) the definition of student achievement, (b) goal setting, (c) superintendent/board of education agreement, and (d) resource allocation.

The second section, the monitoring of progress toward student achievement goals, included discussion of two topics: (a) the reporting of standardized test scores, and (b) the constant evaluation of fluctuations in student demographics.

These sections connected with the first two research questions of this study: How do superintendents and board presidents view their influence on student achievement? In addition, the first two sections highlighted the themes associated by all participants. The superintendent participants revealed their perceived influences on student achievement to be: vision/setting expectations, alignment of curriculum and professional development with district goals, personal and active involvement in student achievement, and employing quality personnel. Board president participants perceived they influence student achievement

by establishing district-level goals, monitoring progress toward the goals, and allowing administration and staff members to do their work without board interference.

The final section, hindrances that prevented the achievement of student learning goals at a more rapid pace, included discussion of (a) changing the mindset, (b) legislative mandates, and (c) parental/community involvement. This section aligned with the final research questions of this study: What do superintendents and board presidents perceive are barriers to their influence on student achievement?

School board president participants replied that school finances were the major impediment to improved student achievement. Other perceived barriers were: (a) demographic barriers, (b) communication, and (c) board unity.

Chapter 5 discusses the themes that emerged from this study and poses recommendations for practice and future research.



## CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to understand district-level leaderships' perceived influences upon student achievement. Specifically, the study focused on the perceptions of Iowa superintendents and school board presidents who, though they may be far removed from the classroom, make vital decisions that impact student achievement. The secondary purpose of the study was to understand the barriers that superintendents and school boards face when striving to increase students' academic achievement.

Data sources for this study were semi-structured face-to-face interviews with six public school superintendents and six board of education presidents as well as review of relevant documents. This chapter discusses study findings, draws conclusions based on the findings, delineates implications and recommendations for practice, and makes recommendations for future research.

### Discussion

Analysis of data from two sources, interviews and documents, resulted in three overarching themes: (a) alignment of the superintendent and board of education members in terms of the district's student achievement goals; (b) monitoring of progress toward student achievement goals by the superintendent and board of education; and (c) hindrances that prevented the superintendent and board of education from making more rapid progress toward the accomplishment of the established goals.

Insights from these themes provide preliminary answers to the four fundamental research questions that framed this study:

1. How do superintendents view their influence on student achievement?
2. How do school board presidents view their influence on student achievement?

3. What do superintendents perceive are barriers to their influence on student achievement?
4. What do school board presidents perceive are barriers to their influence on student achievement?

Themes (a) *alignment of the superintendent and board of education members in terms of the district's student achievement goals*, and (b) *monitoring of progress toward student achievement goals by the superintendent and board of education*, address Research

Questions 1 and 2: How do superintendents and board presidents view their influence on student achievement? The final theme in the findings, *hindrances that prevented the superintendent and board of education from making more rapid progress toward the accomplishment of the established goals*, answers Research Questions 3 and 4: What do superintendents and school board presidents perceive are barriers to their influence on student achievement? The following sections of this chapter discuss the research questions and related themes that emerged from the study along with existing literature on those topics.

### **Research Questions 1 and 2: How do superintendents and board presidents view their influence on student achievement?**

Marzano & Waters (2009) conducted a meta-analysis of research studies on district leadership behaviors. Their findings, graphically displayed in Figure 1 of Chapter 2, describe five district-level leadership responsibilities aimed at improving student achievement: (a) ensuring collaborative goal setting, (b) establishing nonnegotiable goals for achievement and instruction; (c) creating board alignment and support for district goals; (d) monitoring achievement and instruction goals; and (d) allocating resources to support the goals for achievement and instruction (Marzano & Waters, 2009).

Two themes emerged from the data relating to Research Questions 1 and 2: (a) alignment of the superintendent and board of education members in terms of the district's student achievement goals and (b) monitoring of progress toward student achievement goals by the superintendent and board of education. These themes directly relate to two of the Marzano & Waters (2009) model responsibilities: creating board alignment and support for district goals and monitoring achievement and instruction goals.

The first theme that emerged from the data was: alignment of the superintendent and board of education members in terms of the district's student achievement goals. This theme not only resonated with the first two research questions, but also aligned with two responsibilities from the Marzano & Waters (2009) model: *ensuring collaborative goal setting* and *creating board alignment with and support of district goals*.

From participants' responses, three subthemes related to alignment emerged: (a) definition of student achievement, (b) goal setting, and (c) resources.

### **Definition of Student Achievement**

To the chagrin of this researcher, the Marzano & Waters (2009) research was absent of any foundation work prior to establishing, aligning, and monitoring goals. I, as the researcher, felt that an agreed-upon definition of *student achievement* was foundational to the process of improving student achievement.

Superintendents and board presidents were asked, "How has your district defined student achievement?" In all but one district, a truly aligned definition of student achievement was not evident. District C's superintendent and board president were aligned in their definition. Building on this misalignment, when comparing all of the districts, the

responses were mixed with no district aligned to another. It appears that this foundational sector would need to be concrete before goals are built upon it.

### **Goal Setting**

In all six districts, setting goals for student achievement appeared to be a constant conversation at the board table. In all instances, much of the work was completed by the superintendent and/or his designees and then presented to the board of education for final approval. Contrary to Marzano & Waters' (2009) research, none of the board presidents indicated participation in establishing learning goals. Nor was it alluded to that other board members participated. In District A, Board President U noted that the board of education relies heavily on the superintendent and SIAC (School Improvement Advisory Committee) members to establish student achievement goals and then present them to the board for final approval. The Iowa Legislature (2009) only mandates that the goals be developed collaboratively with input from a diverse group of stakeholders. There is no mention that board members must partake in the process.

### **Resources**

A third subtheme related to alignment was resource allocation. This subtheme aligned with another of Marzano & Waters' identified responsibilities: *allocating resources to support the goals for achievement and instruction*. For educational purposes resources include money, curricular supplies, technology, and human capital. Marzano (2009) reported that a positive relationship exists between financial (money) resources and student achievement. Thus districts striving to increase student achievement need to allocate funds for programs or initiatives aligned with improving the identified weaknesses in the curriculum or instruction.

Analysis of the study data revealed that school board members relied heavily on the recommendations from the superintendent when approving a budget for improvement initiatives. Board member comments supported the notion that budget allocation simply meant, “supporting the superintendent’s proposal.” The duty of the board to provide financial support for goals should not be taken lightly. The appropriate allocation of resources by a board of education will determine the success of the district in its improvement efforts (IASB, 2007).

The second theme that emerged from the data was monitoring of progress toward student achievement goals by the superintendent and board of education. This theme also associated with the first two research questions and aligned with a responsibility from the Marzano & Waters (2009) model: *monitoring achievement and instruction goals*. Participants discussed this theme in two parts: (a) student scores and (b) changes in student demographics.

### **Student Scores**

From the perspective of the superintendent, monitoring student achievement is accomplished through serving and supporting schools in the district (Carr, 2005). At the board level, the monitoring role is one of receiving and reviewing reports regarding progress on the established goals (IASB, 2007). In all cases, standardized test scores were the primary source to determine both overall student proficiency and overall district improvement in student achievement. Board President V referred to monitoring as “two-way flow of information.” Information is presented to the board of education who in turns asks questions or cultivates a suggestion for improvement.

### **Changing Student Demographics**

Another component that emerged as a subtheme of monitoring was related to student demographics. In two-thirds of the districts participating in the study, changing student demographics were a concern. Ironically, all of these districts have been designated as SINA, DINA, and/or PLAS districts. These districts noted the need to keep a watchful eye on certain subgroup populations. As the number of students belonging to a subgroup increased, supports were implemented to counterbalance any potential decreases in student achievement.

The six superintendents participating shared their perceived influences on student achievement to be: vision/setting expectations, alignment of curriculum and professional development with district goals, personal and active involvement in student achievement, and employing quality personnel.

### **Vision/Setting Expectations**

When superintendents discussed being the visionary for the district and establishing expectations, there was a hint of another identified responsibility in the Marzano & Waters model: *creating board alignment with and support of district goals*. Superintendents believed that their role was to be visionary, enabling boards of education to envision the possibilities and then set expectations to transform the possibility into a reality.

Superintendent N conceded that his primary objective as superintendent is to “look at the big picture” and “constantly question and challenge” the board of education and staff to think differently about learning.

The establishing expectations subtheme attaches to the concept of goal setting at the district level. When instituting expectations, the superintendent is delegating the duties of

meeting goals to the appropriate personnel. Superintendent P shared that he “sets the expectations based on board goals and then requires staff members to monitor and measure results.”

### **Alignment of Curriculum and Professional Development with District Goals**

Superintendents took the alignment component a step further than having board alignment with district goals. Superintendents perceived alignment to mean that all staff in the district were working toward a common goal. District F’s superintendent referred to this as “district alignment.” Prior to his arrival each elementary building had its own curriculum and professional development; thus like grade levels in different buildings did not receive like curriculum, and the teachers did not receive like professional development. Further, when the SINA and PLAS designations were placed on District E, the superintendent quickly went to work on district alignment of instruction and curriculum. Superintendent O discussed the critical importance of alignment in order for the district to get off “the list.”

This alignment piece supports the defined autonomy component in the literature review. Marzano & Waters (2009) described defined autonomy as doing the right work in the improvement process. Elmore (2003) related this as working smarter not simply working harder. The superintendents determined the right work to be alignment of curriculum and professional development with district goals. Research findings indicate the burden of doing the right work should not fall on the shoulders of a select few; it should be distributed or balanced among groups of stakeholders such as board members, central office personnel, building-level administrators, and teachers (Elmore, 2004; Neuman & Simmons, 2000).

### **Personal and Active Involvement in Student Achievement**

Carr (2005) stated that accountability is automatically built in when the superintendent is involved in school improvement efforts. Superintendents N and O discussed their day-to-day involvement in the achievement efforts of the district. Both served as the curriculum directors for their respective districts. This allowed them to have their “noses in everything” as Superintendent N responded. Even though this was choice for both, it was also a necessity due to the district student population size. The other superintendents in the study proclaimed to be somewhat active in the student achievement efforts but admittedly delegated most of the work to other building-level administrators or central office staff.

### **Employing Quality Personnel**

Superintendents highlighted one of the most important influences on student achievement to be hiring quality personnel. Such comments by the superintendents are reinforced by a significant research base. Teaching is the leading factor influencing student learning (IASB, 2008; Kemp & Hall, 1992; Vitaska, 2008). The quality of the teacher is the most important school factor leading to improved achievement results (Goldhaber & Anthony, 2004; Haycock, 1998; Marzano, 2003). Superintendent K emphasized the importance of the classroom teacher when he stated, “a kid who has a good teacher three years in a row is, at minimum, a year ahead of the kid who has had a mediocre teacher for three years in a row.”

The other important hire relating to student achievement is the building-level leadership. The role of the building-level leader has evolved from one simply of managing the school to that of instructional leader (Vitaska, 2008). Building leadership is second only



to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn in school (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2004; Vitaska, 2008; Waters & Marzano, 2006). The superintendent participants concurred with the research on building-level leaders. They also indicated that principals are vital to every school improvement initiative in the district.

Absent from the data was the topic of nonnegotiable goals for achievement and instruction. The nonnegotiables are a result of the goal setting process. These are firm achievement targets for students that all teachers and administrators are held accountable for and involves the continuous improvement of pedagogical skills among the teaching staff (Marzano & Waters, 2009). Neither superintendents nor board presidents touched upon establishing nonnegotiables. Inferring from the comments on district alignment by superintendents, a guaranteed, viable curriculum is priority. What they may not realize is that nonnegotiable goals for achievement and instruction may need to be developed in order to ensure this guaranteed, viable curriculum.

**Research Questions 3 and 4: What do superintendents and board presidents perceive are barriers to their influence on student achievement?**

A final theme that emerged from the data was: hindrances that prevented the superintendent and board of education from making more rapid progress toward the accomplishment of the established goals. Included in these discussions were: (a) changing the mindset, (b) legislative mandates, and (c) parental/community involvement.

**Changing the Mindset**

Superintendents and board presidents were asked, “What obstacles do you feel slow the progress of improving student achievement?” The participants discussed changing the

mindset of teachers and community members alike. At a time when accountability is at an all time high, superintendents are frustrated that teachers were unwilling to take risks.

District-level leaders expressed the feeling that teachers believed student achievement was good enough. None of the superintendents were comfortable with this belief.

Superintendent N referenced the work of Jim Collins, ‘Good is the enemy of great.’

Superintendent O supported this comment, “we need to allow them (teachers) to be risk takers, and if they fail, let them know it is okay.”

Other participants contributed a slightly different perspective. They lamented on the unwillingness of the community to embrace change. Such comments stemmed from the districts experiencing a change in student demographics. These communities had to determine what the needs were for their new community members, how to meet the needs, and how to accomplish this as a community.

Board President V exclaimed, “Nobody likes change; everyone hates it.” However, in his mind this is not acceptable. More appropriate to say is: nothing stays the same. In his community, it was pivotal the community embraced the transplanted packing plant workers. Community members either accepted the reality or left the community. Superintendent L related this to education as well. “Staff members have adapted to the student population changes in our school. Those who didn’t either left or retired.”

Another mindset that needs to change according to Superintendent K was the understanding that “equal is not always equal.” This is a societal mindset change that addresses the need of struggling learners. The dilemma surrounding this particular issue is understanding the purpose of public education. Superintendent K questioned the “well-rounded student” argument that permeates education versus students “performing at grade

level.” He justified this statement by adding, “graduating students who can’t read, write, or do math at grade level sets them up for a lifetime of failures.” Comments from this particular superintendent alluded to his desire to “establish nonnegotiable goals for achievement” (Marzano & Waters, 2009). Superintendent K’s aspiration is to have students perform at grade level academically. For those struggling learners, additional academic assistance would be offered during the school day during “specials time.” However, by state law, students are not allowed to be removed from special classes such as music, art, and physical education in order to receive additional instructional assistance in academic areas. The challenge then becomes changing the status quo belief of our public educational system. Society has to determine which is more important, a well-rounded student or one who can perform in academically at grade level.

### **Legislative Mandates**

All twelve participants commented on the No Child Left Behind legislation during conversations regarding student achievement or during conversations concerning obstacles to more rapid student achievement progress. Coincidentally, those that viewed the legislation as a barrier to quicker advancement were from districts that held one or more designations associated with not meeting the expectations of the legislation (e.g. SINA, DINA, PLAS). Districts are struggling to cope with legislative mandates that use student test scores to determine not only the quality of educational programs in school, but also the quality of school districts (Elmore, 1999-2000).

The intent of the No Child Left Behind was to guarantee a quality education for all students. Districts were forced to not only focus on total student proficiency, but also subgroup achievement scores. The frustration among superintendents and board presidents

lies with the harsh penalties placed on individual schools and districts when acceptable progress is not made.

### **Parental/Community Involvement**

The final subtheme relating to hindrances of more rapid progress in student achievement was parental and community involvement. Superintendents and board presidents raised concern about the apparent apathy of the district patrons relating to education. With the exception of one district, attendance at board meetings is non-existent. Local PTA or other parent-focused meetings are poorly attended. Parents appeared to be less involved in the education of their children from attending meetings to involvement with homework.

Superintendents reinforced the important role parents have in the education of their children. Parental involvement in a child's education models the importance placed on education (Jacobs & Harvey, 2005). Simply assisting a child with homework and providing a dedicated location within the home for studying demonstrates the significance of education (Fehrmann et al., 1987; Patton, 1994). Superintendent L attributed this to the busy schedules that parents hold. In his community, he sees parents working two jobs in order to support their family. In his observation, "these aren't easy jobs" referring to the number of packing plants in his community. Parents are simply too exhausted to be more involved in their children's education.

Community apathy was another portion of this subtheme. Participants lamented on the number of community members that attend a board meeting. Board presidents and superintendents indicated the importance of community support and involvement in the success of the school district. However, it appeared that the expectation of the community

was placed more on the superintendent to be involved in the community than the community to be involved in the local educational system. A superintendent's involvement and actions in the community are fundamental to building patron confidence which leads to passage of necessary levies and additional taxes. If a superintendent fails to build such confidence, he/she may pay a price later (Crowson, 1992). For superintendents and board presidents this appeared to be quite hypocritical. The involvement was one-way instead of the necessary two-way, working together mentality. However, Superintendent L speculated that his community simply had faith in him and the board of education to do the right thing for students.

The participating school board presidents discussed a variety of barriers to student achievement in addition to the previously mentioned. Five of the six interviewees responded that school finances were the major impediment to improved student achievement. Other perceived barriers were: (a) demographic barriers, (b) communication, and (c) board unity.

### **Finances**

The resounding response from the board president participants was “finances!” Superintendents and board presidents alike reported the lack of sufficient funding for schools is slowing student achievement progress. Board President Y added, “When there is a constant fear in the background, it has a negative impact on student achievement.” I understood this comment to mean that when a teacher is worried about the possibility of losing his or her job, less effort is placed on teaching and learning. At the board level, the most significant contribution to student achievement is allocation of resources (IASB, 2007). However, when the resources are declining, the superintendent and board of education team has to prioritize spending.

### **Changing Student Demographics**

Half of the board presidents participating in this study (three of six) were concerned with student demographic shifts within their communities and the barriers this created for student learning. These districts (B, C, and E) reported increases in non-English speaking students, students qualifying for reduced price meals, and students qualifying for special education services. In the previous monitoring section, board presidents reported the need to monitor these subgroups. NCLB forces districts to review subgroup progress on achievement tests (Farkas, Johnson, Duffet, & Foleno, 2001). Two districts reported that an increase in non-English speaking students caused their overall proficiency percentage to drop. The superintendent in District C commented, “If you have difficulty understanding English, you are not going to do well on the ITBS or ITED.” As was the case in District B, non-proficient subgroups require additional resources to meet achievement proficiency standards. This elevates the vicious cycle of inadequate resources to improve student achievement.

### **Communication**

Correlating with an increasing non-English speaking population is the hurdle of communication. Two board presidents discussed the difficulty the district faced trying to communicate with growing non-English speaking populations. Board Presidents V and Z highlighted the importance of finding avenues for communication. Successful approaches in their districts have been: notices printed in several languages, using translation services for communication, district web pages that can be translated into various languages, and providing personal translators during important meetings (e.g. parent/teacher conferences, discipline matters, and special education meetings).

Another board president discussed the importance of communicating with parents. If the district is going to improve student achievement, parents must be part of the educational process. A district cannot bridge the achievement gap without the support from the home environment. However, an uninformed parent has no idea the important role he/she plays. Board President X wants to “increase communication and encourage parents to become more responsible for their child’s learning” and work with the school staff to improve student achievement in his district. His goal for the district is two-fold: (a) increase communication, and (b) increase parental involvement.

### **Board Unity**

Board presidents alluded to the importance of working as a team. Educational goals are accomplished at a more rapid pace if the board works together. Dissention among board members can lead to lack of confidence among the constituency. Conversely, when a board is unified, the beneficiaries are the students and the community.

Board President W shared his experience participating on unified and non-unified school boards. In previous years, the community held very little confidence in the board of education. Levies and bond referendums failed to gain the necessary voter support. He continued that the board is now unified and “the public now trusts this board to know what is best for children.” The experience of this board president highlighted the positive impact of a united board of education. When a board acts in such a manner, their actions underscore their common goal of providing a quality education for the children of their public school district.

Marzano & Waters (2009) described defined autonomy as selecting the right work to do in the improvement process. Initially, this statement resonates as a responsibility for a

building-level or district-level leader. Based on the experience of Superintendent W, defined autonomy should have a seat at the board table as well. Understanding the right work can assist board members in making solid decisions especially in the area of student achievement.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Practice**

The findings of this study point to five recommendations for addressing and improving the influence that superintendents and board presidents have on student achievement, and reducing barriers that impede progress toward improved student achievement. The five recommendations are: (a) define *student achievement*, (b) improve board of education professional development, (c) understand that *equal* is not always equal, (d) decrease the punitive components of federal legislation, and (e) do the right work.

#### **Recommendation 1: Define Student Achievement**

Because a common definition of student achievement is a prerequisite for all achievement efforts (e.g., goal setting, monitoring of progress), all twelve interviewees (six superintendents and six school board presidents) were asked, “How does your district define student achievement?” In five of the six districts, definitions by the superintendent and corresponding board president of the district were disjointed. Only in District C was there agreement of a definition by the superintendent and board president.

In District C, both the superintendent and board president, independently, referenced board policies pertaining to student achievement. The superintendent stated that the foundation of student achievement starts in the district’s Level 1 Global Ends Policy that calls for “the need to have critical thinkers who are prepared to live and work in the 21st Century.” According to the superintendent, the next level, Level 2, of the policy, “measures



student achievement in five areas: reading, mathematics, science, social studies, and writing.”

District C’s board president also described various levels of the Global Ends Policy. He provided an example of a Level 2 policy on mathematics that states the level of math skill development that the board expects the district to achieve. He added that the board set the goal for annual yearly progress in math skill development “at the same level or a higher level every year.”

Despite the congruence of definitions offered by the superintendent and board president from District C, the question remains, “What is student achievement?” Is it an *end* as District C claims? Is it a state standard? Is it high scores on standardized tests? Is it improvement on local assessments? Is it acquisition of prescribed knowledge and/or life skills? Is it completion of a specified number of years of formal education? The current study uncovered a variety of opinions, often conflicting opinions, about the meaning of student achievement but did not produce a definition of the construct. Lack of an agreed-upon definition impedes districts’ efforts to improve student performance.

Ideally, the Iowa Department of Education would develop or empower a task force to undertake the task. However, the State of Iowa prides itself in local control for education. The resistance to such a definition may impede the process.

Therefore, I recommend that each district develop a definition of student achievement and communicate it to all patrons of the district. The first steps for districts would be to (a) clearly define the academic knowledge and skills to achieve success in school and in life, and (b) clearly define the life skills (e.g. effective communicator, problem-solver, collaborator) necessary to be a successful contributor in and outside of the school environment.

Second, districts need to develop a process to assess their definition of student achievement. Presently all districts are required to use the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills and the Iowa Tests of Educational Development for reporting purposes. All six districts viewed this as a component of student achievement. Another common means for measuring student achievement is summative tests. Two districts in the study alluded to the MAP test utilization due to the importance of showing growth in student achievement.

Whatever the preference, districts should align the assessment component with their definition of student achievement. Once this foundational piece of has been developed, districts will have a common definition of student achievement and a clearer understanding of the expectations in the arena of student achievement.

### **Recommendation 2: Enhance Board Professional Development**

As a result of educational reforms, school governing bodies have been allocated new responsibilities (Farrell & Law, 1997). They are now being held accountable not only for school governance and management but also for student achievement. Yet, members of the board of education for the public school districts are elected individuals, most of whom are laypersons with little educational background. Given their new responsibilities for complex decisions and accountability, members of school governing bodies need training and support (DeVita, 2007).

In Iowa, the Iowa Association of School Boards (IASB) offers training through the Academy of Board Learning Experiences (ABLE) and the annual IASB School Board Convention. ABLE sessions, offered throughout the year, are designed to provide smaller chunks of learning on topics such as: foundations of effective board service; board member accountability; leadership for improved student learning; fiscal responsibility; and

community, media, and legislative relations. The annual convention, held each fall, features nationally known experts who present sessions on topics that are timely and relevant for school leaders. Conference breakout sessions showcase the talents of Iowa educators in areas such as school administration and curriculum initiatives.

A review of the training received by board members from the six districts participating in this study raises concerns. Professional development of board members occurs primarily during the one-day IASB convention. For study participants, attendance at ABLE sessions was almost non-existent (see Appendix G).

Despite the fact that IASB offers training on a variety of topics, board members rarely attend, citing lack of time. They report that they have difficulty juggling work, family commitments, and board responsibilities, including attending board meetings once or twice per month. Finding a yet another night for board training is extremely challenging.

To increase board members' participation in training, I recommend two possibilities. First, IASB should examine the training curriculum and practices of states and countries with exemplary school board performance and effectiveness; review its delivery of professional development for board members; consult with board members about what it would take for them to be able to participate in training; and develop training alternatives that better meet the needs of board members.

While the *2009-2010 Board Development Guide and Calendar* (IASB, 2009) claims "IASB programs are designed to meet the needs of busy people: some courses are online, in video format, or in print while others are offered at workshops and conferences," it may be that a review of training formats and scheduling, together with input from board members, would result in adjustments that would allow greater numbers of board members to

participate. Advancements in technology, especially in the area of communication, could also provide helpful alternatives.

Second, superintendent/board of education teams should determine an alternative method for training if the IASB practices are not convenient or appropriate. Dedicating an established portion of a board meeting for new learning is a signal to the community about the value that the superintendent/board of education team places on constant learning. In some instances, the responsibility for training may fall directly on the superintendent. It is critical in these situations that the superintendent then receives the proper professional development in order to lead the team.

### **Recommendation 3: Understand That Equal Is Not Always Equal**

An interesting theme that emerged from this study is that *equal is not always equal*. This maxim springs from the rigid requirements of the No Child Left Behind legislation that often result in unequal treatment of some students. For example, in the content areas of reading and mathematics, the law places stringent achievement trajectories on school districts. However, these are not the only two subjects that districts are required to teach. In Iowa, districts must adhere to *The Iowa Code, Chapter 12: General Accreditation Standards* (State of Iowa, 1999) that dictate which subjects (e.g., science, social studies, physical education, health, art, music, safety, and vocational courses) must to be taught as well as the minimum length of time each subject must be taught.

For students struggling in the targeted areas of mathematics or reading, the allotted instructional time is never adequate; they require additional time for re-teaching and remediation. At the center of the *equal is not always equal* dilemma is time, a precious commodity in the course of the normal school day. To meet regulations, a student's day is

filled with required courses and physical activity. In order for struggling students to gain additional instructional time in reading and/or mathematics, they need to forfeit another course or activity. Under current guidelines, such special accommodations are not permitted. However, even if they were allowed, supporters of the Chapter 12 standards would argue that students who deviate from the standards would not become the well-rounded individuals that the community demands.

The ultimate goal of student achievement is that all students perform at or above grade level. If students are struggling, districts have little discretion for helping them improve. Until this dilemma is rectified at the state or federal level, districts will either continue to promote students to the next grade level (even though their academic performance is subpar) or retain students without much reason to believe that repeating the grade will yield better results.

Until legislation assists in correcting the quandary, I would recommend starting the conversation about this topic locally. It would behoove superintendents and boards of education to discuss the common understanding that *equal is not always equal* in their respective district. Discussions should address the various chasms between or among individual buildings within the district, even differing needs at the classroom level within a building.

An obvious first step is the allocation of resources. Additional funds, teachers, and professional development are at the forefront of narrowing the achievement gaps. A second step is the uncomfortable conversation regarding addressing the different needs of different students. Students requiring extra instruction in the curricular areas might now be exposed to the same well-rounded curriculum that other students receive. This conversation will pit the

well-rounded student curriculum versus the academically prepared curriculum. As with any potential legislative change, legislative advocacy is critical. In order to change to occur by legislators, they must first understand the problem. Superintendents and board presidents need to educate their state and federal policymakers about the issue at hand.

#### **Recommendation 4: Decrease Punitive Components of Federal Legislation**

It is difficult to quarrel with two aspects of the No Child Left Behind law: the increase in accountability of public schools and the intent of ensuring that no students, particularly low income and minority students are left behind. However good the intentions, educators consider NCLB punitive because it imposes requirements on schools but does not provide funding for those additional responsibilities, and it sets unrealistic goals for student growth.

One way that NCLB placed greater accountability on public school districts was by mandating them to report the percent of proficient students based on standardized test scores. Schools and districts that failed to meet the standard (i.e., minimum number of proficient students) were placed on a watch list. If adequate progress was not made in a specified length of time, additional sanctions were imposed. As a result, districts turned their attention to low-achieving students, focused on professional development to bring up test scores, and largely ignored average and high-achieving students.

Despite the increased efforts to raise the test scores of under-achieving students, schools with large numbers of poor, minority, or ELL students are unable to reach the goals, which often results in their school being designated a School in Need of Assistance (SINA). The SINA designation brings a host of additional problems such as white flight; i.e., the

transfer of white, middle-class students to a non-SINA building; increased transportation costs, and loss of community confidence and support.

As the reauthorization of the NCLB legislation nears, it is time to direct attention once again to the growth of *all* children. Recently, conversation at both the national level and local level (with the new director of the Iowa Department of Education) has revolved around student growth models. This discussion raised questions about the effectiveness of NCLB. As the time approaches for the reauthorization of NCLB, I recommend a call to arms. Educators, parents, students, and community members should put pressure on members of Congress to evaluate the *real* outcomes of NCLB and strike provisions that unduly punish schools, communities, and above all students.

#### **Recommendation 5: Do the Right Work**

The *right work* for schools is improving student achievement. To accomplish this work, educational leaders must devote more time and resources to student achievement efforts. Recent research results indicate the importance of strong building leadership on student achievement (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2004; Vitaska, 2008; Waters & Marzano, 2006). In an ideal world, the primary role of the building principal would be instructional leader. In the real world, principals wear many hats and are frequently distracted from the right work. One emerging strategy for correcting this problem is the utilization of school administration managers (National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality, 2009). Known as SAMs, these individuals relieve the principal of non-instructional duties, allowing him or her to perform the right work as the school's instructional leader.

The literature is also rife with theories and research results on the right work of the superintendent, which is that of educational leader for the district. Results of this study indicate that superintendents understand and embrace the role of educational leader, but their day-to-day work is often, in the words of Superintendent D, “buses, buildings, and budgets.” In order for educational leaders, i.e., principals and superintendents, to carry out the right work, I recommend that districts explore and implement viable options that would enable principals and superintendents to concentrate on student achievement efforts. For example, districts could examine the merits and feasibility of hiring school administration managers to perform the district’s non-instructional management duties.

Second, districts not only need a common definition of student achievement, but an agreed-upon definition of what high quality instruction looks like. Schools are being challenged to educate all students to a high level. What happens in the classroom matters for student learning albeit student achievement (Goldhaber & Anthony, 2004; Haycock, 1998; Marzano, 2003). Superintendents are aware of the pockets of teaching excellence within various schools in the district. Essential to improved student achievement is the ability to develop these pockets of excellence into the norm of the district. Before this can evolve, superintendents (and the building administrators) must have an understanding of what high quality instruction looks like.

One such model that is displaying promise in this arena is the *Instructional Rounds* model (also referred to as rounds). This model is an adaptation and extension of the medical rounds model utilized by medical schools and teaching hospitals. Instructional rounds employ the same methodology as the medical rounds model; however, instead of the focus on the treatment of health-related issues, the focus is on classroom instruction for the purpose



of improving student achievement: “The rounds process is an explicit practice that is designed to bring discussions of instruction directly into the process of school improvement” (City, Elmore, Fiarman, and Teitel, 2009, p. 3). The rounds process places the superintendent (and other school leaders) into the classroom, the heart of instruction, doing the right work.

Therefore, a second recommendation is to include the instructional rounds process as part of the evaluation courses that are now required for those possessing or seeking administrative licenses. As the district-level leader, the superintendent needs to be in tune with school improvement initiatives and the impact of these on classroom instruction. When the superintendent is involved in school improvement efforts, accountability is automatically built in (Carr, 2005). The Instructional Rounds model supports this claim and provides the avenue for the superintendent to be entrenched in student achievement. (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009)

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to understand the perceived influences of superintendents and school board presidents on student achievement, and the perceived barriers that impede progress toward improving student achievement. Although this study represents a start for developing a larger body of research on the relationship between district-level leadership and student achievement, further research is needed on topics such as superintendent tenure; superintendent/board alignment; board unity/training; superintendent evaluation; and board of education self-evaluation.

#### **Superintendent Tenure**

Previous research (e.g., Marzano & Waters, 2009) indicated that the longer a

superintendent served in a district the greater the positive impact on student achievement. Additional studies are needed to support or refute this claim.

Elmore (1999-2000) defined *improvement* as change that has directionality, is sustained over time, and moves the entire system. Future research studies could investigate the relationship of the tenure of the superintendent and sustained improvement in student achievement. Research questions might determine the correlation between superintendent tenure and sustained student achievement improvement, or determine the correlation between the superintendent's tenure and diminishing effects on student achievement.

If the results of future studies indicate a positive correlation between the superintendent's tenure and an increase in student achievement and/or between the superintendent's tenure and sustained improvement in student achievement, boards of education will want to know what they can do to retain effective superintendents. The Wallace Foundation (2007) raised the question this way:

Superintendents seemed to be working many, many hours a day at very stressful, albeit rewarding jobs. Our question is how long human beings— even those as gifted and committed as our transformers – can be expected to keep this up? What are they giving up to be able to do the jobs they are doing? Are they making personal and family sacrifices that simply cannot be sustained? Is it reasonable to believe that they can maintain this level of energy and sparkle and passion years into the future? These leaders deserve a thoughtful answer, as do the children and communities that they serve. (p. 8)

Thus, further research questions associated to superintendent tenure might be related to the internal and external factors that keep effective superintendents working and in their school districts.

### **Transition Periods**

Closely related to the questions on superintendent tenure are questions about what happens to student achievement during transition periods. Marzano & Waters (2009) reported their positive findings on superintendent tenure and student achievement. Given this information in combination with the framework from Chapter 2 depicting the importance of goal setting, board alignment, allocation of resources, nonnegotiable goals for instruction and achievement, and monitoring of the nonnegotiable goals, future research could address the impact upon student achievement if such framework is implement and the superintendent position is vacated. Accordingly, such future research could examine effective district-level instructional models for improved student achievement that are sustainable in the event of superintendent departure.

### **Superintendent and Board Alignment**

Findings from this study indicate that the board of education is not actively engaged in planning for or discussing student achievement efforts. Instead, the board typically rubber stamps proposals made by the superintendent. The board in Superintendent L's district exemplifies this behavior. The superintendent has responsibility for developing plans for student achievement efforts; e.g., curriculum, professional development, and budget items. According to Superintendent L, "The board does not want to have these discussions at the board table. They want a simplified presentation and explanation of the proposed plan, and then they approve it."

Future research should attempt to determine the proper roles of the superintendent and school board in student achievement efforts. Future research questions could address the board of education's role in the collaborative goal process regarding improved student achievement; the specific characteristics of an effective board/superintendent team working to increase student achievement; and characteristics of defined autonomy for the board/superintendent team.

### **Board Unity/Training**

A third topic that requires further study is board unity/training. The initial part of this recommendation encompasses the notion that a governing body such as a school board should operate as a unit instead of individuals. The second part of this recommendation is the necessary training that boards must have in order to move towards a more unified front.

The literature indicates that in effective districts, board members (a) agree on district goals for instruction and achievement, (b) provide necessary supports for those goals, and (c) maintain a united front on student achievement matters (Marzano & Waters, 2009). Key to formulating board expectations for instruction and achievement is to have an understanding of the key components. Training for board members allows the board to grasp the concepts surrounding student achievement.

Board members participating in this study were much more likely to obtain training through the annual IASB convention than through ABLE meetings offered throughout the year (see Appendix G). Yet, a convention held once a year with little or no follow up appears to be an ineffective training strategy.

Board President participants disclosed their dependence on the superintendent to provide a significant amount of training for the board. Superintendents reinforced this to be true. Much of this training happens at the board table as student achievement is discussed. This approach can be attributed to the comfort level and confidence in the superintendent, and the convenience of being trained at home versus traveling. Board presidents inferred this is their first choice to gain the necessary knowledge. At question then is the best method for the superintendent to deliver the board professional development.

Recently, teachers and administrators have found professional learning communities (PLC's) to be effective professional development models because they provide opportunities for continuous conversations about student achievement. Since this delivery model has been effective for teachers and administrators, future research might examine the feasibility of PLC's for school board training. Research questions might include effectiveness of PLC's as a method for board of education professional development and the effectiveness of the superintendent as the leader of local board of education training?

### **Superintendent Evaluation**

The future of our nation can be linked to the quality of its schools, its K-12 educators, and the leadership of its superintendents (Sullivan & Shulman, 2005). The focus of this study was the perceived influence that district-level leadership had upon student achievement. It has been only recently that superintendents were expected to be the educational leaders of the district with responsibility for improving student achievement. To ensure that superintendents undertake this responsibility, school boards, in conjunction with the superintendent, must develop superintendent performance goals related to student achievement and incorporate them into the evaluation instrument (Texas Association of

School Boards, n.d.). Future research on superintendent evaluation is imperative.

Unfortunately, past practice has been to evaluate superintendents based on their performance in administrative areas such as school finance and personnel matters. Superintendent O bluntly stated, “I don’t know of any superintendent who was fired because the curriculum was not aligned, but I know plenty who were fired because of finances.” Research questions could include effective superintendent evaluation systems that reflect the role as the educational leader of the district, and effective evaluation systems that hold the superintendent accountable for student achievement.

### **Board of Education Self-Evaluation**

Finally, more research is needed on evaluation of the board of education. Currently, the sole evaluation of these elected officials comes once every two years, when the public demonstrates its satisfaction or dissatisfaction with school board members in the voting booth.

Rather than wait for the public vote, school boards ought to engage in regular self-evaluation of their work and processes, a key step on the road to governance excellence. The purposes of board self-evaluation are to gather the perceptions of all board members; foster dialogue; improve the board’s understanding of its roles and decision-making processes; identify next steps for board learning and growth; and ensure continuous board improvement (Illinois Association of School Boards, n.d.).

The most effective board self-evaluation processes evaluate the effectiveness of the whole board as opposed to individual member assessment and include assessment of topics such as vision, structure, accountability, advocacy, conduct, and ethics (Minnesota School

Board Association, n.d.). and are normally led by third party experts; e.g., the Illinois Association of School Boards (n.d.) or the Minnesota Association of School Boards (n.d.).

Researchers studying this topic might address questions such as: evaluation of the board of education's performance regarding student achievement and accountability measures in place for boards of education which resulted in improved student learning.

This exploratory investigation has revealed a strong need for further research that would benefit superintendents, school board members, school districts, communities, and, above all, students whose improved achievement is at the reason for doing the work.

### **Conclusion**

Superintendents and school board presidents in this study agreed that *student achievement* should be their primary focus and that they must assume greater responsibility for improving student performance. The evolving roles and responsibilities of superintendents and board presidents require new skills and relevant training to develop these skills. Board presidents view themselves and the other board members as laypersons. In other words, they depend on the superintendent to make suggestions and provide the rationale for such.

Superintendents have positive views of their roles relative to student achievement. They believe they influence student achievement by: setting expectations, serving as educational leaders of the district, aligning curriculum and professional development at grade levels across the district, hiring quality administrators and teachers, reporting and interpreting student achievement data to the board of education, and monitoring progress toward district goals.

Board presidents, too, have positive views of their roles in improving student achievement results. They perceive their primary roles as setting and enforcing board policy, monitoring progress toward achievement goals, and then getting out of the way so that educational leaders can do their work. One board president described these roles as “determining the *ends*” and “monitoring the district’s progress toward meeting the ends.”

There are several significant barriers to improving student performance. For both superintendents and school board presidents, finances and changing student demographics present major barriers to improving student achievement. Superintendents added that five other barriers impede rapid progress toward district goals for student achievement; namely, current legislation, staff and/or community mindset, the lack of risk-taking, little parent involvement, and student apathy. In addition to finances and student demographics, board presidents identified communication with parents and lack of board unity as barriers to growth in student achievement.

Even though the superintendent and board of education can be far removed from the direct impact on student achievement, they still have influence on such. This study has highlighted the influences that both the superintendent and board of education have on student learning. Although there are hurdles to achieving more rapid progress in student achievement, none were deal stoppers but issues to address. Finally, this study supports the claim that district-level leadership matters in the student achievement arena.



## APPENDIX A: DEFINITION OF TERMS

Terms used throughout this study are operationally defined as follows:

**Achievement:** “Accomplishment; the mastery of a skill or of knowledge as a consequence of the individual’s effort, training, and practice” (Ravitch, 2007, p. 9).

**Achievement Levels:** Performance levels that describe how well students achieved on a selected test. In Iowa, the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) and the Iowa Tests of Educational Development (ITED) use three achievement levels: low performance, intermediate performance, and high performance (Ravitch, 2007).

**Achievement Tests:** Assessments designed to measure knowledge and skills. The Iowa Department of Education has approved the use of the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills and the Iowa Tests of Educational Development as the state achievement tests. School officials use the results of achievement tests to compare scores of individuals, groups, and classes to others in the school district, state, and/or nation (Ravitch, 2007).

**Administrator:** An individual who is licensed to coordinate, supervise, or direct an educational program or the activities of other practitioners.

**Area Education Agency:** In Iowa, Area Education Agencies are regional service agencies that provide school improvement services for students, families, teachers, administrators, and their communities.

**Certified Enrollment:** The annual report of counts of all resident students enrolled on October 1 [or the first weekday following] (Iowa Department of Education], 2009, p. 49).

**DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills):** An early literacy measurement used to assess five key areas: phonemic awareness, alphabetic principle, accuracy and fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

**District-level Leadership:** The superintendent, central office personnel, and the school board of a local school district. For the purposes of this study, only the superintendent and president of the school board were synonymous with district-level leadership.

**Free or Reduced Price Lunch Eligibility:** Meals are provided to children who qualify for such benefits according to specified household size and income standards.

**Principal:** A licensed member of a school's instructional staff who serves as an instructional leader; coordinates the process and substance of educational and instructional programs; coordinates the budget of the school; provides formative evaluation for all practitioners and other personnel in the school; recommends or has effective authority to appoint, assign, promote, or transfer personnel in a school building; implements the local school board's policy in a manner consistent with professional practice and ethics; and assists in the development and supervision of a school's student activities program.

**Public School:** Any school directly supported in whole or in part by taxation.

**School Board:** A locally elected or appointed group that is responsible for oversight of a public school district, setting fiscal, personnel, instructional, and student-related policies. The school board has the authority to hire and fire the district superintendent, approve the annual budget, and negotiate contracts with employee unions (Ravitch, 2007, p 189).

**School Board President:** The president of the board of directors presides at all of its meetings, signs all contracts made by the board, and appears in behalf of the corporation in all actions brought by or against it.

**School District:** "A local education agency directed by an elected or appointed school board

that exists primarily to operate public schools” (Ravitch, 2007 p. 189).

Superintendent: An administrator who promotes, demotes, transfers, assigns, or evaluates practitioners or other personnel, and carries out the policies of a governing board in a manner consistent with professional practice and ethics.

## APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE

### Interview Introduction

Hello (respondent name). Thank you so much for agreeing to speak with me. I know you have a busy schedule and really appreciate your willingness to participate in this project.

As stated in a previous letter, I am a doctoral student at Iowa State University conducting a study of perceived district level leadership influences upon student achievement. Today I hope to glean insight into your influence as board president or superintendent upon student achievement in your district. I also hope to gain ideas on the barriers you face in regards to increasing student achievement.

Any information you share will not be attributed to you or used to identify you or anyone else. You and your school district will remain anonymous in any ensuing presentations or publications that may stem from this study. As a result of your participation, there should be no risks for you personally or for your school. Your participation is strictly voluntary and may be discontinued at any time during the interview. You may also decline to answer any question during this interview.

For ease of note taking, getting all of your input, and not slowing down the interview, I would like to record our conversation. The recording made today will be kept confidential and in a safe place. This audio recording will only be heard by myself and the person transcribing this recording. It will be kept in a secure location and destroyed when the study is complete. If at any time you would prefer that I turn the recorder off, please let me know, and I will do so immediately.

Do I have your permission to begin recording our discussion?

Will you agree to participate by signing the Informed Consent document?

Any questions before we begin?

#### A) Introductory Questions:

Superintendent

- 1) How long have you served the district as superintendent?
- 2) How many years of experience as a superintendent do you have? All in your present district?
- 3) Describe your educational career from your first teaching job to your present superintendency.
- 4) What motivated you to become a superintendent?
- 5) What motivates you to stay in the superintendency?
- 6) Please describe your leadership style or approach as superintendent?

## Board President

- 7) How long have you served the district as board president?
- 8) How many years have you served as board president and on the board?
- 9) How many years have you served on the board outside of your presidency?  
All in the same district?
- 10) What motivated you to run for a seat on the board of education?
- 11) What motivates you to stay on the board?
- 12) Please describe your leadership style or approach as board president?

## B) Demographic Questions:

- 13) Describe the community or communities that you serve?
- 14) How many students does your district serve?
- 15) Have there been any changes to the demographics of your student body in the last three years?
  - a. Overall enrollment
  - b. Special education
  - c. ELL
  - d. Socioeconomics
- 16) Have there been any systemic changes in the community (or communities) or to the school system in the last three years?
  - a. Economic changes in the community
  - b. Superintendent turnover
  - c. Board turnover
  - d. School building opening/closing
  - e. Whole grade sharing/consolidation discussions

## C) Research Questions 1 &amp; 2: As a superintendent, how do you view your influence on student achievement? As a school board president, how do you view your influence and that of the board in general on student achievement?

- 17) How has your district defined student achievement?
- 18) How have the changes in demographics influenced student achievement in your district?
- 19) How have the systemic changes influenced student achievement in your district?
- 20) What other factors might influence student achievement in your district?
- 21) What do you see as the superintendent's role in improving student achievement?
- 22) What do you see as the board's role in improving student achievement?
- 23) How long does your typical board meeting last? How much of that time is spent on student achievement? How does this compare to the previous three years?
- 24) How has your leadership effected student achievement in your district?
- 25) How do you monitor student achievement in your district?

- 26) Do you have specific goals or targets for improving achievement?
- 27) Do you have specific goals or targets for improving instruction?
- 28) How are these goals or targets determined? Who is involved in this process as well as the monitoring of progress?
- 29) How are resources aligned to these goals or targets?

D) Research Questions 3 & 4: As a superintendent, what are perceived barriers to your influence on student achievement? As a board president, what are perceived barriers to your influence and that of the board in general on student achievement?

- 30) What obstacles do you feel slow the progress of improving student achievement?
- 31) What has the superintendent (or “have you as superintendent” for the superintendent interviewees) done to overcome these obstacles?
- 32) What has the board of education done to overcome these obstacles?
- 33) What professional development have you as superintendent participated in that assisted you in addressing student achievement issues?
- 34) What professional development has the board participated in that assisted you in addressing student achievement issues?
- 35) How has this professional development influenced you as superintendent (or “the superintendent” for the board president)?
- 36) How has this professional development influenced the board?
- 37) If you had a “magic wand” and could change anything about student achievement, what would it be? Why?

E) Conclusion:

Is there anything that I did not ask you that you would like to share?

Thank you so much for participating in this interview. I appreciate your time and cooperation today. After I have reviewed the transcript of our conversation today, may I contact you if I have further questions?

If you have any further questions for me, please do not hesitate to contact me at any time. A written transcript of this interview will be made available to you at your request. As a reminder this information will remain confidential and will be destroyed at the end of the project. Do you have any final comments or questions?

Thanks and have a great rest of the day/evening.

## APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

**Title of Study:** *Perceived District-Level Leadership Influences Upon Student Achievement*

**Investigator:** *Dan Mart, ISU doctoral candidate (with assistance from Dr. Scott McLeod, ISU Associate Professor)*

This is a research study. Please take your time in deciding if you would like to participate. Please feel free to ask questions at any time.

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to learn more about how superintendents and board presidents influence student achievement in their respective school districts. You are being invited to participate in this study because you are a superintendent or board president with experiences involving student achievement.

### DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES

If you agree to participate, Dan Mart will interview you for no longer than 60 minutes. You will be presented with the interview guide ahead of time (see attached interview guide for complete list of questions). The full interview will be recorded on a digital voice recorder. You will be identified by a pseudonym for the study and your information will be protected before, during, and after this research project.

During the interview process, you may skip any questions that you don't wish to answer.

Your participation will last for the amount of time that the interview takes. After the interview, the audio recording will be transcribed, and you will be presented with a copy of the transcript for your review. This will be delivered in person or via an e-mail to the address that you provide to me. After that, your participation will be over. At the conclusion of the dissertation research, you will be provided a write-up of the written, anonymized findings from the study.

### RISKS

There are no known or foreseeable risks for participation in this study.

### BENEFITS

If you decide to participate in this study, there are no personal advantages to participation. It is hoped that the information gained in this study will benefit your school district's leadership

team (including board of education). It also is hoped that the information gained in this study will benefit society by adding to the body of research about how superintendents and board presidents influence student achievement.

#### COSTS AND COMPENSATION

You will not have any costs related to participating in this study, other than the time you spend during the interview and reviewing the interview transcript.

#### PARTICIPANT RIGHTS

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may initially refuse to participate or stop participating in the study at any time. If you decide to not participate in the study or leave the study early, it will not result in any penalty or detrimentally affect your relationship with the researcher, his major professor, and/or Iowa State University.

#### CONFIDENTIALITY

Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies, auditing departments of Iowa State University, and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy your records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information.

To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken:

1. Your interview will be recorded and transcribed but you will be identified in the transcripts and on tape with a pseudonym.
2. The data will be stored on a password-protected computer in a locked room at all times.
3. The data only will be kept until the completion and publication of the study. If the results are published, your identity will remain confidential. In publications related to this study, your school district and all participants will be referred to by their pseudonyms.

#### QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

You are encouraged to ask questions or express your concerns at any time during this study.

- For further information about the study, contact primary investigator *Dan Mart*, 515-782-3721; or *Dr. Scott McLeod*, 707-722-7853.



- If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, [IRB@iastate.edu](mailto:IRB@iastate.edu), or Director, (515) 294-3115, Office for Responsible Research, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.

\*\*\*\*\*  
\*\*\*

### PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE

Your signature below indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given time to read this document, and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

Participant's Name (printed) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Participant's Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

## APPENDIX D: IRB DOCUMENTS

**IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY**  
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Review Board  
Office for Responsible Research  
Vice President for Research  
1138 Pearson Hall  
Ames, Iowa 50011-2207  
515 294-4566  
FAX 515 294-4267

**Date:** 1/24/2011

**To:** Dan Mart  
425 Whispering Pine Ave  
Polk City, IA 50026

**CC:** Dr. Scott McLeod  
N231 Lagomarcino

**From:** Office for Responsible Research

**Title:** Perceived District-Level Leadership Influences Upon Student Achievement

**IRB Num:** 10-617

**Submission Type:** New      **Exemption Date:** 1/18/2011

The project referenced above has undergone review by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and has been declared exempt from the requirements of the human subject protections regulations as described in 45 CFR 46.101(b). The IRB determination of exemption means that:

- **You do not need to submit an application for annual continuing review.**
- **You must carry out the research as proposed in the IRB application**, including obtaining and documenting informed consent if you have stated in your application that you will do so or if required by the IRB.
- **Any modification of this research should be submitted to the IRB on a Continuing Review and/or Modification form, prior to making any changes**, to determine if the project still meets the federal criteria for exemption. If it is determined that exemption is no longer warranted, then an IRB proposal will need to be submitted and approved before proceeding with data collection.

Please be sure to use **only the approved study materials** in your research, including the **recruitment materials and informed consent documents that have the IRB approval stamp**.

Please note that you must submit all research involving human participants for review by the IRB. **Only the IRB may make the determination of exemption**, even if you conduct a study in the future that is exactly like this study.

<b>For IRB Use Only</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Research Per Federal Regulations	<input type="checkbox"/> No Human Participants	IRB ID: 10-1017
	EXEMPT Per 45 CFR 46.101(b): 2, 3	Minimal Risk <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Review Date: 1/18/2011

**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB)  
Exempt Study Review Form**

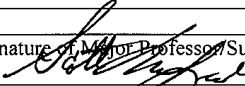
RECEIVED

Full

## SECTION I: GENERAL INFORMATION

DEC 23 2010

Principal Investigator (PI): Dan Mart	Phone: 515-782-3721	Fax: 515-685-2002
Degrees: BS, Masters & Certificate of Advanced Studies @ Iowa State University	Correspondence Address: 425 Whispering Pine Ave, Polk City, IA 50226	
Department: Ed Leadership and Policy Studies (ELPS)	Email Address: mart@northpolk.org	
Center/Institute:	College: Human Sciences	
PI Level: <input type="checkbox"/> Faculty <input type="checkbox"/> Staff <input type="checkbox"/> Postdoctoral <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Graduate Student <input type="checkbox"/> Undergraduate Student		
Alternate Contact Person: Scott McLeod	Email Address: mcleod@iastate.edu	
Correspondence Address: N243 Lagomarcino Hall, Ames, Iowa 50011-3195	Phone: 707-722-7853	
Title of Project: <i>Perceived District-Level Leadership Influences Upon Student Achievement</i>		
Project Period (Include Start and End Date): [10-31-10 to 10-1-11]		

<b>FOR STUDENT PROJECTS</b>	
Name of Major Professor/Supervising Faculty: Scott McLeod	Signature of Major Professor/Supervising Faculty: 
Phone: 707-722-7853	Campus Address: N243 Lagomarcino Hall, Ames, Iowa 50011-3195
Department: Educational Leadership and Policy Studies	Email Address: mcleod@iastate.edu
Type of Project: (check all that apply)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Research	<input type="checkbox"/> Thesis
<input type="checkbox"/> Independent Study (490, 590, Honors project)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Dissertation
	<input type="checkbox"/> Class project
	<input type="checkbox"/> Other—Please specify: _____

## KEY PERSONNEL

List all members and relevant experience of the project personnel. This information is intended to inform the committee of the training and background related to the specific procedures that each person will perform on the project.

NAME & DEGREE(S)	SPECIFIC DUTIES ON PROJECT	TRAINING & EXPERIENCE RELATED TO PROCEDURES PERFORMED, DATE OF TRAINING
✓ Dan Mart; BA-Buena Vista University, Masters of Arts in Teaching; Morningside College; & Certificate of Advanced Studies from Iowa State University	Principal investigator: Interviewing, Observing, Document Reviewing, and Data Analyzing; project management	Research experience in qualitative and quantitative research methods: Completion of IRB 11/18/06
✓ Scott McLeod	Major Professor	5/27/08

Office for Responsible Research/IRB 08/13/10

1

**FUNDING INFORMATION**

<input type="checkbox"/> Internally funded, please provide account number:
<input type="checkbox"/> Externally funded, please provide funding source and account number:
<input type="checkbox"/> Funding is pending, please provide OSPA GoldSheet ID:
<input type="checkbox"/> Title on GoldSheet if different from above:
<input type="checkbox"/> Other: (e.g., <i>funding will be applied for later, project not funded, etc.</i> ).
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Student Project—no funding or funding provided by student

**SCIENTIFIC REVIEW**

Yes  No Has or will this project receive peer review?

Although the assurance committees are not intended to conduct peer review of research proposals, the federal regulations include language such as “consistent with sound research design,” “rationale for involving animals or humans,” and “scientifically valuable research,” which requires that the committees consider in their review the general scientific relevance of a research study. Proposals that do not meet these basic tests are not justifiable and cannot be approved. If an assurance review committee(s) has concerns about the scientific merit of a project and the project was not competitively funded by peer review or was funded by corporate sponsors, the project may be referred to a scientific review committee. The scientific review committee will be an ad hoc and will consist of your ISU peers and outside experts as needed. If this situation arises, the PI will be contacted and given the option of agreeing that a consultant may be contacted or withdrawing the proposal from consideration.

If the answer is “yes,” please indicate who did or will conduct the review:

If a review was conducted, please indicate the outcome of the review:

**COLLECTION OR RECEIPT OF SAMPLES**

Will you be: (Please check all that apply.)

- Yes  No Receiving biological samples from outside of ISU? See examples below.  
 Yes  No Sending biological samples outside of ISU? See examples below.

Examples include: genetically modified organisms, body fluids, tissue samples, blood samples, pathogens.

**If you will be receiving samples from or sending samples outside of ISU, please identify the name of the outside organization(s) and the types of samples you will be sending or receiving outside of ISU:**

--

**ASSURANCE**

- I certify that the information provided in this application is complete and accurate and consistent with any proposal(s) submitted to external funding agencies.
- I agree to provide proper surveillance of this project to ensure that the rights and welfare of the human subjects or welfare of animal subjects are protected. I will report any problems to the appropriate assurance review committee(s).
- I agree that I will not begin this project until receipt of official approval from all appropriate committee(s).

- I agree that modifications to the originally approved project will not take place without prior review and approval by the appropriate committee(s) and that all activities will be performed in accordance with all applicable federal, state, local, and Iowa State University policies.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

ISU's Conflict of Interest Policy requires that investigators and key personnel disclose any significant financial interests or relationships that may present an actual or potential conflict of interest. A conflict of interest can be defined as a set of conditions in which an investigator's or key personnel's judgment regarding a project (including human or animal subject welfare, integrity of the research) may be influenced by a secondary interest (e.g., the proposed project and/or a relationship with the sponsor). By signing this form below, you are certifying that all members of the research team, including yourself, have read and understand ISU's Conflict of Interest policy as addressed by the ISU Faculty Handbook and have made all required disclosures.

- Yes  No Do you or any member of your research team have an actual or potential conflict of interest?  
 Yes  No If yes, have the appropriate disclosure form(s) been completed?

#### SIGNATURES

Dan Marr 11/30/10  
 Signature of Principal Investigator Date  
Kinda Seira Hagdon 12/20/10  
 Signature of Department Chair Date

#### FOR IRB USE ONLY:

- Project is exempt.  
 Project is not exempt.  
 Project is not research according to the federal definition.  
 Project does not include human subjects as defined by the federal regulations.

Kerry A. Agnitsch  
 IRB Reviewer's Signature

January 20, 2011  
 Date

## SECTION II: EXEMPTION CATEGORY

The following categories and sub-parts are eligible for exempt status review.

Check all applicable categories and sub-parts below. To select a category box, double-click on the check box.

**PLEASE NOTE:**

All procedures for all subjects in a project must be exempt in order for the project to be reviewed for exemption (i.e., all of the activities that participants will be asked to participate in must be found in one or more of the following categories).

Exemption does not apply if the targeted populations for the research will involve individuals who are legally incompetent, significantly mentally ill or impaired, or those who are vulnerable to extraordinary institutional coercion, such as prisoners, residents of 24-hour nursing facilities, or anyone who is involuntarily confined.

Investigators whose research projects involve procedures which do not fit within an exempt category will be asked to complete the ISU Application for Approval of Research Involving Humans.

Investigators conducting research that fits into the exempt categories of research are not required to obtain a volunteer's consent to participate using an informed consent document containing all of the elements of consent. However, the IRB requires that the following items be included in an informed consent document or letter of introduction: a statement that the project involves research; a statement that participation is voluntary; a statement that the participant may skip any questions they do not feel comfortable answering in a survey; and the measures that will be used to ensure confidentiality of data collected in the research.

- Education Practices:** Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings involving normal educational practices is exempt when:
- research is on regular and special education instructional techniques, or
  - research is on the effectiveness of, or the comparison among, instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods.
- Educational Tests:** Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement) is exempt if:
- in the researcher's private data (including field notes), as well as in any published material, information taken from these sources is recorded in such a manner that subjects *cannot* be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; or
  - the information, if disclosed outside of the research, could *not* reasonably place the subject at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subject's financial standing, employability, or reputation.

- Surveying or Interviewing:** Research involving, or interview procedures of, adult-aged subjects is exempt if:
- in the researcher's private data (including field notes), as well as in any published material, *responses are recorded anonymously* and in such a manner that the human subjects *cannot* be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects: or
  - the responses, if disclosed outside of the research, could *not* reasonably place the subject at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subject's financial standing, employability, or reputation.

**This exemption does not apply if the subjects are minor children or other vulnerable participants.**

- Public Observations:** Research involving observation of public behavior is exempt if:
- in the researcher's private data (including field notes), as well as in any published material, information taken from these sources is recorded in such a manner that subjects *cannot* be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; or
  - the information, if disclosed outside of the research, could *not* reasonably place the subject at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subject's financial standing, employability, or reputation.

**This exemption applies to research involving minor children only when the investigator does not participate in the activities observed. Workplace meetings and activities, as well as classroom activities, are not considered "public behavior."**

- Public Officials:** All research involving educational tests, survey or interview procedures, or public observations is exempt when the respondents are elected or appointed public officials or candidates for public office. [*the school board members, not the superintendents*]

**Managers and staff in public agencies are not "public officials" in most cases.**

- Existing Data:** Research involving the collection of existing data, documents, records, pathological or diagnostic specimens is exempt if:
- these sources are publicly available, or
  - in both the researcher's private data and in any published material, the information is recorded by the researcher in such a manner that subjects *cannot* be identified, directly or through identifiers (e.g., ID codes, email addresses, etc.) linked to the subjects.

- Taste and Food Quality:** Research on taste and food quality evaluation and consumer acceptance studies is exempt if:
- wholesome food without additives will be used, or
  - the food contains a food ingredient that is at or below the level found to be safe, or agricultural chemical or environmental contaminant at or below the level found to be safe, by the Food and Drug Administration or approved by the Environmental Protection Agency or the Food Safety and Inspection Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

### SECTION III: PROTOCOL INFORMATION

1. Please describe the purpose of the study and how the data will be used.

The purpose of this study is to collect data about how adult school superintendents and board of education presidents perceive their influence upon student achievement results.

2. Please outline the study procedures. Include a complete description of how subjects will be involved and all data collection procedures (i.e., what participants will be asked to do). For studies using existing data, please describe the source of the data and whether or not it is available publicly.

**Additionally, please attach a copy of all data collection instruments, such as surveys, interview or focus group questions, etc.**

The study will consist of interviews as the data collection method. Participants are all adult school superintendents and board presidents from Iowa public school districts. Participants will be contacted face-to-face to be asked about their study participation. During the course of the face-to-face meeting, they will be asked to review and sign the informed consent documents. The participants will be assigned a pseudonym to be used during the interview process such as "superintendent A from rural Iowa school district". The interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed. The participants will be given a copy of the transcript to review and verify the content. Their participation will be complete at that time.

3. List characteristics of your study population (i.e., ages, student status, gender, ethnicity, etc.) and your rationale for choosing them for the study. (Studies with vulnerable populations such as children, adolescents, prisoners, or other institutionalized individuals are not eligible for exempt review.)

Six school superintendents and six school board presidents in Iowa will be interviewed. In order to narrow the number of districts from the present 359 to the number needed for the study, districts were selected using a stratified random sampling. This method of sampling divides the population into smaller groups called strata, which share a specific characteristic or attribute. From each stratum a random sample is produced. The strata for this study were generated according to the certified enrollment as of October 2009. Three enrollment bands based on certified enrollment will be used as the strata for this qualitative study. Two districts will be selected from each band or stratum for a total of six. Stratum one includes those districts that have certified enrollment of 599 or less. The second stratum contains districts with enrollments between 600 and 999 students. The final stratum includes the remaining districts which have student enrollments greater than 999.

4. Describe any potential risk and assess its level of likelihood and seriousness. *If you believe there are no risks, please explain why.* Describe the procedures to be used for protecting against or minimizing any potential risk, including any confidentiality measures used to minimize the risks related to disclosure of data. Risks could be physical, psychological, social, or legal and can include minor discomfort and/or embarrassment.

There are no potential or anticipated risks for the participants for this study. Participant information will be kept confidential to the extent possible by law. Any sensitive information gained will additionally be protected by participant pseudonyms. School district names and language that could be construed to identify individual school systems will be modified as necessary (e.g., "superintendent A from rural Iowa school district described a teacher incident").

5. Describe the informed consent process to be used for the study. Attach copies of consent forms, information sheets, and/or letters of introduction that will be used. Also attach any documents that will be used for advertising or recruiting purposes.



The participants will be contacted face-to-face about their participation in the study. The attached informed consent documents will be thoroughly reviewed by the participants. They will also receive copies of the consent forms they sign.

6. If the project involves the use of existing data, please describe the extent to which persons could be identified based on information in the data, such as:
- whether or not any identifiers (names, addresses, email addresses, exact dates of birth, SSN, student IDs, subject ID codes, etc.) will be included with the data you receive;
  - whether or not you have access to any keys or links between ID codes and the identity of the persons (please attach any agreements with the holder of the key/link that it will not be released to you).

There will be no identifiers on any of the data collected during the interview process of this study. Pseudonyms will be used throughout the data collection, analysis, and reporting process.

**APPENDIX E: AUDIT TRAIL**

January 24, 2011	Received IRB approval to conduct research.
January 25, 2011	Used an Excel formula to produce a stratified random sampling of six Iowa public school districts meeting the student achievement criteria.
January 25, 2011	Emailed the superintendents and board presidents of the six school districts selected to invite them to participate in the study.
January 31, 2011	Explained the informed consent form and process to participant one; conducted face-to-face interview.
February 3, 2011	Explained the informed consent form and process to participants two and three; conducted face-to-face interviews.
February 4, 2011	Explained the informed consent form and process to participants four and five; conducted face-to-face interviews.
February 9, 2011	Explained the informed consent form and process to participants six and seven; conducted face-to-face interviews.

February 10, 2011	Explained the informed consent form and process to participant eight; conducted face-to-face interview.
February 11, 2011	Explained the informed consent form and process to participants nine and ten; conducted face-to-face interviews.
February 16, 2011	Explained the informed consent form and process to participants eleven and twelve; conducted face-to-face interviews.
February 1-19, 2011	Performed transcription and analysis process of all twelve interviews.
February 3-22, 2011	Conducted follow-up communications with twelve participants providing them the opportunity to review transcripts.
February-April 2011	Data analysis through transcript review.
March-April 2011	Requested peer and colleague review as findings and themes emerged.

## APPENDIX F: SCHOOLS AND DISTRICTS IN NEED OF ASSISTANCE

### District A

Study Participants: Superintendent N/Board President U

- SINA\* Watch List--none
- On SINA List—none
- On DINA\*\* List—no

#### District Demographics

- Limited English Proficient Student Percentage: 0.00
- Free/Reduce Price Meal District Percentage: 25.2
  - Building Percentage:
    - 1 elementary school--27.2
    - 1 middle/high school—23.4

### District B

Study Participants: Superintendent L/Board President V

- SINA Watch List
  - 1 elementary school for math and reading
- On SINA List
  - 1 elementary school for reading
  - 1 middle school for reading and math
  - 1 high school for reading and math
  - 1 alternative high school for reading and math
- On DINA List—yes

#### District Demographics

- Limited English Proficient Student Percentage: 49.11
- Free/Reduce Price Meal District Percentage: 64.3

### District C

Study Participants: Superintendent K/Board President Z

- SINA Watch List
  - 2 elementary schools for reading and math
  - 1 elementary school for reading only
  - 1 elementary for participation in reading
  - 1 junior high school for reading and math
- On SINA List
  - 5 elementary schools for reading and math
  - 1 elementary school for reading
  - 1 elementary school for math
  - 2 junior high schools for reading and math

- 2 high schools for reading and math
- 1 alternative high school for reading and math
- On DINA List—yes

#### District Demographics

- Limited English Proficient Student Percentage: 3.75
- Free/Reduce Price Meal District Percentage: 30.9
  - Building Percentages
    - 19 elementary schools ranging from 6.1 to 80.9%
    - 3 junior high schools ranging from 18.7 to 35.2 %
    - 2 high schools ranging from 22.4 to 30.8%
    - 1 alternative high school: 72.4%

#### **District D**

Study Participants: Superintendent O/Board President X

- SINA Watch List--none
- On SINA List--none
- On DINA List—no

#### District Demographics

- Limited English Proficient Student Percentage: 0.39
- Free/Reduce Price Meal District Percentage: 19.0
  - Building Percentages:
    - Elementary-23.4
    - Middle School-21.9
    - High School—16.2

#### **District E**

Study Participants: Superintendent P/Board President Y

- SINA Watch List
  - 1 elementary school for reading
  - 1 middle school for reading participation
- On SINA List--none
- On DINA List—no

#### District Demographics

- Limited English Proficient Student Percentage: 0.58
- Free/Reduce Price Meal District Percentage: 45.2
  - Building Percentage
    - 2 elementary schools ranging from 50.8 to 51.3
    - 1 middle school—46.2
    - 1 high school—36.9

**District F**

Study Participants: Superintendent M/Board President W

- SINA Watch List
  - 3 elementary schools for reading
  - 1 middle school for reading
- On SINA List--none
- On DINA List—no

District Demographics

- Limited English Proficient Student Percentage: 0.77
- Free/Reduce Price Meal District Percentage: 28.7
  - Building Percentages
    - 6 elementary schools ranging from 22.1 to 42.9
    - 1 middle school—28.7
    - 1 jr/sr high school—23.6
    - 1 high school—24.3

State Averages:

2010-11 State of Iowa Limited English Proficient Student Percentage: 4.38

2010-11 State of Iowa Free/Reduced Price Meal Percentage: 38.2

- 
- \* SINA: School in Need of Assistance
  - \*\* DINA: District in Need of Assistance

**APPENDIX G: BOARD PARTICIPATION IN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES**

District*	09-10 ABLE**	09-10 School Board Convention***	10-11 ABLE**	10-11 School Board Convention***
A	0	4	0	5
B	2	4	2	3
C	1	7	0	7
D	0	2	0	3
E	0	5	0	4
F	0	1	1	1

---

\* Six districts participated in the study. Five of those districts have a five-member board of education; District C has a seven-member board.

\*\* ABLE: Academy of Board Learning Experiences (offered by the Iowa Association of School Boards)

\*\*\*Annual convention of the Iowa Association of School Boards

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