Trust: A Mediator in District Reform

by

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Trust: A Mediator in District Reform

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to enhance an understanding of how the concept of trust served as a mediator in school reform initiatives. The study described how district leaders worked to build and nurture trusting relationships to sustain reform efforts.

A phenomenological research design was utilized to understand how trust mediates system reform. This qualitative study included eight district leaders from Southern California. The district leaders participating in this study were recognized by the National Center for Urban School Transformation (NCUST) for leading America’s Best Urban Schools or had received the distinction of Honor Roll classification by the California Business for Education Excellence. The researcher conducted an extended interview, which was organized as two segments, with those district leaders. In the first segment, district leaders were asked to share their background in education, their belief system pertaining to who holds responsibility for school and district improvement, and their perspectives on the district’s culture, patterns of communication, and ability to identify and implement reform. The second segment of the interviews focused on efforts to build trust in an effort to ascertain the leaders’ perceptions as to the importance of trust and actions necessary to build it.

District leaders shared numerous structures and strategies they believed addressed specific facets of trust including honesty and respect, vulnerability and interdependence, consistency and reliability, and openness and communication, as they worked to build trusting relationships with various stakeholders. Through the interview process, they identified trust as a variable that supports and sustains district reform.
In summary, this study is significant in building upon the research base affirming that sound leadership at the district level has a profound effect on sustained system reform. It also shows that it would behoove district leaders to support conditions in which trusting relationships are nurtured and strengthened. By establishing structures and systems in which there is a strong sense of partnership between the district, the school site, and the community trusting relationships will serve to mediate district reform.
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The past 3 years have caused me to reflect and realize how important it is to keep learning. This I know for sure: I could not have taken on this learning opportunity if I did not have the support of my family and friends. My mother has been an inspiration to me my entire life. She exemplifies strength and independence, which have influenced me in all facets of my life. She is my hero.

This journey would not have been the same without Margaret and Stefan. The two of them have made me a better person, a stronger leader, and a more thoughtful student. Our friendship reaches beyond the classroom, the school, and the university. I believe that together we make a difference and hope I will have an opportunity to try on this learning with them in further adventures that will make a difference for schools. The professors I have worked with at San Diego State University have inspired and made a lasting impact on me; their dedication and leadership exemplifies integrity, which is exactly what we need today to improve systems for all students. Having the opportunity to work with Dr. Pumpian again has reminded me of the importance of staying true to my heart and keeping the interest of others as the focus of all my behaviors and actions.

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Again, thank you.
CHAPTER 1—INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to enhance an understanding of how the concept of trust serves as a mediator in school reform initiatives. In this era of high-stakes accountability and public scrutiny, school districts throughout the nation are working to sustain systems for lasting reform. If meaningful reform is to succeed, stakeholders must be involved in the initiatives. Throughout the years, school systems have implemented school reform initiatives that have failed to produce the desired results for various reasons. A lack of buy-in from stakeholders is one of the most prevalent reasons that so many reform initiatives have failed.

Perry and McDermott (2003), consultants with the Panasonic Foundation which helps urban districts analyze current practices and design systemic strategies for improvements, affirmed that leaders must recognize that reform strategies are only as effective as the people who use them. Like Fullan (2010), they emphasized that it is critical to build capacity of everyone in the organization, stating: “We have not seen a school district that has been successful in leading and sustaining change that did not recognize the importance of central office administrators—parents, students, teachers, site and district administrators, and system leaders” (p. 1). As reform initiatives are introduced, stakeholders tend to be leery and will often recoil rather than embrace and participate in the change. Sparks (2007) asserted that leaders must create and maintain relationships within organizations. He emphasized that in order to cultivate an atmosphere of cooperation and trust within an organization, its leaders must encourage high-quality connections that enhance engagement and openness among stakeholders.
Mobilizing individual school, as well as district-wide teams, is essential when embarking on system reform. According to Fullan (2002), administrators must be “sophisticated conceptual thinkers who transform the organization through people and teams” (p. 17). Developing and nurturing relationships over time is critical for reform efforts. Blankstein (2011) expanded on this view, stating that “when trust and relationships are strong, people become committed to far more than the new initiative. They commit to one another; this is more binding and sustaining than anything else an organization can offer” (p. 91).

When describing how to establish trust, Tschannen-Moran (2004) suggested that trust is a “multi-dimensional and dynamic phenomenon” (p. 41) and added that the way it builds will not be the same at all times in all places. Trusting relationships are complex and develop only with ongoing effort over time. Without commitment from stakeholders as well as strong professional relationships, school systems are unlikely to implement and sustain change (Firestone, 1989; Fullan, 2010; Smylie, Mayrowetz, Murphy, & Louis, 2007). Now more than ever, school districts are critical participants in system reform and must work to support coherence within and among schools.

Acknowledging these key points, this study builds on research in an effort to provide a deeper understanding of the benefits of trusting relationships and their effect on school-system reform. Understanding how school leaders at the district and site levels effectively build and nurture trusting relationships will prove to be essential, especially as reforms are introduced and implemented system-wide.
**Background for the Study**

Today’s schools are being called upon to change, improve, and reform. School reform initiatives vary from school to school, district to district, state to state, and among nations. Current challenges linked to sustained reform include the constant effort to create school environments in which relationships are built to support competence, collaboration, and trust among stakeholders. Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000) synthesized four decades of research pertaining to trust in organizations; they concluded that their research on trust in organizations also served as context to inform educators in their work to foster and strengthen trusting relationships in schools. They stated, “Trust is required for many reforms taking shape in American schools. New forms of governance such as site-based management, collaborative decision making, and teacher empowerment depend on trust. Parents are pressing for involvement in school governance; this too requires trust” (p. 585).

Bryk and Schneider (2002) used the term *relational trust* to describe trust in schools. In their research of organizational trust, they compared elements of organic and contractual trust to shed light on the complexities of trust in schools. Whereas organic trust is common in small-scale communities in which people give their trust unconditionally, contractual trust is based on consensual outcomes. Trusting relationships based on organic trust are more likely to endure because of a strong sense of identification with the group. In relationships initiated through contractual trust, the sustaining power is dependent on progress toward meeting previously agreed-upon terms.

All forms of trust rely on social exchanges. To function effectively, schools depend on stakeholders to adhere to their specific roles. Through their research, Bryk and
Schneider (2002) concluded, “A complex web of social exchanges conditions the basic operations of schools. Embedded in the daily social routines of schools is an interrelated set of mutual dependencies among all key actors: student, teachers, principal, administrators, and parents” (p. 20). Interdependence is a necessity regardless of a stakeholder’s position. For example, district office administrators depend on principals, principals depend on teachers, and teachers depend on the involvement of parents and students to fulfill role obligations, which in turn help create and sustain an optimal learning environment.

Cultivating collegial trust was investigated in a qualitative study conducted by Cosner (2009). Her work supported the notion that schools are based on interdependence. She also found that increased trust supported multiple forms of interaction within organizations by reducing uncertainty and providing safe environments in which people were more likely to cooperate. In a study conducted by Chhuon, Gilkey, Gonzalez, Daly, and Chrispeels (2008), school district and site leaders worked with a university partner to develop trusting relationships. The study highlighted that open lines of communication served to strengthen relationships between site and district leaders.

Furthermore, research conducted by Goddard, Salloum, and Berebitsky (2009) indicated that trust is a strong predictor of several important outcomes for schools, including student achievement regardless of race or socioeconomic status. The researchers found that in high-trust schools, trust served as a “mediator of the relationship between school disadvantage and academic achievement” (p. 306).

Recent educational research is uncovering a key lesson in school reform: Trusting relationships matter. Nurturing trusting relationships has proved to support teaching and
learning in the classroom. Blankstein (2011) succinctly captures the power of trust in his book, *The Answer Is in the Room*. One excerpt states, “As trust is built, people are focused on working together to solve a problem they have collectively identified as important. This, too, helps foster relationships and trust” (p. 90).

**Statement of the Problem**

Trust between site principals and teachers in schools has been studied, and the results indicate that high-trust relationships contribute to both school success and student achievement. Research pertaining to the role school districts play in developing trusting relationships, which in turn relate to sustained system reform, is growing (Blankstein, 2011; Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Chhuon et al., 2008; Fullan, 2010; Mourshed, Chijioke, & Barber, 2010; Spillane & Thompson, 1997; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). One stumbling block in efforts to develop trust is the structural differences between schools and district offices. Because trusting relationships must be continually fostered, any logistical issue can be a hurdle. District office administrators are often assigned to support numerous schools and their principals; the demands on their time and focus may be an obstacle to administrators’ efforts to initiate, build, and sustain trusting relationships. A lack of relational and organizational trust in the school system is another obstacle that can derail district administrators’ efforts to build strong relationships.

To sustain system-wide reform, trusting relationships are crucial. Without high-trust relationships, stakeholders including superintendents, district office leadership, school board members, school-site staff, parents, students, and community members are unlikely to succeed in creating a vision for system reform that is implemented, embraced, and sustained over time. Research details the relationship between district office and site
leaders as hierarchical and semiautonomous (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2004; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000), thus strengthening the case for building trusting relationships at all levels. In a meta-analysis examining research spanning 35 years, Waters and Marzano (2006) refer to the term *defined autonomy*, wherein the superintendent “encourages strong school-level leadership and encourages principals and others to assume responsibility for school success, he or she has fulfilled another responsibility to establish a relationship with schools” (p. 13), acknowledging that school systems committed to sustained reform must face the challenge of creating and nurturing trusting relationships.

The purpose of this study is to explore how district leaders, particularly school superintendents and central office administrators, develop and nurture trusting relationships with school leaders. The study will also explore how superintendents and central office administrators encourage trusting relationships to help implement and sustain system reform. The primary purpose of this research is to encapsulate the importance of high-trust relationships across school systems in an effort to improve relationships, which in turn foster improved student achievement.

Waters and Marzano (2006) conducted a meta-analysis involving 2,817 school districts and the achievement of more than three million students. Their research reported a positive correlation of .24 between district leadership and student achievement, clear evidence that district leadership does matter. Because research indicates that trusting relationships lead to improved student performance, developing an understanding of trust as it relates to improving relationships among leaders at the site and district levels should prove to be useful to educational strategists.
Methodology

To answer the research questions, the researcher employed the qualitative tradition of phenomenology (Creswell, 2007). A phenomenological research design supported the quest to understand how trust mediates system reform by collecting information and describing essential experiences of district leaders who have experienced the phenomenon. The participants were purposefully selected utilizing a chain sampling technique by which the researcher “identifies cases of interest from people who know people who know what cases are information-rich” (Creswell, 2007, p. 127). Professors at San Diego State University facilitated participant selection for the research study.

Districts in Southern California who were recognized by the National Center for Urban School Transformation (NCUST) Project or the California Business for Education Excellence awards were used to identify district leaders who have experienced success in leading school districts toward improved academic achievement for all students. The criteria applied by NCUST and the California Business for Education Excellence Honor Roll award provided an informative link between school district leaders and effective school reform.

During the course of the study, the researcher conducted one semi-structured, individual interview with eight district leaders. The interview was organized into two segments. The purpose of the first segment of the interview was to gain an understanding of each district leader’s personal perspective of essential elements necessary to implement and sustain reform measures. The researcher asked no specific questions about trust. The second segment of the interview explored key components that relate to both successes of and barriers to specific reform efforts; it also probed whether trust served as a catalyst to
fuel district reform. Information collected from these interviews should expand the understanding of how district leaders view the role trust plays in reform initiatives. Data were analyzed in successive rounds of review. The final analysis highlighted the essence of the phenomenon, detailing each district leader’s experience in his or her district’s reform effort, while also highlighting the role trust played in the reform effort.

Limitations of the Study

The proposed study was conducted within Southern California, limiting the extent to which the findings might be generalized more broadly throughout the state or beyond to encompass the nation. Because the participating district leaders were selected based on their connection to specific awards, results may not be generalized to other states or regions. That said, the insights from the study may enhance understanding of the role trust plays in reform efforts, while also encouraging future research related to the phenomenon. Results were restricted to assessing the experiences and perceptions of the district leaders interviewed. The researcher worked to develop an interview tool that encouraged district leaders to provide thoughtful answers that highlighted their experiences related to trust and reform efforts. In terms of limitations, it is also important to note that it can be difficult to enlist district leaders to participate in interviews during a relatively short period of time.

Significance of the Study

Understanding the role district leaders play in developing and nurturing trusting relationships in an era of high-stakes accountability is significant in the field of education. In addition, an investigation of how trusting relationships build capacity within a school system and facilitate system-wide reform will serve those seeking sustained change. The
literature review conducted for this study will provide a basis for district leaders to better understand the importance of building trusting relationships with all stakeholders. To establish and build trust, it is vital for all involved to understand that trust itself is multifaceted and ever changing. The literature reviewed and the methods utilized to interview district leaders will highlight key practices that both promote and sustain trust while system reform initiatives are in progress.
CHAPTER 2—REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

Developing trusting relationships may be a prerequisite for building the capacity necessary to sustain system reform. After reviewing four decades of research focusing on trust, Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000) determined that it is considered to be fundamental in an interdependent society and is also acknowledged as a vital aspect of a well-functioning organization. Because school districts are complex organizations that are hierarchal in nature, building trusting relationships among educational leaders must be a priority. According to Spillane and Thompson (1997), district leadership, commitment, knowledge, and trustworthiness are needed to ensure that resources are used to the greatest advantage in teaching and learning. In addition, Louis (2003) surmised that without high-trust relationships, district stakeholders would be unlikely to create a shared vision for reform. Research suggests that trust relates directly to important workplace behaviors and attitudes (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). In fact, when predictive factors such as trust, empowerment, and involvement were in play, teachers and administrators perceived a less rigid response in schools that were operating under sanctions from state-mandated program-improvement requirements (Daly, 2009). In this era of high-stakes accountability and increased student needs, justice and trust enhance the principal’s ability to positively influence school climate and, ultimately, the interaction between teachers and students (Dipaola & Guy, 2009).

This literature review examines research related to positive system change and the importance of trusting relationships between schools and the school district’s central office. In schools, organizational preconditions including trust, professional learning, and
reciprocal accountability are required for distributed leadership to take root, which in turn
helps build powerful school cultures centered on student achievement (Copland, 2003).
Fullan, Bertani, and Quinn (2004) extended this notion of collaborative leadership,
suggesting that “like distributed leadership at the school level, large scale reform requires
pluralized leadership, with teams of people [district-level administrators] creating and
driving a clear, coherent strategy” (p. 43). Vangen and Huxham (2003) referred to trust
within a business setting as a cyclic process; when outcomes met expectations, trusting
attitudes were reinforced, thereby reducing the sense of risk in future interorganizational
collaboration. In addition, this literature review encompasses research and scholarship
regarding organizational practices as indicative of commitment to the employee
(Whitener, 2001).

There is reason to believe that school district officials play a pivotal role in the
success of schools, yet few studies investigate their influence on relationships at the site
level. As stated by Rorrer, Skrla, and Scheurich (2008), “In general, school reform,
school improvement, and school effectiveness research over the past two decades often
has overlooked, ignored, and even dismissed the potential of districts as substantial
contributors to systematic reform” (p. 308). Despite that perspective, Fullan et al. (2004)
engendered a more positive outlook by observing “key lessons . . . emerging out of our
increasingly sophisticated understanding of how districts implement large-scale change”
(p. 42). Future study might seek to explore the benefits of trusting relationships between
school system leaders and their constituents as a natural extension of, and support
structure for, trusting relationships that ultimately relate directly to student achievement.
Studying Organizational Trust

Trust is dynamic and changes over the course of a relationship (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). According to Cosner (2009), “Trust supports a variety of interactions within an organization, whether interactions are between individuals, within teams, subgroups, or among an entire staff, by reducing uncertainty and predisposing people to cooperate” (p. 251). Shamir and Lapidot (2003) suggested that trust is both an interpersonal and a collective phenomenon; they identify three levels of trust: the system level, the group level, and the individual level. Furthermore, Dirks and Ferrin (2002) found that trust contains multiple dimensions, including cognitive and affective layers. Cognitive dimensions of trust reflect issues such as reliability, integrity, honesty, and fairness, while affective dimensions reflect concern as to one’s welfare.

Tschannen-Moran (2004) defines trust as “one’s willingness to be vulnerable to another based on the confidence that the other is benevolent, honest, open, reliable, and competent” (p. 17). Dirks and Ferrin (2002) conducted a meta-analysis of research studies spanning four decades. The research they reviewed included 106 independent samples from 27,103 individuals. Data were coded into four categories: affective trust, cognitive trust, willingness to be vulnerable, and overall trust. Data revealed a significant relationship between trust and attitudinal variables, such as job satisfaction ($r = .51$) and organizational commitment ($r = .49$). Trust was found to be essential in building relationships that led to positive results for education and business organizations.

Vangen and Huxham (2003) conducted a synthesis of research that included reviews of literature, statements by practitioners, and research data from studies related to health, economic area regeneration, and poverty alleviation to support trust management.
From the data, researchers developed a trust-building loop to manage interorganizational collaboration, as well as a table to summarize implications of trust. The research highlighted the complexity of initiating, building, and sustaining trust. The trust-building loop details key facets of trust and how they are interdependent, as shown in Figure 1. If various parties are unfamiliar with one another, they must at least have enough trust to be vulnerable, thus initiating the loop. This might translate to a school district. For example, if a principal is concerned about the level of communication provided by the central office, he/she would need to be willing to take a risk, and have enough trust in central office administration to share concerns and possible solutions. Through participation, risk is reduced if the principal’s expectations are met. The key to a successful trust building loop is making sure the principal(s) involved are working on increasingly ambitious and realistic outcomes. When outcomes are realized, trust is strengthened. In the event outcomes are out of reach, it is likely trusting attitudes will not be reinforced resulting in a break in the loop.

Effective school leaders develop trusting relationships as a means to influence teacher behavior and build capacity for improving student learning and achievement (Dipaola & Guy, 2009). Lewicki and Bunker (1996) described the development of this sort of trust in professional relationships as occurring in three stages: deterrence-or calculus-based trust, knowledge-based trust, and identification-based trust.

Deterrence-based trust is based on consistency, which entails doing what one says one will do. It links to behavioral consistency, which means that trust is sustained to the degree that the deterrent is clear, possible, and likely to occur. In this instance, the person is motivated to trust because of a threat rather than a reward. For example, individuals
who feel they will be reprimanded or ostracized will probably attend mandated meetings, fearing that if they do not they might be considered untrustworthy or disloyal to the group.

Knowledge-based trust relies on information and is linked to predictability rather than deterrence. This form of trust develops over time in accord with growing knowledge that the other party will act predictably. Regular communication is a building block for knowledge-based trust. True relationships are built on numerous interactions in different contexts, and, as a result of those encounters, the individuals involved are likely to endure despite disappointments or inconsistent behavior. For example, if one forgets an
important engagement, it is unlikely that trust will ultimately be damaged. Because of a shared history that includes regular communication, previous consistency, and a reputation of trustworthiness, both parties involved in that situation are likely to understand the incident was an oversight rather than a purposeful affront.

Identification-based trust occurs when parties develop a collective identity. For this construct, individuals identify with one another and know what is needed to sustain one another’s trust. For example, in a Professional Learning Community (PLC), members develop a common set of goals over time and work toward the same outcome, thus developing a collective identity built on interdependence.

Lewicki and Bunker (1996) asserted that trust is built over time. They developed a model depicting how trust evolves as relationships are built on consistency and positive interactions. They advanced that model to illustrate how one is vulnerable in the beginning stages of trust. This is similar to the trust-building loop developed by Vangen and Huxham (2003) as shown in Figure 1, which details key facets of trust and how they are interdependent. Both models emphasize how trust leads to risk taking. Each time a risk is taken and results in an intended outcome, trusting attitudes are reinforced. The outcome becomes a part of the history of the relationship, thus reducing the sense of risk in subsequent actions.

District leaders could benefit by studying the research that pertains to positive and productive relationships. This context would fuel an understanding that trusting systems are more likely to remain focused during reformation. Succinctly stated by Fullan (2010), “We are beginning to appreciate that successful schools, districts, and larger systems have resolute leadership that stays with the focus, especially during rough periods, and these
leaders cause others around them to be resolute” (p. 5). Further study in this area might explore the tenets of trust in the context of resolute leadership as defined by Fullan.

Supporting the perception of the impact strong district-level leadership holds, Waters and Marzano (2006) conducted a meta-analysis to examine the influence of district-level leadership on student performance. Efforts to define the benefits of strong relationships between district-level leadership and student achievement, a positive correlation of .24 was found when the superintendent involved board members and principals in the process of goal setting. Practices the superintendent and central office staff utilized to fulfill superintendent responsibilities included a goal-setting process, non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction, board alignment with defining and support of district goals, and monitoring goals for achievement and instruction. Waters and Marzano concluded, “The answers we found affirm the long-held, but previously undocumented, belief that sound leadership at the district level [resolute leadership] adds value to an educational system” (p. 8).

Tschannen-Moran (2004) described the evolution of trust as “multifaceted . . . including many elements or drivers of an overall level of trust” (p. 17). She refers to trust as the “glue” binding organizational participants to one another, noting that trust matters most in situations of interdependence that include vulnerability. In accord with the aforementioned authors, Tschannen-Moran maintains:

It [trust] takes on different characteristics at different stages of a relationship. As trust develops, it “gels” at different levels, depending on the nature of the relationship and the qualities of the interactions as parties have gotten to know one another. The nature of vulnerability can change as the level of
interdependence increases or decreases and as expectations are either met or disappointed. (p. 41)

According to Cosner (2009), aspects of knowledge-based trust are particularly instructive to trust formation in organizational settings such as schools, where trust develops among individuals through repeated social exchanges. In accord with that perspective, Chhuon et al. (2008) studied the perspectives of school site leaders and central office administrators working in partnership with university faculty to investigate trust issues and trust building in a California school district. Through case study design, data were collected over a 3-year period and included interviews, observations, videotapes, document analyses, and surveys. A constant comparative analysis was conducted on qualitative data to identify different perspectives that pertained to central issues involving trust. In addition, survey data were quantified to assess change; matched data were used to create a comparison of the same population in 2004 and 2007 via trust surveys. Chhuon et al. stated:

This study makes a unique contribution to the research literature in that it examines not only the construct of trust in its totality, but also the individual and combined effects of the facets of trust on the development of site and district relationships. (p. 269)

Findings from the case study indicated that districts strengthen trusting relationships with site leaders to the degree that district officials demonstrate expeditious follow-through on concerns important to school site leaders. Such responsiveness clearly signals reliability and integrity, builds shared leadership via transparency, and improves communication. As a result of the study, district officials instituted regular school visits according to a
cluster configuration. Teacher leaders working with principals and central office administration became advocates for shifting organizational processes from a hierarchical to an inclusive model, thus increasing two-way communication and nurturing trusting relationships.

Throughout the literature, vulnerability-interdependence, openness-communication, integrity, collaboration-reciprocation, and leadership emerged as key themes and essential components for building trusting relationships. Further study in this area might examine the key elements of trust and how they mediate sustained system reform.

Key Elements of Trust

Throughout the literature reviewed for this study, key elements of trust emerged. In this section essential elements of trust will be discussed.

Vulnerability and Interdependence

Trust is critical when two parties rely on each other to achieve desired outcomes. Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000) conducted a multidisciplinary analysis to shed light on the meaning of trust in organizational settings. In their review of philosophical, economic, organizational, and educational literature, recurring themes surfaced. Vulnerability emerged as a descriptor of trust within most definitions. The authors stated that interdependence brings vulnerability. Without interdependence, there is no need for trust.

Bryk and Schneider (2002) likewise refer to the importance of relational trust that occurs when each party in the relationship maintains an understanding of his or her role and holds expectations about the obligations of the other parties, in other words when the
construct involves interdependence. Applying a similar perspective in a business context, Whitener (2001) utilized the social exchange theory, highlighting the norm of reciprocity to explain aspects of the relationship between the organization and its employees. She suggested employees themselves have a relationship with their employer that is parallel to the relationship individuals build with one another, thus, personifying the structure of an organization. In her work, Whitener explored human resource practices in 180 credit unions using a sample size of 1,689 employees to investigate the relationships among human resource practice, trust-in-management, and organizational commitment. Her findings indicated that employees’ trust and commitment was stronger when they perceived the organization was committed to and supportive of them.

Another aspect of vulnerability, as it relates to trust, involves hierarchical relationships. This facet of trust is observed in both business and educational arenas. “Because of the hierarchal nature of relationships within schools [and districts], it is the responsibility of the person with greater power to take the initiative to build and sustain trusting relationships” (Tschannen-Moran, 2004, p. 35). Considering trust from another angle, Martin (1999) explained:

- The development of trust is a never ending process. It is essential to recognize that trust can only be obtained from others if it is first freely given. It is up to the leader to set the pace; to make the first move. The leader must go first and trust his employees. Trust will then flow back to him. (p. 43)

Shamir and Lapidot (2003) examined systematic and interpersonal trust relationships and the role that groups play in those relationships. Their study utilized a mixed-method approach to determine levels of trust associated with the role of
commanders supervising 84 teams of male cadets in an officers’ training course in Israel. The quantitative portion of the study simply found that individual cadets held a dispositional level of trust toward their commander based on their trust in the institution. That trust later eroded because of a team-level phenomenon. The qualitative portion of the study showed that trust in the commander was most negatively impacted by a cadet’s expulsion from the course. The data indicated expulsions were rare, and a team commander’s recommendation to expel a cadet was not always accepted. Furthermore, cadets were sometimes involved in dismissing a peer by formally rating an individual’s appropriateness as an officer.

This study demonstrated that trust is not only an interpersonal phenomenon but also a collective (team level) phenomenon, acknowledging that leadership is characterized by interdependence benefitting from cooperation and trust. In accord with that conclusion, Kramer (1999) suggested, “Trust between two or more interdependent actors thickens or thins as a function of their cumulative interaction. Interactional histories give decision makers information that is useful in assessing others’ dispositions, intentions, and motives” (p. 575). Waters and Marzano’s (2006) meta-analysis supported the concepts of interdependence, cooperation, and history, noting that a superintendent may provide principals with “defined autonomy-setting clear non-negotiable goals for learning and instruction, yet provide school leadership teams with the responsibility and authority for determining how to meet these goals over time” (p. 4). They also noted a “bonus” finding that emerged as a result of two studies that reported a correlation between superintendent tenure and student academic achievement. The meta-analysis findings reported a weighted correlation from the two studies as .19 significant at the .05
level, again supporting the assertion that history is a factor in building positive relationships.

Dirks and Ferrin (2002) drew distinctions between two theoretical perspectives of trust in leadership. The leader-follower perspective elicits citizenship because of the emphasis on relational issues of care and consideration, while the character-based perception focuses on vulnerability and the hierarchical nature of the relationship. The purpose of their meta-analysis was to reveal the relative importance of various relationships; doing so would inform organizational decisions that involved building trust in supervisors versus building trust in senior leadership. Seven hypotheses were constructed to probe the relationship between trust and job performance. Various topics were studied, including attitudes, satisfaction with leaders, trust in direct leaders, and participative decision making, as well as the relationship between overall trust and cognitive trust as it relates to job performance and fairness.

Findings indicated that there was a significant link between trust in leadership and each of the attitudinal, behavioral, and performance-based outcomes. Dirks and Ferrin (2002) noted that analysis of data provided evidence of significant relationships between trust and hypothesized outcomes. They expressed a need for future research that might distinguish between the effects of relationship- and character-based theories, suggesting “a study might, for example explore where trust in a supervisor affects a particular outcome by means of processes associated with the character-based perspective, the relationship- based perspective or, both” (p. 622). Thus, in facilitating the leader-follower and character-based aspects of relationships, good judgment and care are vital to performance because of the hierarchical structure within most systems. To reduce
vulnerability and create a culture of care, understanding the role of openness and communication is paramount.

**Openness and Communication**

A High Performing Organizational Model (HPO), as described by Blanchard (2007), included six essential elements (SCORES) working interdependently to produce and sustain high performance and employee satisfaction. The elements are described as: (S) Shared Information and Open Communication; (C) Compelling Vision; (O) Ongoing Learning; (R) Relentless Focus on Customer Relations; (E) Energizing Systems and Structures; and (S) Shared Power and High Involvement. This model acknowledges open communication as one of the six key elements. Blanchard maintained that “sharing information and facilitating open communication builds trust and encourages people to act like owners of the organization,” likening open communication to the “lifeblood” of the organization (p. 10). With a similar perspective, Tschannen-Moran (2004) stated, “When a leader makes him/herself vulnerable through openness, a spiral of trust is initiated that serves to foster increasing levels of trust in the organization” (p. 25).

Aligning the research related to business organizations with school districts, Chhuon et al. (2008) stated that repeated social exchanges (communication) are potentially more important for building trust than social similarities such as race and religion. They also recognized that the structural design of most school districts does not allow for repeated social exchange and interaction. The authors described the relationship between principals and central office administrators as hierarchical, semi-autonomous, and loosely coupled. They conducted a study in California over a 3-year period, involving a university partner who proved to be instrumental in raising a
sense of urgency and providing a safe forum within which difficult issues could be discussed and acted on. Quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed and highlighted four catalytic developments deemed influential in moving trust forward as an important district-wide concern. The developments were identified as: (a) enrollment growth and changing demographics, (b) attendance at a local university partner’s 2003 fall institute, (c) participation in the university’s 2004 summer learning lab, and (d) presentation of the trust survey data to the district administrative team in autumn 2004. Data analysis utilized a constant comparison method that grouped answers to common questions and analyzed different perspectives of interviewees on central issues pertaining to trust. Chhuon et al. defined openness as “the extent in which relevant information is not withheld—a process by which people make themselves vulnerable to others by sharing personal information with others, giving of oneself” (p. 253). Communication was defined as “an act of interaction between individuals or groups in which a message is being transmitted” (Chhuon et al., 2008, p. 255).

Analysis of data revealed that trust-building activities, which focused on openness, risk taking, and communication, served to nurture trusting relationships between those involved with district and site leadership. Findings from the case study signaled that district officials intent on strengthening trusting relationships with site leaders benefit from expeditious follow-through on important issues. In addition, following up in a timely, thoughtful manner increased reliability via transparency, and improved communication. As a result of the study, the district instituted regular school visits within a cluster configuration. Teacher leaders were involved and took on the role of facilitators to shift from a hierarchical structure to a more inclusive model with the
intent to increase two-way communication and nurture trusting relationships. This study could be adapted as part of future research to determine practices that nurture trusting relationships between central office administrators and site leaders. In addition, as stated by Chhuon et al. (2008), “Longitudinal studies would determine whether sustained efforts to build trust yield better perceptions among adults and gains in student achievement” (p. 275).

Studies of trust within schools between site principals and teachers have indicated high trust relationships contribute to school success and student achievement. Conversely, research also signals that structural differences between schools and district offices make nurturing trusting relationships between site leaders and central office administrators difficult. Compounding those hurdles to building trust, relational and organizational trust is often absent in school systems, a deficit that may deter school reform.

**Studying District-System Reform**

In the McKinsey report, *How the World’s Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better*, Mourshed et al. (2010) reported on school systems that achieved significant, sustained, and widespread gains on international and national assessments from 1980 to 2010. Three school systems from the United States were included in the report: Aspire Public Schools (U.S. Charter School system), Long Beach School District (California), and Boston (Massachusetts). To represent developed and developing countries, the school systems were identified as sustained improvers and promising starts. The sustained improvers encompassed 13 systems that met the criteria of experiencing at least 5 years of increased achievement spanning multiple data points and subjects.
Promising starts encompassed seven systems that met the criteria of a developing country or emerging area that had begun data reform efforts and realized significant improvement over 2 to 3 years. The report suggested that understanding the current stage of performance, identifying necessary interventions, and adapting to the context within which the system lived (culture, politics, and structure of the school system) were essential actions for achieving reform. The report carefully described the level of interventions various systems used to improve learning, delineating differences in systems according to performance stages: poor to fair, fair to good, good to great, and great to excellent.

According to Mourshed et al. (2010), the key to successful interventions was maintaining integrity and fidelity; they likened those key factors to the role exercise and diet play in a regimen implemented to improve health. The interventions may be similar for different people, but if they are not appropriate, consistent, and disciplined, they are not likely to succeed. The authors provided demographic data, including the number of systems within each performance stage, the wealth of each system or area, the type of system (nation, province, district, and network), the number of schools in each system, and per pupil expenditure in each system. The report described a correlational relationship between performance stages and level of guidance provided by the system. It also described how successful systems were cognizant of the pros and cons of their context, stating a leader’s “prime aim in contextualizing the intervention is usually to gain the requisite support of the various stakeholders for the interventions being made” (Mourshead et al., 2010, p. 27).
Drawing on published and unpublished literature spanning a 20-year time frame, Levin and Fullan (2008) advance similar tenants to the McKinsey report (Mourshed et al., 2010) noting:

Large scale, sustained improvement in student outcomes requires a sustained effort to change school and classroom practices, not just structures such as governance and accountability. The heart of improvement lies in changing teaching and learning practices in thousands and thousands of classrooms, and this requires focused and sustained effort by all parts of the education system and its partners. (p. 291)

Levin and Fullan (2008) stated that change is easy, but improvement is not. They identified seven key elements necessary to facilitate improvement through change that leads to sustained student growth and success. Those elements were:

(a) a small number of ambitious yet achievable goals, (b) a positive stance with a focus on motivation, (c) multilevel engagement with strong leadership and “guiding coalition,” (d) emphasis on capacity building with a focus on results, (e) keeping a focus on key strategies while also managing other interests and issues, (f) effective use of resources, and (g) constant and growing transparency, including public and stakeholder communication and feedback. (p. 293)

These elements are interdependent, which makes building relationships and increasing morale that will endure system change a multifaceted endeavor. It is critical for leaders within systems design reform strategies and programs to pay careful attention to the research on trust.
Much of the educational research stated that school districts play a vital role in meaningful systematic school reform (Chhuon et al., 2008; Daly & Finnigan, 2012; Fullan et al., 2004; Levin & Fullan, 2008; Mourshed et al., 2010; Rorrer et al., 2008). Rorrer et al. (2008) referred to the district as an “organized collective constituted by the superintendent, the board, the central office-level administration, and principal, who collectively serve as critical links between district and the school for developing and implementing solutions to identified problems” (p. 311). In a narrative synthesis, Rorrer et al. purposely identified 81 pieces of empirical research. Analysis of data identified four essential roles the district played in educational reform. The roles noted were: (a) providing instructional leadership, (b) reorienting the organization, (c) establishing policy coherence, and (d) maintaining an equity focus. The overall finding from the synthesis was that districts do matter. The authors explained that key staff such as superintendents, board members, central office administrators, and principals serve individually as organizational actors. Collectively, they represent institutional actors “bound by a web of interrelated roles, responsibilities, and relationships” (Rorrer et al., 2008, p. 333). Rorrer et al. also stated that “as institutional actors with institutional capacity, the district can execute the four roles related to systematic reform” (p. 334); they made a point to highlight the importance of essential roles being interdependent and interrelated.

Sharing similar components of district reform, Resnick and Glennan (2002) described a reform initiative identified as the Institute for Learning (IFL). The IFL utilized nested learning communities in which a number of districts worked alongside one another to reorganize by sharing instructional principles and practices. Membership in
the IFL required district-level leaders, including superintendents, to be actively engaged in instructional decisions and leadership. Resnick and Glennan noted, “Profound changes sought in the culture of the organization of the school district can occur only if top district leadership understand the instructional design and practices leadership consistent with it” (p. 168). The IFL facilitated layered accountability within the district, utilizing both researchers and practitioners. It identified five design principles: (a) a commitment to an effort-based concept of intelligence and education, (b) a focus on classroom instruction throughout the district, (c) a culture emphasizing continuous learning and two-way accountability, the core elements of nested learning communities, throughout the system, (d) continuing professional development for all staff based in schools and linked to the instructional program for students, and (e) coherence in standards, curriculum, assessment, and professional development. These design principles supported effective instruction in schools, building a “commitment to a shared set of beliefs in the district concerning good instructional practice, sustained communication among professionals concerned with instruction, and a shared conviction that continued learning is a professional responsibility” (Resnick & Glennan, 2002, p. 167).

**Context of Reform**

As school districts zero in on system reform, it is essential to shift the focus from individual schools to an inclusive approach of the entire system (Daly & Finnigan, 2012; Fullan, 2010). Unless school systems, regardless of the context (district, state, or national), are committed to aligning educational priorities with the sole purpose of building capacity, systematic reform will not flourish. McLaughlin and Talbert (2003) utilized a mixed method approach to determine patterns of district action that supported
school reform over time. They listed key conditions that characterized reforming districts as “a system approach to reform, learning community at the central office, coherent focus on teaching and learning, a stance of supporting professional learning and instructional improvement, and data-based inquiry and accountability” (p. 10). In addition, their research dispelled a common myth that teachers and principals resent a strong central office presence, instead noting an important perspective: “It is not necessarily the strength of the district role that affects teachers’ morale and view of the district, but rather what that role is and how it is carried out” (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003, p. 21). That assertion links directly to the importance of building trusting relationships between central office and school staff.

According to Fullan (2002), administrators must be “sophisticated conceptual thinkers who transform the organization through people and teams” (p. 17). He also stated that it is essential for leaders to remain purposefully attuned to the importance and urgency of systematically implementing reform; their doing so will ensure that all students have equal access to a high-level, standards-based curriculum. Factors critical to this endeavor include sharing a moral purpose that encompasses working toward systematic reform, closing the achievement gap at each school, and treating all stakeholders well.

In a case study conducted by Daly and Finnigan (2012), social network and trust data were analyzed to determine how the school district supported or limited improvement. In an effort to better understand the limitations of district-wide organizational change under No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, Daly and Finnigan argued that “district improvement efforts require closer attention to social
capital and the forms of relationships and trust among and between school and central
go office administrators as they undergo district turn around in response to No Child Left
Behind” (p. 495). In a similar manner, using public administration as a medium through
which to understand the role of trust in an effort to develop a model for optimal trust,
Choudhury (2008) noted:

Many functional benefits are attributed to a trust based approach to organizing and
governance . . . it is not surprising that we find scholars and practitioners as well
as citizens and reformers considering trusts as a necessary goal as well as a means
for effective administration. (p. 587)

In his research, Choudhury refers to relational trust as “inseparable for the context of a
relationship and rests on a complex mix of cognitive, affective, and moral facets that
characterize the relationship” (p. 590).

Fullan (2008) emphasizes the following components for purposeful leadership
when working toward sustained system reform: improving relationships, understanding
change, knowledge creation and sharing, and making coherence (Table 1).

Fullan (2005) also asserted that building leadership capacity is essential in reform
efforts. He advised that to make and sustain change, school leaders must create social
learning environments where leaders are cultivated at all levels within a school system.
Building leadership capacity thus creates a leadership pipeline to improve the quality of
instruction. This notion is aligned with the work of Bryk and Schneider (2003), which
found that “when professionals trust one another and sense support . . . relational trust
fosters the necessary social exchanges among school professionals as they learn from one
another” (p. 44).
Table 1

*Components for Purposeful Leadership*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Focus</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| 1 Improving Relationships | • Relationships improve, thus schools get better.  
• Building relationships in teams is THE most difficult skill for leaders.  
• Well-established relationships are the resource that keep on giving. |
| 2 Understanding Change | • Getting commitment from others, including those who may not agree or understand the need for change.  
• Innovate selectively with coherence.  
• Help others assess and find collective meaning and commitment to new ways.  
• Appreciate the “implementation dip”—it is unavoidable.  
• Redefine resistance—address naysayers’ concerns; they may have sound points.  
• Re-culturing—changing what people in the organization value and how they work together to accomplish it leads to lasting change. |
| 3 Knowledge Creation and Sharing | • Information becomes knowledge through a social process, i.e., professional learning communities and understanding that [trusting] relationships are essential to sustained growth.  
• Sharing equates to continuous growth for all. |
| 4 Coherence Making | • Effective leaders must be coherence makers.  
• Moral purpose, understanding the change process and building relationships and the creation, and sharing of knowledge forge coherence.  
• Concentrate on student learning as the central purpose of reform and keep an eye out for external ideas that further the thinking and vision of the school. |
| 5 Leadership and Sustainability | • Key components of sustainability are developing the social environment, learning in context, and cultivating leaders at many levels.  
• Social environment—close the achievement gap at the school and district level.  
• Understand that the schools and the system will deteriorate if there is not concern for all.  
• Learning in context-inter-visitation, examining real problems, and devising solutions leads to application of new learning. |
In order to sustain change, Fullan (2010) outlined five key elements and purported their ability to “compound and multiply through interrelated use” (p. 62). The elements include: (a) moral purpose, through which stakeholders work toward systematic improvement and reform, closing the achievement gap at each school and student level, and treating all stakeholders well; (b) individual capacity, all constituents are focused on instruction, have blended theory and practice, and are provided regular and consistent support and feedback to enable them to fully participate in collaborative partnerships; (c) collective capacity, which involves the critical mass of educators possessing a deep understanding of and an allegiance to a chosen initiative through precise language, collaborative completion, collective efficacy, and shared responsibility; (d) intelligent accountability, which means the system relies on incentives, not punishment; and (e) resolute leadership, which is purposeful leadership followed by action. It includes a leader’s ability to build positive relationships with teachers. Resolute leaders understand how to motivate and encourage teachers; they know that without teachers there is no system reform.

Waters and Marzano’s (2006) recommendations, based on results of a meta-analysis, concur with the work of Fullan and other experts in the field, stating, “Superintendents should note the importance of remaining in a district long enough to see the positive impact of their leadership on student learning and achievement” (p. 20). In their report, Waters and Marzano refer to Chris Whittle’s (2005) book, *Crash Course: Imagining a Better Future for Public Education*, to contrast the average tenure of superintendents in three large urban school districts and the average tenure of CEOs in four large corporations. They reported that in Kansas City the average superintendent
tenure was 1.4 years; in Washington, DC, 2.2 years; and in New York City, 2.5 years. As for the tenure of the corporate CEOs, those at General Electric averaged 11 years; at Federal Express, 35 years; at Microsoft, 30 years; and at Dell, 21 years. Waters and Marzano found a significant and positive relationship between district-level leadership and student achievement; their findings suggested that when district leaders have a shared understanding of and commitment to schools, student achievement is realized. This affirms Fullan’s commitment to collective capacity, sustainability, and resolute leadership.

During any course of change, there will be obstacles. In *The Six Secrets of Change: What the Best Leaders Do to Help Their Organizations Survive and Thrive*, Fullan (2008) referred to obstacles as part of a “re-culturing” process that takes time. He stated that, within an organization, people understand the importance of change but may not have the wherewithal to take the time to fully invest in behavior that will result in sustainable change. The natural tendency for an organization going through change is to struggle, or experience an implementation dip, at the inception of change because new practices have not yet become habits. He explained that the process of trying new things and creating collective meaning and commitment helps develop great ideas. Blankstein (2011) likewise identified leadership as the key to addressing constraints and overcoming obstacles. He stated that commitment, focus, engagement of the larger community, and developing a common understanding of an initiative and the vision for addressing it are crucial for success. Hargreaves and Fink (2005) discussed leadership and change in their book *Sustainable Leadership*. The authors asserted, “Change in education is easy to propose, hard to implement, and extraordinarily difficult to sustain” (p. 1). They
addressed the importance of trust, describing it as “an indispensable resource for improvement” (p. 212). Forsyth, Adams, and Hoy (2011), stated:

> When an organization is complex, the probable best means to achieve cooperation and predictability is for leaders to use social controls and trust building . . . that is they will act in ways consistent with criteria for judging trustworthiness: benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competence. (p. 111)

Shannon and Bylsma (2004) collected and analyzed more than 80 research reports and articles to provide an understanding of improved school districts and their characteristics and actions. The analysis of the study identified the following themes:

- focus on all students learning,
- dynamic and distributed leadership,
- sustained improvement efforts,
- high expectations for adults,
- aligned curriculum and assessment,
- coordinated and embedded professional development,
- quality classroom instruction,
- effective use of data,
- strategic resource allocation,
- policy and program coherence,
- professional culture and collaboration,
- school and district roles and relationships,
- and interpretation and management of the external environment.

The themes were categorized into four broad topics: effective leadership, quality teaching and learning, support for system-wide improvement, and clear and collaborative relationships.

A preponderance of persuasive literature directs our attention to the importance of building trusting relationships within school systems to promote sustained reform. But how is trust developed and nurtured between school sites and districts? What factors help to shape it? And what efforts do district leaders embed when building relationships to ensure that trust is continually worked at in relationships?
CHAPTER 3—METHODOLOGY

The literature reviewed for this study affirmed the significant role central office administrators uphold as they work to build and nurture trusting relationships. The literature review also highlighted a subtle message that trust mediates sustained system reform. This research design is best described as qualitative. Qualitative research, as defined by Creswell (2009), is “interpretive research, with the inquirer typically involved in a sustained and intensive experience” (p. 177).

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of district leaders to learn how they build and nurture trusting relationships in an effort to sustain reform. For purposes of this study, the researcher adhered to several characteristics of qualitative research put forth by Creswell (2007). The basic parameters ensured that: (a) district leaders were interviewed in their workplace settings, (b) the researcher collected her own data, (c) the researcher analyzed data to reveal themes related to trust, (d) the researcher remained focused on the district leaders’ interpretation and definition of trust, as well as the practices they used to build trusting relationships within their districts, and (e) the researcher adhered to the purpose of the study: to learn from district leaders and compile information that produces a deeper understanding of their efforts in building strong trusting relationships.

The research design chosen for this study was best described as phenomenological. As stated by Plano Clark and Creswell (2010):

Researchers choose to use phenomenology for the design of their studies when they need to understand the essence of a phenomenon as it is experienced by
individuals . . . to use this approach the researcher must be interested in learning about a single phenomenon as it is actually experienced. (p. 239)

Moreover, key characteristics of phenomenological research defined by Plano Clark and Creswell (2010) were followed:

- The researcher’s purpose was to determine the essence of a single phenomenon.
- The researcher set aside her own experiences about the phenomenon and collected data from people who had experienced it.
- The researcher analyzed the data for significant statements and meanings about the phenomenon.
- The researcher reported themes, descriptions, and the essence of the phenomenon.

**Research Questions**

The overarching questions for this study are:

- What strategies do district leaders recognize using to build and nurture trusting relationships?
- How important is trust between school sites and the district in building positive, sustained reform?

**Sampling Technique and Participants**

The concept of purposeful sampling is used in qualitative research. For the purpose of this study, chain sampling was utilized; this means the researcher “identifie[d] cases of interest from people who know people who know what cases are information-rich” (Creswell, 2007, p. 127).
The district leaders were purposefully selected; those invited to participate in this study have been recognized as leading “America’s Best Urban Schools” by the National Center for Urban School Transformation (NCUST, 2012a) or have received the distinction of Honor Roll classification by the California Business for Education Excellence. The researcher assumed that trust played a role in the academic achievement of the schools being recognized with such prestigious recognition. In addition, those distinguished schools provided a useful link between district leaders and effective school reform.

In his remarks about sampling, Creswell (2007) stated, “It is essential that all participants have experienced the phenomenon being studied [trust]. Criterion sampling works well when all individuals studied represent people who have experienced the phenomenon” (p. 128). The NCUST’s (2012b) mission, as stated on its website, is to “help urban school districts and their partners transform urban school into places where all students achieve academic proficiency, evidence a love of learning, and graduate well prepared to succeed in post secondary education, the workplace, and their communities” (para. 1). The schools were recognized based on the following NCUST criteria:

- Urban location and low income students;
- Non-selective admissions;
- High attendance rates;
- Met Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) Data;
- High rates of academic proficiency;
- High rates of academic proficiency for every racial/ethnic group;
• Evidence of high academic achievement for English Language Learners and students with special needs;
• Low rates of out-of-school suspension;
• Excellence in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math Education (STEM).

Fourteen school districts in California have been identified as award-winning since the inception of NCUST in 2006. The California Business for Education Excellence identifies and recognizes higher performing schools in the state, particularly higher poverty schools that are closing the achievement gap with a focus on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) proficiency. District leaders of numerous award-winning schools were invited to participate in this study.

Context

To provide perspective on how the role of trust supports sustained reform, eight district leaders from Southern California were interviewed. Those leaders represented five districts. In the two largest districts serving students in Kindergarten through 12th grade, the superintendent and an assistant superintendent were interviewed. In the largest district serving students in Kindergarten through sixth grade, two assistant superintendents were interviewed. Table 2 provides demographic information on each district.

Instruments and Procedures

During the course of the study, the researcher conducted one semistructured interview with individual district leaders, inclusive of superintendents and assistant superintendents as previously detailed. The interview was organized in two segments. In the first segment, each district leader was asked to share his or her
Table 2

Demographics of Participants’ School Districts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Enrollment</th>
<th>Staff</th>
<th>No. of schools</th>
<th>Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Superintendent 1, Assistant</td>
<td>133,182</td>
<td>6,500</td>
<td>200+</td>
<td>K-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superintendent 4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superintendent 2</td>
<td>47,960</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>K-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superintendent 3, Assistant</td>
<td>81,000</td>
<td>8,000</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>K-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superintendent 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Superintendent 1, Assistant</td>
<td>28,500</td>
<td>2,400</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>K-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superintendent 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Superintendent 2</td>
<td>5,700</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>K-6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

background in education, belief system pertaining to who holds responsibility for both school and district improvement, and perspective on the district’s culture, patterns of communication, and ability to identify and implement reform. The second segment of the interview was designed to elicit the strategies district leaders used when building nurturing and trusting relationships and to determine his or her perspective on the role trust plays in system reform. District leaders were asked to describe factors that led to the successful implementation of each district’s reform effort. The researcher’s purpose was to specifically explore whether and how district leaders perceive trust was used to fuel district reform. The interviews lasted between 30 and 40 minutes each and were digitally recorded and transcribed. The interviews took place during the workday at the designated district leader’s office. Protocols of the interview are included in the appendix.
Data Analysis

The researcher analyzed data to identify significant statements so as to determine how the district leader experienced his or her district’s reform effort. After developing a list of nonrepetitive statements, the researcher grouped the statements into larger units designated as themes. The researcher then wrote a textual description of the experience, explaining “what” each district leader experienced, including verbatim comments from the interviews. The next step of analysis included writing a description of “how” the experience happened; this is referred to as the structural description, which focuses on the setting and context in which the phenomenon was experienced. The final analysis included an explanation of the essence of the phenomenon; it described the district leader’s experience in his or her district’s reform effort, ultimately illuminating the role trust played in that effort.

Ethical Issues

Prior to being interviewed, participating superintendents received an explanation of the intent of the study, as well as basic details for how the findings were to be utilized. Participants were informed of their right to “voluntarily withdraw from the study at any time” (Creswell, 2007, p. 123). Pseudonyms for district leaders were used to protect their identities. The researcher “bracketed” her knowledge related to the subject, so that her personal bias did not influence the findings (Creswell, 2007, p. 59). Because the interviews might have addressed or revealed sensitive topics, the recordings were securely stored while the study was underway and were erased when it ended (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008).
The purpose of the present study was to further examine how trust mediates district reform. The researcher specifically focused on the perspectives of superintendents and assistant superintendents, and on how they worked to build and nurture trusting relationships with school site leaders to support system reform. For this study, interviews were conducted with eight district leaders, comprising three superintendents and five assistant superintendents, during the summer of 2013. The superintendents will be referred to as S1-S3, and assistant superintendents will be referred to as AS1-AS5. The protocol for this study modeled the protocol utilized by Chhuon et al. (2008), in which trust emerged as an essential element in district reform. In their study, Chhuon et al. utilized an exploratory participant-observer case study over a 4-year period. The purpose of that study was to explore the development of trust between district-level leaders and site administrators who were participating in a district-university partnership.

That study included separate interviews with site and district leaders. The interviews were conducted over three sessions. The first session, or segment, was broad and open-ended. The researchers used this segment to gather baseline data for their study. The second interview was conducted as a follow-up, to probe more deeply for the participants’ perspectives on the partnership. No specific questions about trust were asked in the first two interviews. However, trust was a primary theme that emerged from the second interviews. Chhuon et al. (2008) organized the third interview to specifically elicit the leaders’ perceptions on the importance of trust and actions necessary to build it.
In this study, one interview was conducted in two segments. Similar to the study conducted by Chhuon et al. (2008), the questions in the first segment were intentionally open-ended; the interviewer did not ask direct questions about trust. This approach was purposeful; the intent was to determine whether trust would emerge as a theme, as with the study by Chhuon et al. In the first segment, district leaders were asked to share their background in education and their belief system in terms of who has primary responsibility for improving school-district collaboration, as well as their perspectives on the district’s culture, patterns of communication, and ability to identify and implement reform. The second segment of the interview focused specifically on trust in an effort to ascertain the leaders’ perspectives on its importance and actions necessary to implement and sustain it.

In this chapter, findings from the study are used to detail how district leaders perceive trust. Those findings are presented as summaries of the first segment of the interviews as reported by each district leader, including the superintendents and assistant superintendents interviewed. An analysis of themes that emerged during the data review follow the interview summaries. Chapter 5 will thoroughly address the two overarching questions posed to district leaders: (a) What role does trust play in implementing district reform? and (b) What role does trust play in sustaining reform?

**Findings: District Leader Perspectives**

In the following section, district leaders’ thoughts and experiences as to how they fostered trust within their district will be presented.
Superintendent 1 (S1)

Superintendent 1 characterized himself as a “nontraditional superintendent.” He joined the district as a business leader 3 years before assuming the role of superintendent; he has served as superintendent for 4 years. He said he learned the “educational side of the district through personal engagement with principals, area superintendents, the deputy superintendent, visits to campuses, and a lot of reading.” He added that he graduated “magna cum laude from the school of hard knocks in this district.” When asked who has primary responsibility for improving a school district, he stated, “The entire line of authority, and I start with the board.” He shared his perspectives on responsibility, indicating that it starts at the top and works its way down through the district to each individual teacher. Superintendent 1 explained, “I do not think you can draw lines as to who is and who is not accountable for academic outcomes for a school district.” He talked about parental impact, as well as the role each department plays, including the business support group, transportation, and food services.

When asked about the conditions necessary for district and site leaders to learn together, he answered, “There needs to be a bedrock of acceptance, read that as trust, that you can and will collaborate as a team, sharing vision around academic outcomes.” During this segment of the interview, the superintendent talked about trust and “honest, genuine communication.” He alluded to the importance of a “feedback loop” to better understand when needs are or are not being met. When asked whether the conditions he referenced were present in the district, he responded, “A district our size, scale creates a challenge for us.” He added, “I would like to think that we are all operating as a team and trust is deep and wide,” noting that he did not want to kid himself by asserting
that perspective with absolute certainty. Superintendent 1 explained that differences in personalities and leadership styles across the campuses “make it difficult to convince everyone that we are on the same journey, at the same milestone.” He stressed the importance of continuing “to work at it through certain amounts of team building among principals and between principals and central office area superintendents to create networks . . . build opportunities to create team identity.” He indicated, “With team identity you can build trust with each other to accept a shared vision.”

When asked about the culture of the school district, the superintendent responded, “I think the culture is one that we believe in community engagement, that this is not a top-down, central office-centric district anymore.” He described specific documents that have “reinforced by words and actions that we are a district that appreciates consensus-driven operation.” He continued to describe how the district has welcomed the community in a significant way stating, “[The community] has been given access and opportunity to at least engage in a dialogue which has allowed us to create this culture of open community engagement.” He again referred to the size of the district and shared insights from the Broad Prize review team (the district was recognized as a finalist in the 2012 selection process), stating that the Broad representatives “acknowledged the fact that we have tried to be more open-ended in involving people and that we have tried to create campuses that are built on respect and inclusiveness.” He went on to explain, “[Open community engagement] is where want to be,” then added, “I cannot guarantee that this is exactly where we are with almost 200 campuses.”

When asked about the district’s ability to identify and implement reform, S1 replied, “We have acknowledged that we inside the district need to come to grips
with where our issues and challenges are and seek [our own] version of reform or transformation.” He talked about the district using internal specialists rather than external experts, “which in the past were used and did not get anywhere.” The superintendent reiterated, “We created our own approach . . . which does emphasize openness and bottom-up engagement, and we are going forward accordingly.” In the final question of the first segment of the interview, the superintendent was asked to comment on specific policies or practices that facilitated or hindered efforts to share system-wide reform strategies. He stated, “I do not think there are any things that hinder it now unless individuals want to purposely block it.” Superintendent 1 concluded the first segment of the interview by saying, “We have allowed people a voice.”

**Superintendent 2 (S2)**

Superintendent 2 has served her school district for 41 years. She began her tenure with the district as a student teacher; she subsequently taught and served as a principal at both the elementary and secondary levels. Superintendent 2 then moved on to the central office, where she contributed in the curriculum and instruction, personnel, and business divisions. She assumed the position of superintendent 15 years ago. When asked who has primary responsibility for improving a school district, S2 responded, “The superintendent and a whole heck of a strong, talented team if you want to get it done.” She commented on the necessary commitment and responsibility to “actuate it,” stressing the importance of paying attention to teachers and adding, “You will never be better than your teachers, and that is all of our responsibility . . . to help our teachers grow so they can help our kids continue to grow.” She emphasized the need for continued growth, concluding, “Ultimately, that is all the superintendents’ responsibility.”
When asked about the conditions necessary for district and site leaders to learn together, S2 again referred to commitment. She stated, “You have to have clear goals . . . share the commitment . . . picking the right goals focused on results.” She indicated, “In order to have a shared vision and [collective] commitment, you have to have trust, people have to trust, especially [trust that] the superintendent is steering the right course and that [he or she will] be there when you land.” She talked about holding herself and everyone else accountable for building the “commitment to getting it done, and the willingness to take risks while you learn.” She further explained how the work of schools is not always “clear-cut,” noting that it often gets “messy” and asserting that “underlying or overlying or surrounding all that [commitment, risk taking, shared vision, and accountability], a necessary condition has to be there, trust.”

When asked to what extent the conditions she had noted, including clear goals, commitment, a shared vision, and accountability, among others, were present in her school district, S2 replied without hesitation, “I think they are all present.” She continued by referencing the size of the district, which comprises 65 schools and 50,000 students. She also remarked, “I think everyone, people could certainly tell you what those [district goals] are. . . . In terms of accountability, we are still working on that.” She commented on the district’s effort to be transparent in terms of how strengths and opportunities for improvement are shared, reiterating, “There is a lot of trust in the district,” and then adding, “You always have to work on that trust piece. . . . It [level of trust] depends on what group you are talking to, the district as a whole, each individual, or school by school.” She described how trust ebbs and flows and how “you have to calibrate,” noting that “we are in a pretty good spot . . . but still have room for improvement.”
When asked to share her perspectives on communication patterns between
district- and site-level leaders, the superintendent responded, “We think it is good, but not
nearly good enough. . . . There is pretty clear communication, but I am not sure there is
always clear understanding.” She commented on how time can be a constraint in terms of
ensuring that messages are clear, explaining, “Messages go out and messages come back.
. . . It takes time to make sure people really understand the message both ways.”
Superintendent 2 also emphasized the need to continually work on explaining “why this
is what we have chosen. . . . why this is where we are going. . . . why we picked this
strategy.” She returned to the topic of time and underscored the importance of listening
to ensure understanding and clear messaging, acknowledging, “I think we have a lot of
room for improvement.” She summed up her viewpoint by saying, “When compared to
other districts [rating communication between central office and school sites], people
would say excellent. . . . Comparing against my standard, I would say maybe a C.”

When asked to share her perspectives about the district’s ability to identify and
implement reform, S2 asserted, “We don’t call it reform; we talk about refining.” She
provided an example of how the district has moved from 20% of its students graduating
prepared “to go on to college or skilled careers to 59% in the last 14-15 years. . . . So we
have refined our way to a much better place. . . . We don’t talk about reform a lot.” In the
final segment of the first interview, the superintendent was asked to comment on specific
policies or practices that facilitated or hindered efforts to share system-wide reform
strategies. She answered, “What gets in the way are adults and the fact that we don’t
change so quickly.” She cited employee groups and having to work through the state
bureaucracy as additional challenges. She concluded segment one of the interview by
saying, “All those things are there . . . but they are not excuses. . . . We cannot blame our failures on anything but ourselves for not getting it right.”

Superintendent 3 (S3)

Superintendent 3 has served as an educator for 32 years. He began his career as a teacher and held nine other positions in the district before he assumed the role of superintendent 12 years ago. At the outset of the first interview, he stated, “Every position for me is [about] how can I make a larger impact on a larger group of kids.” He said that his guiding work centers on social justice and access for all students. When asked who has primary responsibility for improving a school district, he clearly stated, “It is actually everyone.” He defined the role of the school board as one of setting policies and the role of the superintendent as that of the CEO who is responsible for carrying out those policies. He explained how the members of the management team must be aligned, noting, “If you don’t have a well-oiled machine and do not have alignment, you will not get things done.” The superintendent provided a specific example of this premise, referring to the district’s strategic plan. He mentioned that the plan was developed collaboratively with all stakeholders involved, including employees and students. He described the alignment in detail:

Because the board set the goal with the community, the professional development took place, the line supervisors worked with the teachers, and the assistant superintendents worked with the curriculum office and the principals, who in turn worked with the teachers, and the teachers worked with the students to attain the goal of having 60% of students in algebra with a proficiency rate of 75%, which has been accomplished ahead of the proposed date originally set for 2016.
Superintendent 3 concluded, “That is a good example of how it is not any one person or
group of individuals, that it has to be the entire system.”

When asked about the conditions necessary for district and site leaders to learn
together, S3 stated, “There needs to be trust and a plan of action.” He indicated that the
plan could be simple or detailed, written or verbal, asserting, “Honestly, it doesn’t even
have to be on paper if everyone knows what the ethos is and what the goals are.” The
superintendent again referenced the algebra proficiency example, stressing the importance
of collaboration among aligned departments and stakeholders. He referred to alignment
as an entry point for building trust. Superintendent 3 explained, “Without alignment,
collaboration, and trust, you will not be able to do the things you want to do.” When
asked about the extent those conditions were present in his school district, he responded,
“I would say they are pretty strong,” and then added, “Like any organization, they can
always be improved upon and have to be revisited.”

Superintendent 3 mentioned the new Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) and
shared that the strategic plan committee will reconvene to make sure that it is aligned
with the new requirements. He talked about a meeting held recently with principals to
share information about the LCFF and the California Office to Reform Education Waiver
(Core Waiver), emphasizing how the district was aligned with the new projects. He
stated that the principals had been “very pleased” by the meeting, noting that “whenever
you have something new and it is aligned with what you are doing, [principals] will
support the effort.”

When asked to characterize the culture of his school district, S3 responded, “I
think for the most part it is pretty positive; people are always willing to learn.” He
mentioned the district’s open-door policy, explaining that people are free to contact anyone at “any given time.” He also asserted that there is no fear about doing so, adding, “I think for the most part they all know we are working on the same page together.” He added, “Some people might not like what we do because of personal biases, but other than that I think it [the district] is a very open, trusting organization.”

When S3 commented on communication in the district, he referred to horizontal and vertical patterns. He stated that “many structures are in place” to inform all stakeholders, adding that those structures also provide “a vehicle” for parents, teachers, administrators, and others to conduct pilot programs. He noted that many pilots have “started with one teacher in one classroom or one parent at a school site.” When asked to describe the district’s ability to identify and implement reform, he stated, “I think we are good at that; it is one of the strengths of the organization.” The superintendent explained that his district does not jump on “the latest bandwagon” but instead utilizes pilots to “see how new models work and go from there.” He acknowledged that taking that approach often leads to criticism from those who don’t see the wisdom of “go slow to go fast.”

When the superintendent was asked to comment on specific policies or practices that facilitated or hindered efforts to share system-wide reform strategies, he replied, “I don’t believe in a lot of policies.” He commented on teachers feeling “very free” and explained, “If a teacher has an idea, they can move forward.” However, S3 noted that before implementing a change, a teacher is expected to provide a rationale detailing how his or her plan will positively affect students. By way of an example, he described how a high school teacher had piloted a program whose goal was to keep ninth graders in
school. He said, "The teacher took the risk, implemented the pilot, returned with data indicating success, and as a result the program was expanded."

**Assistant Superintendent 1 (AS1)**

Assistant Superintendent 1 has been serving the same school district for 35 years. He worked as a teacher, associate principal, principal, and executive director before assuming the assistant superintendent position 3 years ago. When asked who has primary responsibility for improving a school district, he responded, "It is a joint responsibility." He mentioned that the word primary has a "connotation of a hierarchy" and discussed the need to create a culture in which everyone is responsible for school improvement. The assistant superintendent stated that when the relationship between the business and instructional side of the house is focused on improving the "quality of instruction in classrooms in order to raise achievement for all," a culture is created in which everyone is responsible. He noted that the superintendent is "the one who faces the board and community," adding, "The superintendent holds the whole system, including teachers, students, and parents, accountable for improving the quality of instruction and obviously the outcome for kids."

When asked about the conditions necessary for district and site leaders to learn together, AS1 replied, "It is a lot about relationships and trust." He explained, "Our industry is about people and developing kids." He proceeded to highlight his experience of "when it works and when it doesn’t," noting the impact [relationships, trust, communication] have on "a lot of things." He emphasized the importance of checking for understanding, noting, "It is amazing how people can hear very different messages."
When asked to characterize the culture of his district, AS1 replied, “The culture is the responsibility of all the leaders in the system.” He referred to culture as “an evolving and changing beast . . . very dynamic . . . . It goes up and down.” He referred to his previous response, noting that trust, respect, and accountability are essential. He reiterated, “We [districts] are dealing with humans, and the reality is that we have to deal with biases, vulnerabilities, weaknesses, and agendas.” The assistant superintendent added, “The more I am in this position, the more [I realize] that every word at this level has an impact, either positively or negatively, [on culture].” When asked about his district’s ability to identify and implement reform, he replied, “I think our district is very strong in this area; the ability to identify and implement reform continues to permeate the organization.” He explained that “doing things differently” is a part of the district’s culture and that the district had built a reputation for being at the “forefront” even before he joined the system 35 years ago. Assistant Superintendent 1 noted, “Over the years [the people in the district] have been fostered and nurtured to think outside the box, be innovative and the leader in terms of different initiatives.”

When asked to comment on specific policies or practices that facilitated or hindered efforts to share system-wide reform strategies, the assistant superintendent could not name any that hindered reform. He emphasized the importance of “checking egos at the door and sharing best practices honestly.” He referred to an end-of-year activity with principals called a café. He described how principals who had been recognized by the National Center for Urban School Transformation (NCUST) presented their successes to others in a structured setting. Assistant Superintendent 1 acknowledged, “I think there was a lot of pride in that.” He summed up the first segment of the interview by
highlighting the importance of providing structured environments in which people “can share and others can learn.”

**Assistant Superintendent 2 (AS2)**

Assistant Superintendent 2 served as a teacher, vice principal, principal, and a county coordinator of categorical school improvement before assuming the position of assistant superintendent of learning support 2 years ago. When asked who has primary responsibility for improving the school district, she responded, “When I think primary, I think your superintendent; he/she is the vision keeper of the school district.” She described the superintendent’s role as one of “making sure we are all on message-out in front.” She explained that the superintendent cannot be solely responsible and stressed the importance of everyone in the system understanding the message and “doing the work.” The assistant superintendent pointed out how the district office supports site principals, noting that the principals are “doing most of the work and making the most difference.” She also explained that principals can’t do their work without the vision keeper and the support of the central office.

When asked about the conditions necessary for district and site leaders to learn together, AS2 responded, “Communication, time, time, time.” She stressed the importance of being organized, using time wisely, and not letting “the fires on the outskirts” get in the way of focusing on the job of instructional improvement and learning. She also emphasized the importance of training for everyone as a means to keep focused on improving the quality of instruction. When asked to what extent communication and time were conditions in place for her school district, she responded, “to a great extent” while acknowledging, “There is still the tyranny of the urgent and we
do allow ourselves, at times, to be pulled away.” She described how the district is starting “strategic planning work” and again referenced the role of the superintendent as the vision keeper. The assistant superintendent noted that her district is experiencing “growing pains,” which often makes it a struggle to keep the plan “foremost in our minds.” She also highlighted systems in place to ensure that leadership team meetings focus on planning, implementing, and instruction for the year. She noted, “We do not let our leadership team meetings get pulled away by the urgent.”

When asked to characterize the culture of the school district, AS2 responded, “We definitely have a culture of high expectations.” She explained that much is expected of principals and that principals expect a lot from their teachers, who in turn have high expectations for their students. “Teachers work long hours to make that happen,” she added. The assistant superintendent described the district culture as independent, saying, “[It’s] like yes we can. We can do this. We are the best.” When asked about the patterns of communication in the district, she likened communication to a bridge spanning a river. “You have that bridge, but you could step on a board and it might break,” she noted. Assistant Superintendent 2 also mentioned that the district has communication systems in place and cautioned, “You have to be very vigilant and make sure you keep working at it [communication].”

When asked to describe the district’s ability to identify and implement reform, she responded, “One thing unique about this district is that we are very data driven.” She shared information about the system and how Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) have been renamed as data teams. Assistant Superintendent 2 explained how the principals and the district leaders are focused on results and how data helps them
determine which policies and practices are successful and which are not. She highlighted
the inception of a “consultation committee,” which strengthened lines of communication
between the teachers association and district administrators for purposes of discussing
issues, adjustments, and results. She further explained that the consultation committee
brings information it gathers to cabinet meetings so “we can look at data and hear what
teachers are saying to inform our decision-making process.” She detailed how the district
partners with the county to get an “outside look,” which she described as “really
important as you are looking to change and improve.”

When asked to comment on specific policies or practices that facilitated or
hindered efforts to share system-wide reform strategies, she responded, “There are not
any practices that hinder reform; I think there is human nature that hinders reform.” She
talked about systems that support the principals while holding them accountable. The
assistant superintendent also described how the superintendent has one-on-one
conversations with principals three times each year, similar to the conversations
principals have with teachers. She explained that during those meetings the principal
shares school data and goals, their site plan, and how they are working [making progress]
toward the goals in that plan. She added that the information from those conversations is
shared with cabinet “to look at it from business, human resources, and learning support to
try to help them [principals] improve systems they are trying to put forward.” Assistant
Superintendent 2 concluded the first segment of the interview by noting, “So, practices
that inhibit, I wouldn’t say, practices that help, yes . . . . Human nature will always try and
inhibit change.”
Assistant Superintendent 3 (AS3)

Assistant Superintendent 3 started in her current district as a teacher, moving into a teacher-leader position and then serving as a principal for 7 years. She went on to become an administrator who coordinated the district leadership program and then an assistant superintendent, the position she has held for the past 7 years. When asked who has primary responsibility for improving a school district, she responded, “I see superintendent, district-level staff, and principals as a working togetherness that approaches the improvement from different perspectives, but all aiming toward increasing student achievement.” She described the role of the superintendent as being one that involves “really thinking about how to set the course or vision so schools across the system are striving for something.” She noted, “It is multiple people who are responsible for the success of schools.”

When asked about the conditions necessary for district and site leaders to learn together, AS3 said that over the past couple of years she has been thinking about that topic, especially with the implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The assistant superintendent commented that the “district has to represent themselves as a learner.” She also stated that regardless of her level of expertise, “I must represent that I am continuously learning.” She talked about the “huge intersection” of relationships, explaining, “It [the intersection] is using the relationship-building skills, communication, and who you interact with along with the information about what you are implementing. . . . This intersection is how folks can work together in a productive way.”

When asked to what extent the conditions she mentioned are present in her district, she responded, “We have constructed all kinds of learning opportunities that
involve side-by-side a supervisor, school principal, and in some cases teachers.” She explained that this structure allows for “all kinds of district learning.” Assistant Superintendent 3 also described how in the past few years there have been many changes in terms of school supervision. She explained how teams have been established to learn together in a “constructive protocol.” She further explained how the new system is moving from a traditional supervisory role to one of a “learning relationship—folks know who their bosses are, and that in most cases there is a coaching relationship between school [principals] and their supervisors.”

When asked to characterize the culture of the school district, she responded, “We have had two superintendents in the past 20 years.” She added that the district has also had a very stable school board, noting, “There is a tremendously established culture of continuous improvement, and high expectations focusing efforts on students and not letting an adult culture be pervasive.” She referred to the budget crisis and stated, “I believe what our district has been able to sustain both in student results and employee morale is related to having a really strong organizational culture.” When asked to characterize the patterns of communication in the district, the assistant superintendent noted that there were several communication systems in place. She explained that there are one-way systems that push information out to all stakeholders for a variety of reasons, and she also described many systems that support two-way communication. Assistant Superintendent 3 mentioned that the district has established forums in which “there is an aspect of learning, a place for folks to be constructive and sometimes give criticism and sometimes praise . . . frankly to open up communication with district staff [and stakeholders].”
When asked to describe the school district’s ability to identify and implement reform, she referred back to the organizational culture of the district. She noted that over time the district has learned that using data to inform innovation and two-way communication with stakeholders has helped develop a framework for making decisions that involve deploying resources and implementing change. Assistant Superintendent 3 mentioned embedded collaboration and went on to explain, “It is a very rare time when I will not be working with another department on something that is related to pushing out an innovation or building a system.” When asked to comment on specific policies or practices that facilitated or hindered efforts to share system-wide reform strategies, she responded, “Time.” She acknowledged the time it takes to be collaborative as a challenge, noting, “In order to create system change in which everyone has a part of it, it does involve time.” She also commented on how one person’s belief system can get in the way of systemic change. Additionally, she said that resources present a challenge and that focusing on the “right now” sometimes creates challenges because “3 years down the road it [the current issue] is a problem.” Concluding the first segment of the interview, she asserted, “How the district leadership team is developed and collaborates with the superintendent can be a hindrance or a way to build the system up.”

Assistant Superintendent 4 (AS4)

Assistant Superintendent 4 started his career as a teacher, then moved on to serve as a counselor, vice principal, principal at a middle school and a high school, and then to the central office, where he has served as assistant superintendent for the past 5 years. When asked who has primary responsibility for improving a school district, he responded, “If you look at the macrolevel, it would be the district . . . ; at the microlevel, it would be
the teacher.” He commented on the importance of creating a balance by “establishing very strong relationships.” When asked about the conditions necessary for district and school site leaders to learn together, he responded, “I think the primary condition is for the site to feel supported by the district.” He then explained various types of support and commented on the need “for trust between the site and district office.” The assistant superintendent also noted it was important for him to listen to the needs of the site “in order to assess what I can offer.” He added, “When the district allocates resources that are not sufficient and then makes demands . . . it truly throws the conditions off because it creates a lack of trust when expectations are not realistic.”

When asked to what extent the support and trust he mentioned were present in the district, he responded, “I think there are pockets of support . . . [but] nothing systematic about the support.” Commenting on the inherent challenge, he said, “There is a disconnect between what sites feel is support and what we [central office] feel is support.” When asked to characterize the culture of the district, he replied, “It is in constant churn.” The assistant superintendent explained that the current superintendent has made gains in developing trust and communication with the stakeholders, noting, “We are now in a place where it has turned again [the superintendent is retiring]; people are listening, and they are going to be watching for evidence [of trust and communication].”

When asked to characterize the patterns of communication between district and site leaders, AS4 said that most of the communication between the district and the site is “bestowed on the area [assistant] superintendent.” He then explained that the level of communication is determined by the assistant superintendent, noting, “We [the district]
have attempted to be collaborative, but [communication] often was perceived as top-down.” When asked to describe the school district’s ability to identify and implement reform, he replied, “We do not have a systematic way of identifying reform; it is not something we have developed.” He commented on the need to follow state mandates and referred to the CCSS. Assistant Superintendent 4 said he hoped that the implementation of the CCSS would support the district in staying the course, noting, “That is the beauty of CCSS; we don’t have a choice.”

When asked to comment on specific policies or practices that facilitated or hindered efforts to share system-wide reform strategies, he replied, “I do not think we have a process or procedure to amplify or systemize those good practices that are happening in schools.” Assistant Superintendent 4 provided an example of how one assistant superintendent developed a system to showcase “exemplary practices” within schools in his assigned area. He also explained how he worked with that assistant superintendent to develop a presentation to share with others is an effort to say “this is what we are doing,” in hopes that sharing best practices would become systematic. He noted, “We just did it [created the presentation], and it stopped there.”

Assistant Superintendent 4 commented that the new superintendent is focused on increased collaboration among assistant superintendents and explained that they are expected to share what is working and “blast to the masses.” He concluded by saying, “My thinking is I need to propel that work within this new paradigm of true collaboration.”
Assistant Superintendent 5 (AS5)

Assistant Superintendent 5 began her career in education as a classified employee in 1972. She held numerous positions, including teacher, assistant principal, principal (in two districts), and executive director, before assuming the position of assistant superintendent 4 years ago. When asked who has primary responsibility for improving a school district, she responded, “Every single employee.” She explained that the responsibility must be shared and that the accountability is different based on each stakeholder’s position. The assistant superintendent commented on the roles of the superintendent and cabinet members, noting, “It is not just your job description but your commitment to the well-being and success of every student.”

When asked about the necessary conditions for district and site leaders to learn together, AS5 replied that the conditions are “tied into the culture and belief system of the district.” She referred to accountability, not just as an evaluation tool but also as a way to hold one another accountable for fostering continuous learning. She stated, “Trust develops because you see that you are really focused on the student and that, by holding each other accountable, you are ensuring we all continuously grow and improve together.”

Assistant Superintendent 5 talked about the sense of team and collaboration and the necessity of those traits “in a trusting, working relationship.” When asked to what extent teamwork and collaboration were present in her district, she described how the district has evolved over the past decade and “set the tone” when its mission and core values were developed. During the interview, she pointed to documents on the wall identifying the district mission statement and goals and said, “It is not so much those
four documents on the wall; it is a firm commitment on behalf of the administrators, classified and certificated employees, but also a commitment from the community that is leading our actions.” She then declared, “There is that respect and element of trust that exists between the board, the superintendent, and the administration.” Assistant Superintendent 5 explained, “It took all of us together to create the mission, the vision, and the core values. . . . But [working] together is what we need to keep them alive and really help us guide.”

When asked to characterize the communication patterns within the school district, the assistant superintendent described a variety of systems. She asserted that everyone has a responsibility to “serve and support the district.” She referred to open communication, acknowledging that, because of the size of the district, face-to-face interaction is often not an option. Assistant Superintendent 5 also talked about “the communication piece providing information that is necessary for others to be able to conduct business.” She noted that open communication is especially important when there are changes taking place; she also asserted that for the quality of communication to improve, feedback on the level of communication between the central office and school sites is necessary.

When asked to comment on the district’s ability to identify and implement reform, AS5 stated that in terms of the practices in place, “We have been very strategic. . . . We have collective minds that sit around and ponder an issue or need . . . openly discuss . . . provide input . . . then strategically plan so we can include others.” She provided specific examples of including principals, classified staff, union representatives, the “business side of the house,” among others, in various discussions, noting that “depending on the
nature of the change/reform [and the effects of the change on a specific group or groups], one group may be included more than another.”

Assistant Superintendent 5 underscored the importance of including others in making decisions by acknowledging efforts to take “into consideration the timeline and what investment you want to make up front, so you have more buy-in by those mostly affected.” She summed up segment one of the interviews by asserting, “I think that [change/reform] is one of the pieces our district has done that is not very reactive. . . . It is very strategic and analytical . . . always at the base of what impact it [change/reform] will have on students and those immediately around them—parents and teachers.”

The Essence of Trust

Trust was not a specific focus of the first segment of the interviews; no questions pertaining to trust were asked. However, six of the eight district leaders specifically referred to trust when asked the second interview question, which invited them to comment on the conditions they considered necessary for district and site leaders to learn together.

Tschannen-Moran (2004) defined trust as, “one’s willingness to be vulnerable to another based on the confidence that the other is benevolent, honest, open, reliable and competent” (p. 17). She further explained that trust is multifaceted and “dynamic in that it can change over the course of a relationship as expectations are either fulfilled or disappointed as the nature of the interdependence between two people changes” (p. 17).

In segment one of the interviews, S1 referred to trust immediately upon being asked about the conditions necessary for district and site leaders to learn together. As he responded, he talked about the need for both site and district leaders to accept each other
and be willing to collaborate in an effort to improve student outcomes. Similarly, S2 shared her perspectives on the importance of having a shared commitment and shared vision, noting, “You have to have clear goals around what you are going to do, and people have to share the commitment to achieving those goals. Then you have to have trust.” Accordingly, S3 noted, “I think there has to be trust there [between district and site leaders] and a plan of action, whatever that plan of action is.”

Assistant Superintendent 1 also commented on trust during the second question of the first segment of the interviews when he described the conditions necessary for district and site leaders to learn together by saying, “It is a lot about relationships and trust.” Assistant Superintendent 4 talked about the need for the site leader to feel supported, noting that support could be provided in many ways; he mentioned trust when clarifying, “It can be support in terms of relationship building, and for [that to happen] there needs to be trust between the site and the district office.” Assistant Superintendent 5 also referenced trust as being a key factor when he commented in the first segment of the interviews, “I think that [learning together] is what is needed and the trust that develops because you see that you are really focused on the student, and that by holding each other accountable you are ensuring we all continuously grow and improve together.” Although AS2 and AS3 did not use the word trust when they described the conditions necessary for district and site leaders to learn together, both commented on the importance of relationships and mentioned using communication as a relationship-building skill when interacting with people.
These findings mirror those detailed by Chhuon et al. (2008); trust emerged as a significant theme in the analysis of their second interview, in which participants discussed the importance of trust without being specifically asked to do so.

Findings: Themes That Emerged

In the process of reviewing the data, several clear themes emerged, as well as many ideas and examples that indicated other overlapping themes. In the following section, data are clustered by these themes: (a) honesty and integrity, (b) vulnerability and interdependence, (c) consistency and reliability, and (d) communication and openness.

Honesty and Integrity

The literature reviewed for this study identified honesty and integrity as a fundamental facet of trust. Tschannen-Moran (2004) avowed, “Without the confidence that a person’s words can be relied upon and can accurately predict future actions, trust is unlikely to develop” (p. 22).

As district leaders shared their backgrounds and perspectives related to their work, honesty and integrity were among the themes that surfaced. Commenting on how honesty nurtures trusting relationships, AS1 said, “Trust means you respect the person and do not undermine [him or her]; you can be honest with not only what you are thinking but [how] you are feeling about the situation.” In addition, AS5 stated, “Trust means I have confidence and a belief in an individual or group of individuals and that we are being very honest with each other.” Assistant Superintendent 4 and AS2 commented in similar ways. Assistant Superintendent 4 stated, “Trust means that I can work with someone and trust that he or she is going to do his work and trust that they are going to be honest and keep their word, be confidential and truthful to whatever we are doing as a group.”
Assistant Superintendent 2 asserted, “[When I think of trust] I think of honesty; I know if someone is being honest with me, I can trust them.”

The aforementioned statements about trust aligned with research conducted by Forsyth et al. (2011), who noted:

When an organization is complex, the probable best means to achieve cooperation and predictability is for leaders to use social controls and trust building . . . that is they will act in ways consistent with criteria for judging trustworthiness: benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competence. (p. 111)

Additionally, Tschannen-Moran (2004) professed, “Trust implies that statements made were truthful and conformed to what really happened and that commitments made about future actions will be kept” (p. 22).

Although being honest was construed as positive, many participants noted that honesty sometimes gave rise to challenges among those who were working to build trust within their districts. Assistant Superintendent 4 cited one such challenge, saying, “When trust gets violated, the lack of honesty in the outcome, there is this lack of creative ideas . . . more stilted conversations, less free dialogue; open communication is hard to regain.” This issue was addressed in the literature by Covey and Merrill (2006), who concluded, “It’s walking your talk . . . being congruent, inside and out . . . having the courage to act in accordance with your values and beliefs. . . . Most massive violations of trust are violations of integrity [honesty]” (p. 54). Similarly, Tschannen-Moran (2004) noted the impact of dishonest behavior by asserting: “The revelation of dishonest behavior may be more damaging to trust than lapses in other facets because it is read as an indictment of the person’s character” (p. 23).
Vulnerability and Interdependence

Tschannen-Moran (2004) described the evolution of trust as “multifaceted . . . including many elements or drivers of an overall level of trust” (p. 17). She referred to trust as the “glue” binding organizational participants to one another, noting that trust matters most in situations of interdependence, which involve vulnerability. Expanding on that perspective, Tschannen-Moran maintained:

It [trust] takes on different characteristics at different stages of a relationship. As trust develops, it “gels” at different levels, depending on the nature of the relationship and the qualities of the interactions as parties have gotten to know one another. The nature of vulnerability can change as the level of interdependence increases or decreases and as expectations are either met or disappointed. (p. 41)

During the first segment of the interviews, district leaders referred to vulnerability and interdependence in many instances. Superintendent 2 conveyed a sense of vulnerability when she stated, “It [trust] is when people are willing to follow or lead even though they are not sure where they are following or going because they have faith you are going to be there beside them, and if they fail they will be supported.” Commenting on vulnerability and trust from another perspective, S3 stated, “I do not agree with everything my assistant superintendents do by any means, but what I have to trust is they have the best interest of the kids at heart, and if they initially failed that is okay; I do not beat them up for it.”

Research conducted for this study affirmed that trust is critical when parties rely on one another to achieve desired outcomes. In Tschannen-Moran and Hoy’s (2000)
review of philosophical, economic, organizational, and educational literature, recurring themes surfaced. Vulnerability emerged as a descriptor of trust within most definitions. The authors stated that interdependence assumes vulnerability. Without interdependence, there is no need for trust. Bryk and Schneider (2002) struck a similar chord; they referenced the importance of the relational trust that occurred when each party in the relationship maintained an understanding of his or her role and held expectations about the obligations of the other parties, which is the essence of interdependence.

In this study, district leaders revealed the tenuousness of trust when they expressed the following perspectives pertaining to vulnerability and interdependence. Assistant Superintendent 1 said, “I think trust is very delicate and fragile because there is competition, jockeying for power and position.” He further explained the complexity of trust, which involves the facet of vulnerability, by referencing his direct experience with hierarchical relationships:

I am responsible to coach 12 schools and trust takes time, because as a coach you want them [site leaders] to open up; you want them to not put on a dog and pony show [but instead] to be vulnerable and say, “I do not know how to do this . . . .” It takes a lot of risk on the part of the coachee [site leader], because they do not want to be vulnerable. . . . No one wants to be vulnerable.

Assistant Superintendent 4 provided another clear example of vulnerability when he stated, “I often think that mistrust begins because we think we have to do everything right; we think we have to know everything, and I am not going to tell anybody if I cannot do it right.”
Martin (1999) referenced the interconnectedness of vulnerability and trust in a similar fashion when he noted:

The development of trust is a never-ending process. It is essential to recognize that trust can only be obtained from others if it is first freely given. It is up to the leader to set the pace, to make the first move. The leader must go first and trust his employees. Trust will then flow back to him. (p. 43)

Moreover, Dirks and Ferrin (2002) detailed distinctions between two theoretical perspectives on trust in leadership. They contended that the leader-follower perspective elicits citizenship because of its emphasis on the relational issues of care and consideration, while the character-based perspective focuses on vulnerability and the hierarchical nature of the relationship. The purpose of their meta-analysis was to highlight the relative importance of various relationships to inform organizational decisions regarding investments in building trust in supervisors versus building trust in senior leadership. Hypotheses were constructed to explore the relationship between trust and job performance. Ultimately, five factors were studied, attitudes, satisfaction with leaders, trust in direct leaders, participative decision making, as well as the relationship between overall trust and cognitive trust as it relates to job performance and fairness. Their findings indicated that trust in leadership related significantly to each of the attitudinal, behavioral, and performance-based outcomes. The authors noted that the data analysis provided evidence of significant relationships between trust and the hypothesized outcomes. Dirks and Ferrin expressed a need for future research that might distinguish between the effects of relationship-based and character-based theories, suggesting that “a study might, for example, explore where trust in a supervisor affects a particular outcome
by means of processes associated with the character-based perspective, the relationship-based perspective, or both” (p. 622).

**Consistency and Reliability**

Chhuon et al. (2008) defined reliability as a situation of interdependence, noting that when something is required from another person or group, the individual or group can be counted on to supply it. Assistant Superintendent 3 acknowledged the importance of being fair and consistent when she said, “I have a strong belief in consistency. . . . I think that one of the ways [to] build trust is not about favoritism or liking somebody but that the district supervisor represents an element of consistency and fairness that builds trust.” This idea of being dependable was echoed by AS2, who defined consistency simply as “doing what you say you are going to do.” Assistant Superintendent 5’s response aligned with that perspective; she noted, “You develop trust when you know you have someone who has strong ethics and morals and has been very consistent in their actions. . . . You know there is no hidden agenda.”

Other district leaders shared similar insights. Assistant Superintendent 3 commented, “We [central office administration] meet together and work on our work together, so when we go out to schools there is an element of consistency.” Her perspective was mirrored by S3 when he commented on alignment, saying, “The board sets the policy. . . . The superintendent is responsible for carrying out policy, then the management team. . . . It is not one particular person or one group; it is everyone. . . . [It] has to be the entire system.” Assistant Superintendent 5 also spoke from the system-wide perspective when she reflected on her district’s mission; she said, “It took all of us together to create the mission, the vision, and the core values. . . . But [working] together
is what we need to keep them [consistency and reliability] alive and really help us guide.” Superintendent 3 described how consistency nurtured trust when he stated, “. . . you foster that trust by living it on a day-to-day basis through everything you do . . . that is really important.”

Lewicki and Bunker (1996) maintained that trust is built over time. They developed a model depicting how trust evolves as relationships are built on consistency and positive interactions. Tschannen-Moran (2004) echoed that view when she noted:

Reliability [consistency] implies a sense of confidence that you can rest assured that you can count on a person doing what is expected on a regular, consistent basis. . . . you need not invest energy worrying whether the person will come through or make mental provisions of how to mange in case of failure. (p. 29)

District leaders also recognized that a perception of inconsistency and unreliability compromises trust-building efforts. That concern was expressed by AS4, who said, “I think when we hiccup and not walk our talk as leaders, people are watching. . . . If people are bold enough to tell you, at least you have a chance to rectify . . . but how often does that happen?” Superintendent 1 also emphasized that it is important for leaders to be reliable, contending, “If I told you I was going to do something and I did not do it, it creates a potential gap on whether you believe I am going to say and do what I say, and that gets to trust.” Tschannen-Moran (2004) noted, “One of the most difficult things about mistrust is that once it is established it has a tendency to be self-perpetuating. When interacting with a distrusted person, even normally benign actions are regarded with suspicion” (p. 76).
Communication and Openness

Blanchard (2007) maintained that “sharing information and facilitating open communication builds trust and encourages people to act like owners of the organization”; he regards open communication as the “lifeblood” of the organization (p. 10). Similarly, Tschannen-Moran (2004) stated, “When a leader makes him/herself vulnerable through openness, a spiral of trust is initiated that serves to foster increasing levels of trust in the organization” (p. 25).

The assertion that open lines of communication serve to strengthen relationships between site and district leaders was a major finding of the research from this study. Communication and openness overlapped as themes in many of the comments from district leaders. All of the district leaders commented on the importance of being collaborative, taking time to listen to and clarify communication with all stakeholders, and the critical need to share important information in an effort to build trust. The statements that follow highlight the perspectives of district leaders as they made connections among openness, communication, and trust. Assistant Superintendent 2 said, “Communication is probably the biggest thing we would do to foster trust.” Assistant Superintendent 5 commented on the importance of trust in another way, saying, “You can be open, honest, and direct with each other, and know you have each other’s best interest in mind and you understand that difficult decisions have to be made from time to time. . . . I think that is part of trust.” When describing the culture of his district, S3 stated, “We have an open-door policy; people feel free to contact anybody at any given time.” Superintendent 1 reflected on the conditions necessary for collaboration, saying, “There needs to be a bedrock of acceptance, read that as trust, that you can and will collaborate
as a team, sharing vision around academic outcomes.” Assistant Superintendent 3 alluded to communication and collaboration when she said, “Using the relationship-building skills, communication, and who you interact with along with the information about what you are implementing. . . . This intersection is how folks can work together in a productive way.”

The aforementioned key findings align with the positive effects of effective two-way communication. District leaders stressed the importance of remaining focused on clear, timely messaging and acknowledged that trust often deteriorates when communication breaks down or is interrupted. Superintendent 2 commented that, by other people’s standards, her district would rate among the best in terms of effective communication but noted, “We think it [communication] is good, but not nearly good enough. . . . There is pretty clear communication, but I am not sure there is always clear understanding.” Assistant Superintendent 2 acknowledged the need to keep some information private; she explained, “Actions sometimes will break trust. . . . Not everyone is privy to all things. . . . Sometimes actions seem counterintuitive . . . leading to mistrust.” Superintendent 1 emphasized the importance of openness when trying to build trusting relationships when he stated, “If we are truly transparent, I know where you stand on a position and I know where you are. . . . It is okay to evolve . . . but we should not be sending out mixed messages [which] undermine trust.”

Other district leaders shared similar points of view. Assistant Superintendent 1 reflected, “The more I am in this position, the more [I realize] that every word at this level has an impact, either positively or negatively, [on culture].” Assistant Superintendent 2 emphasized the importance of openness and communication when she
affirmed, “You have to be very vigilant and make sure you keep working at it [communication].” Superintendent 2 stated simply but emphatically, “Messages go out and messages come back. . . . It takes time to make sure people really understand the message both ways.”

The literature reviewed for this study stated that consistency, reliability, and communication factor into the time and effort it takes to restore trust. Tschannen-Moran (2004) noted:

Openness in communication needs to take place in the context of good judgment, it is a critical element of trustworthy leadership . . . school leaders may not be able to explain or defend their decisions or actions when doing so would require sharing confidential information. (p. 160)

Tschannen-Moran further explained, “Trust repair is facilitated by working for good communication, being meticulously reliable, and using persuasion rather than coercion” (p. 160). Correspondingly, findings from a case study conducted by Chhuon et al. (2008) signaled that districts intent on strengthening trusting relationships with site leaders benefitted from expeditious follow-through on important issues; that timeliness enhanced reliability and integrity, building shared leadership via transparency while also improving communication as a key element of the system’s redesign.

**Summary of Findings**

The goal of this study was to further examine how trust mediates district reform. This chapter detailed findings from the interviews, excluding the overarching questions that will be addressed in Chapter 5.
The researcher utilized one semistructured, individual interview with eight district leaders from Southern California. The sample included three superintendents and five assistant superintendents. The interview was organized in two segments. In the first segment, district leaders were asked to share their background in education, their belief system pertaining to who has primary responsibility for district improvement, and their perspectives on the district’s culture, patterns of communication, and ability to identify and implement reform. The interviewer asked no specific questions about trust in the first segment of the interviews.

This study’s protocol was modeled after research conducted by Chhuon et al. (2008) in which trust emerged as an essential element in district reform. The purpose of that study was to explore how trust developed between district-level leaders and site-level leaders while they participated in a district-university partnership.

In this chapter, the researcher provided a summary of each interview; an overview of themes emerged during that data analysis followed the compilation of those summaries. In the first segment of the interviews, trust was not specifically a focus; the interviewer asked no questions pertaining to trust. However, six of the eight interviewees specifically referred to trust when asked the second interview question, which invited each participant to share what he or she considered the conditions necessary for district and site leaders to learn together. In segment two of the interview process, the researcher purposely focused the discussion on trust. Segment two was designed to explore what themes emerged relating to the leaders’ perspectives on trust, its importance, and how they attempted to nurture it. In this segment, district leaders defined trust, identified challenges they believed linked to building and nurturing trust, and explained how they
used trust to nurture relationships when working to implement and sustain positive reform.

To sum up the findings, various themes emerged from the interviews conducted, and they were consistent with the themes cited in the literature detailed in Chapter 2. An analysis of the general themes highlighted in the data analysis process followed the interview summaries; those themes were: (a) honesty and integrity, (b) vulnerability and interdependence, (c) consistency and reliability, and (d) communication and openness. In conclusion, results of this study clearly indicate that district leaders do indeed view trust as an essential element when they are working with site-level leaders to nurture trusting relationships in an effort to support district reform.

Chapter 5, which follows, addresses the two overarching questions of the study as posed to district leaders: What role does trust play in implementing district reform? What role does trust play in sustaining reform?
CHAPTER 5—SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction and Overview

Findings will be further reported and discussed in this chapter. This will encompass reviewing and interpreting findings that relate to the study’s two overarching questions. The chapter will also include the study’s implications and limitations, as well as the researcher’s concluding remarks.

The overarching research questions for this study specifically asked district leaders to share strategies they used to build and nurture trusting relationships and to share their perspectives on the role trust played in building positive, sustained system reform. As previously detailed, in the first segment of the interviews with district leaders, all participants remarked that building and nurturing trust was a key dimension of their work. In the second segment of the interviews, district leaders provided examples of how they had strategically built and strengthened trusting relationships in the service of district improvement. Findings related to both of those segments were reported in Chapter 4. To expand on the ways trust mediates district reform, this chapter will focus on the two overarching research questions pertaining to this study:

- What strategies do district leaders recognize using to build trusting relationships?
- How important is trust between school sites and the district in building positive, sustained reform?

Summary of Overarching Research Questions

The district leaders who participated in this study shared the strategies they used to build and nurture trusting relationships, as well as their thoughts about the importance
of trust when working to build positive, sustained reform. The themes of honesty and respect, vulnerability and interdependence, consistency and reliability, and openness and communication described in Chapter 4 surfaced throughout their responses. This section will detail the steps district leaders took to build capacity, enhance communication, assess relationships between district and site leaders, and support consistency.

**Building Capacity**

The themes that emerged in this study—honesty and respect, vulnerability and interdependence, consistency and reliability, and openness and communication—overlapped as district leaders described their efforts to build relationships (capacity) with all stakeholders. For example, when AS3 talked about the importance of relationships, she stated, “Trust is often beyond an individual or moment but really about the part of the relationship that lets you know that someone is going to walk away from a conversation and think about it and make the best decision in a situation, even if it is not something they would agree with.” She explained how the district had used several tools over time to teach people the “impact of relationships in their work.” She also described how the human resources department offered communication training that linked specifically to evaluation and supervision, noting, “We [central office leaders] have all gone through [the same training], so it impacts the way we talk to people even about their daily work.” When reflecting on conditions that built trust, S2 said, “I think it is a matter of walking in other people’s shoes, looking at it from their point of view, understanding how they see it, being willing to listen to their opinions, being willing to share ideas you have. . . . You have to have empathy.” Assistant Superintendent 4 and AS3 shared similar perspectives about nurturing relationships. “It [trust] can be [nurtured] by a sheer conversation, being
proactive, extending a hand before the hand is needed,” AS4 explained. “Trust is protection of personal characteristics like confidentiality and respecting those aspects of a person,” AS3 asserted. Superintendent 1 acknowledged the importance of reflecting on how relationships are strengthened, noting, “I think if you do not pause occasionally to ask how the relationships are evolving, you miss an opportunity to make some course correction.”

When S3 talked about nurturing relationships, he mentioned creating a safe culture in which stakeholders feel as though they can take risks without repercussions. He emphasized the importance of creating a safe environment and explained by way of example, “All the meetings we hold, whether it be teacher council, parent forum meetings, one-on-one meetings, or town hall meetings, we never shoot things down and say no, no, no; we always say, well, come back to us with a plan, here is an opportunity.” He added that parents and other stakeholders often express surprise that they were listened to. Summing up his thoughts, S3 said, “You foster trust by living it day to day, everything you do; that is really important.”

Sharing her thoughts on reform, S2 said, “You can call it reform; I call it refinement.” She stated that during her tenure with the district (41 years), she learned that the term reform caused mixed emotions. She also noted that when she contemplated various issues, she would address them in a way that built on what was already in place. “If you say it is not all bad; let us see if we can make it better . . . that is refinement . . . People do not mind doing that so much,” she said. The superintendent provided an example of the district’s “quest to try to move the needle to get our kids A-G ready.” She explained how the district leaders worked hard to get the correct courses offered, and so
forth, but then got stuck realizing, after reviewing data, that offering the right courses was no longer the problem; grading practices were the issue. She talked about the “whole messy and emotional place of high school grading practices” and likened the challenge of grading to climbing a mountain. She then explained the process of addressing the situation, which involved convening teachers from all departments and bringing in “good people like Marzano” to share their thoughts on grading scales. Superintendent 2 commented on reading together and “building in our teachers the desire to make this right.” She reiterated that she is a firm believer that “just like we want to do, they [teachers] want to do the right thing [for the kids], too.” She summed up by saying, “We are getting it done.”

**Communication**

One theme threaded throughout the second segment of the interviews was the importance of clear, open lines of communication to ensure understanding and to build trusting relationships when working with stakeholders. The district leaders provided many examples to highlight how they worked with stakeholders at different levels (depending on the issue) to build and nurture relationships throughout the district. They also talked about systems in place that promoted collaboration by facilitating opportunities to hear from stakeholders; the constraints and demands on time were noted as an issue in many responses.

Assistant Superintendent 2 shared, “I would think that communication is probably the biggest thing we would be doing to foster trust.” She noted that it is a great advantage to work in a small district, because “you get a lot of time together.” The assistant superintendent added that because of the size of the district, it was easy to share
information, plan for professional learning, and give and get input. “We do everything together because we are a small group,” Assistant Superintendent 2 said. “I do not know if a larger system would do that, but we have that luxury. . . . We see each other constantly.” Assistant Superintendent 5 stated, “If you inform everyone, and keep everyone equally informed . . . no matter who it is, a parent, staff member, classified member, they will be able to articulate what the need is.”

When commenting on specific structures in place to facilitate collaboration and sharing information with stakeholders, the district leaders described a range of systems. Those systems included one-to-one conversations, district-site leadership teams, town hall meetings, and cluster meetings. The district leaders clearly articulated the strategies they used to provide opportunities for input, while also noting challenges. Assistant Superintendent 1 stated:

You have to provide groupings and be deliberate about orchestrating how you have people sit; [you need to think about] what kinds of meetings you have; do you allow time for conversations, so you set up protocols for appropriate interaction?

Assistant Superintendent 3 pointed out that in her district stakeholders are included in forums with the superintendent. She explained that there is usually a presentation that would be of interest to parents and others in the community; causal conversation, including a question-and-answer period, follows the more general presentation. The assistant superintendent also described a similar structure for teachers, noting that the venue is “set up to be a place for folks to be constructive and give
comments, criticism, and sometimes praise, but frankly just to open up communication with the district office staff.”

Similarly, S1 and AS4 described cluster meetings that were established to increase communication and collaboration with community members through “cluster governance . . . to invite community to participate.” They explained how the configurations of the groups were based on high school geographic areas, with the intent to share decision making. Superintendent 1 noted, “Before we did that [initiated cluster meetings], I think most stakeholders would suggest we were a traditional top-down central office-driven district. . . . But when we went out on a limb . . . we now had to walk the talk, so that is what we have been trying to do the last couple of years.” Commenting on the same topic, AS4 noted, “I think having the whole cluster movement . . . has been very helpful.” He referred to the success of monthly meetings the superintendent held with principals to “have conversations . . . to speak to them [principals], address questions and listen; [this forum] was a way to demonstrate collaboration and that we [central office leaders] are willing to listen and take it in.”

**Assessing the Strength of Relationships**

In addition to detailing how systems had been strategically implemented to build and nurture trusting relationships, district leaders also described ways they assess the strength of relationships between the school sites and the district. In doing so, S1 talked about looking at trends on campus. He clarified his assessment of a positive relationship by noting, “What I am suggesting here is a well-run campus with a well-supporting central office usually means that solutions come up for problems at the very lowest level and they do not get elevated and dramatized.” By way of contrast he added:
And there are a handful [of relationships] that you start connecting the dots; they have staffing issues, academic problems, they may have a leadership challenge. . . . Campus climate is another factor for evaluation; how positive it is can signal whether or not there is a good rapport between central office and [the] campus.”

When S2 shared a more personal approach linking to the importance of listening, she highlighted the opportunity to conduct surveys and other ways to get feedback: “You just have to be out there . . . you have to listen,” she stated simply. The superintendent also talked about the large size of the district and how she benefits from having been there for so long. “I have been around a long time; I have contacts in every school,” she said. “You just need to be present.” She also explained that central office administrators are always assessing relationships, noting, “Our union, quite honestly, sometimes will give us information that we do not like but truthfully we need to listen.” Superintendent 2 summed up her perspective by saying, “To say, well, everybody is telling you the king has lovely clothes, but truthfully, in this school not so much. . . . There are multiple sources of information if you are willing to listen.”

Assistant Superintendent 1 stated a similar perspective. “I think it is perception data, vulnerability and willingness to be honest with what is not working, not just focus on all the great stuff but showing one’s dirty laundry and knowing that it is not going to be judgment,” he said. Summing up, he added, “To me those are qualitative sources of data that [verify] there truly is a relationship based on trust and respect.” Commenting on this topic, S3 suggested, “If you are about a system of change, it is not 87 islands of excellence. . . . I do not believe in this individual issue because it’s about systems of change.” He talked about the need to provide varied support for schools, explaining that
all schools do not need the same type of support. He added that the assistant superintendents share responsibility for building relationships, noting, “I have really deployed a lot of that responsibility to the assistant superintendents. . . . They are the ones that have the greatest connectedness to the school sites; that is what they are being held accountable to.” He further noted, “For me, personally, it is more important we have one message of who we are, what we are doing, and how we are trying to get there.”

Addressing the topic of relationships between the district and the sites, AS5 shared, “We take situations or concerns that are expressed and then analyze it; we peel it down to see what the root or issue is and try to improve it.” She noted that district leaders do not typically get feedback of whether they hit the target because it is usually tied to a situation. Summing up she said, “You could say it is really just based on situational issues that come up.”

**Continuity**

Because S2, S3, AS1, AS3, and AS5 have served their districts in a variety of roles for more than 20 years each, their perceptions of and experiences with building relationships and systems for sustained improvement had been formed over time. As those leaders talked about their districts, they shared a more comprehensive view of what has evolved over the years.

The district leaders referenced in this section commented on various configurations within their districts that afforded stakeholders an opportunity to learn about new initiatives, suggest ideas, and provide input. For example, S2 described how she included high school teachers when addressing grading practices aligned to the A-G graduation requirements newly adopted by the district. Likewise, S3 provided numerous
examples of how stakeholders, whether parents, teachers, or leaders, were encouraged to “try on” new practices if they could provide a solid rationale for their proposed pilot. Similarly, AS3 noted that over time the district had learned that using data to inform innovation and two-way communication with stakeholders had helped develop a framework for making decisions that involved deploying resources and implementing change. She mentioned embedded collaboration and noted, “It is a very rare time when I will not be working with another department on something that is related to pushing out an innovation or building a system.”

Assistant Superintendent 1 referenced continuity when he commented on the connection between relationships and reform. “Over the years they [the people in the district] have been fostered and nurtured to think outside the box, be innovative and the leader in terms of different initiatives,” he said. Assistant Superintendent 5 struck a similar chord when she talked about the sense of team and collaboration and the necessity of those traits “in a trusting, working relationship.” She noted that she had seen how the district had grown over the last decade and “set the tone” when the mission and core values were developed. This view of a shared vision was shared by S3, who suggested, “If you don’t have a well-oiled machine and do not have alignment, you will not get things done.” He also referred to alignment as key for building trust.

Those district leaders who had 5 or fewer years in the district did not have the benefit of seeing practices change and evolve over time. This was evident when S1 talked about the need to build team identity. He alluded to the importance of a “feedback loop” to signal when needs are or are not being met. “I would like to think that we are all operating as a team and trust is deep and wide,” he said, adding that he did not want to
kid himself by asserting that perspective with absolute certainty. The superintendent explained that differences in personalities and leadership styles across the campuses “make it difficult to convince everyone that we are on the same journey, at the same milestone.” He stressed the importance of continuing “to work at it through certain amounts of team building among principals and between principals and central office area superintendents to create networks . . . build opportunities to create team identity.” He indicated, “With team identity you can build trust with each other to accept a shared vision.”

Assistant Superintendent 4 also underscored the need for further alignment when he addressed necessary conditions for district and site leaders to learn together. He said, “I think there are pockets of support . . . [but] nothing systematic about the support.” The assistant superintendent acknowledged a challenge by saying, “There is a disconnect between what sites feel is support and what we [central office] feel is support,” and he characterized the culture of the district as being in “constant churn.” Assistant Superintendent 4 also noted that the current superintendent had made gains in developing trust and improving communication with stakeholders, explaining, “We are now in a place where it has turned again [the superintendent is retiring]; people are listening, and they are going to be watching for evidence [of trust and communication].” When asked to characterize the patterns of communication between district and site leaders, he responded that most of the communication between the district and the site is “bestowed on the area [assistant] superintendent.” He went on to explain that the area (assistant) superintendent determines the level of communication, saying, “We [the district] have attempted to be collaborative, but [communication] often was perceived as top-down.”
A lack of alignment or commonality of purpose was perhaps most telling when AS4 was asked to share specific strategies used to build relationships between site and district leaders. After a long pause he replied, “I guess if it takes me this long to answer, I do not think we have a system of coherent strategies.” He added that having strategies in place to foster relationships between site and district leadership is a part of the district’s goal. He referenced a current initiative being rolled out and asserted, “If we stay the course . . . and really do the right work . . . there is hope and possibility.”

**Discussion and Interpretation of Findings**

As district leaders responded to interview questions, they shared their thoughts and experiences as to how they built and nurtured trusting relationships; they also articulated their perspectives on the importance of trust in building positive, sustained reform. Through analysis of data, all district leaders acknowledged working to build trusting relationships with stakeholders. Although some districts appeared to have more systematic structures in place than others, all the leaders emphasized the need to ensure that every stakeholder group was informed and offered an opportunity to provide input. The research reviewed for this study pertaining to trust and system reform details ways trust can be cultivated between school sites and district leaders.

All the district leaders who participated in this study emphasized using strategies to build capacity within their organizations to support reform efforts. In the preface of his book *All Systems Go*, Michael Fullan (2010) conveys with urgency that the “key to systemic reform is the concept of collective capacity professing that collective capacity generates the emotional commitment and technical expertise that no amount of individual capacity working alone can come close to matching” (p. xiii). Likewise, many
researchers referred to building relationships as building capacity. Perry and McDermott (2003), consultants with the Panasonic Foundation (which helps urban districts analyze current practices and design systemic strategies for improvements), affirmed that leaders must recognize reform strategies are only as effective as the people using them. Like Fullan, Perry and McDermott emphasized that it is critical to build capacity of everyone in the organization. They stated, “We have not seen a school district that has been successful in leading and sustaining change that did not recognize the importance of central office administrators, parents, students, teachers, site and district administrators and system leaders” (p. 1). Similarly, Bottoms and Fry (2009) stated, “Regardless of a school district’s improvement agenda, it is most effective when districts involve school and community stakeholders in its development” (p. 14).

Numerous examples in the present study highlighted how district leaders worked to include stakeholders in the efforts to improve their schools. In his book *Leadership and Sustainability*, Fullan (2005) explained, “We can’t change the system without lateral (cross-school and cross-district) sharing and capacity development” (p. 66). He added that it is the district’s role to make the lateral sharing and capacity development happen. Fullan defined sustainability as the capacity of a system to engage in the complexities of continuous improvement consistent with deep values of human purpose. His research was based on his work in several districts in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom, and it identified 10 lessons he referred to as preconditions for sustainability. In detailing the lessons learned, Fullan referred to many aspects of the key points discussed in the present study. He referred to the importance of “high engagement and plenty of
two-way communication with others in shared ownership and commitment at all levels of the district” (p. 67).

The district leaders who participated in the present study talked about various configurations within their districts that afforded stakeholders an opportunity to learn about new initiatives, suggest ideas, and provide input. Senge (1990) discussed team learning in his book *The Fifth Discipline*. He also referred to the phenomenon of alignment, in which a group of people function as a whole. He defined alignment as “a commonality of purpose, a shared vision, and understanding of how to complement one another’s efforts” (p. 234). In the present study, district leaders spoke of alignment, shared vision, and coordinated efforts to support improved student outcomes.

Furthermore, Senge wrote that organizations have three critical dimensions: (a) the need to think insightfully about complex issues, (b) the need for innovation, and coordinated action, and (c) the need to understand the role of team members on other teams. Senge expanded on the significance of those three dimensions, noting:

Most of the actions of senior teams are actually carried out through other teams . . . a learning team continually fosters other learning teams through inculcating [instilling] the practice and skills of team learning more broadly . . . which involves mastery of dialogue and discussion. (p. 236)

This notion is in sync with the structures of the districts involved in this study; within those districts the superintendents worked in conjunction with assistant superintendents, and the topic of effective two-way communication surfaced repeatedly throughout the literature on trust reviewed and during the interview sessions.
Senge (1990) described an unaligned team as one in which “individuals may work extremely hard but their efforts do not efficiently translate to team effort” (p. 234). He further explained that “alignment is a necessary condition . . . and . . . empowering the individual when there is a relatively low level of alignment worsens the chaos and makes managing the team even more difficult” (p. 325). This theme also emerged in the present study as district leaders commented on efforts to develop systems and strategies addressing commonality of purpose, clear communication, and strategies that would support improved relationships and alignment between site and district. Assistant Superintendent 4 was forthright in describing his own struggle with those efforts. Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers (1996) addressed the matter of alignment and shared purpose in another way, stating, “Most organizing efforts don’t begin with a commitment to creating a coherent sense of identity . . . through relationships, information is created and transformed, the organization’s identity expands to include more stakeholders, and the enterprise becomes wiser” (p. 4).

Implications for Future Research

Trust between site principals and teachers in schools has been studied, with findings that show high trust relationships contribute to school success and student achievement. Research pertaining to the role school districts play in developing trusting relationships related to sustained system reform is growing (Blankstein, 2011; Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Chhuon et al., 2008; Fullan, 2010; Mourshed et al., 2010; Spillane & Thompson, 1997; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). School systems that are committed to sustained reform face a major challenge of creating and nurturing trusting relationships.
With that context in place, this study provided an opportunity to better understand how district leaders used strategies with site leaders to sustain system reform.

The present study focused on the district leaders’ perspective. A similar study could be completed from the perspective of the site principals. Studies that explore the two-way nature of trust building and its value also appear warranted. Differentiating relationships based on high levels and low levels of trust and the impact of trust on variables such as school performance, tenure and evaluations, and individual and collective efficacy could also have significant implications for practice, professional development, and more research. Further studies are needed to explore how the site principals’ and district leaders’ perceptions of trust-building strategies are aligned with those of various stakeholder groups. In the present study, district leaders identified key points in building and nurturing trusting relationships as they worked to sustain reform. The findings highlighted the following: honesty and respect, vulnerability and interdependence, consistency and reliability, and openness and communication; all of those themes were stressed as foundational facets of trust within the literature. It would be beneficial for those in the educational community to understand how each stakeholder group perceived the level of trust throughout the system and to what degree each group valued the facets of trust embodied in the themes that emerged.

The present study also affirmed that the tenure of a district leader appears to have an impact on the strategies employed to build and nurture trusting relationships. The data signaled that the longer the district leader had been in the district, the broader view he or she could share. Future studies might explore how efforts over time help strengthen
relationships and how those relationships enhance sustained reform that leads to gains in student performance.

In sum, exploring and understanding trust between school district and site leaders warrants future study. This study identified the importance of trust and themes associated with fostering trust. It appears that studies that examine its impact on learning and efficacy, and practices that promote and repair trust, could have significant impact on enhancing the school district’s role in site effectiveness.

**Limitations**

The present study was conducted within Southern California, limiting the extent to which the findings might be generalized more broadly to apply throughout the state or beyond to encompass the nation. Because the participating district leaders were selected based on their connections to specific awards, results may not be generalized to other states or regions. That said, the insights from the study may enhance understanding of the role trust plays in reform efforts, while also encouraging future research related to the phenomenon. Results were restricted to assessing the experiences and perceptions of the district leaders interviewed. The researcher worked to develop an interview tool that encouraged them to provide thoughtful answers that highlighted their experiences related to trust and reform efforts. In terms of limitations, it is also important to note that only eight district leaders were interviewed during the designated study.

**Concluding Thoughts**

To sustain system reform, trusting relationships are crucial. Without high-trust relationships, it is unlikely that stakeholders—including superintendents, district office leaders, school board members, school-site staff, parents, students, and community
members—can be successful in creating a vision for system reform that is embraced and sustained over time. Research reviewed for this study described the relationship between district office and site leaders as hierarchical and semiautonomous (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2004; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000), a perspective that strengthens the case to build trusting relationships at all levels. In a meta-analysis examining research spanning 35 years, Waters and Marzano (2006) referred to the term defined autonomy, whereby the superintendent “encourages strong school-level leadership and encourages principals and others to assume responsibility for school success, he or she has fulfilled another responsibility to establish a relationship with schools” (p. 13).

In conclusion, the qualitative data analyzed in this study indicated that district leaders value trust as a variable to support system reform. The leaders shared numerous structures and strategies that promoted open communication to build trusting relationships with stakeholders. Because research suggests that trusting relationships lead to improved student outcomes, developing an understanding of the phenomena related to improving relationships between site and district leaders should prove to be useful to educational leaders.

Finally, by creating the organizational conditions in which people are collectively committed to improvement, district leaders must be mindful of how trusting relationships are built and nurtured. Fullan et al. (2004) extended this notion of collaborative leadership, suggesting, “Like distributed leadership at the school level, large scale reform requires pluralized leadership, with teams of people [district-level administrators] creating and driving a clear, coherent strategy” (p. 43).
It is the hope of this researcher that the findings from this study will provide district leaders with the impetus to build and nurture trusting relationships as they work to support school sites as part of their overarching quest to improve achievement for all students.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX

Interview Protocol

**Background and Beliefs**

- Please share your background and belief system as it pertains to your work.
- Who has primary responsibility for school improvement in your school district?
- What do you consider the conditions necessary for district and site leadership to learn together?
  
  - What extent are those present in your school district?
- How would you characterize the culture of your school district?
- How would you characterize the patterns of communication in your school district?
- How would you describe your school district’s ability to identify and implement reform?
- Are there any policies or practices that facilitate (or hinder) the sharing of school-wide reform strategies?

**Overarching Question**

What strategies do district leaders recognize using to build and nurture trusting relationships?

- What does the term trust mean to you?
- How would you describe the necessary conditions to build trusting relationships between district and site leaders?
- Could you share specific strategies your district is using to build trusting relationships between district and site leaders?
Secondary Questions

How important is trust between school sites and the district in building positive, sustained system reform?

- Thinking about your district’s specific reform issue(s), what event or strategies are in place to foster trust?
- How would you describe the most powerful event or strategy the district has implemented to build a climate of trust?
  - What made this event or strategy so powerful?
- How do you perceive collaboration between site and district leaders?

To what degree do district leaders value and identify trust as a variable to support system reform?

- How do you assess the strength of relationships between school sites and the district?
- Please share structures that are in place to support collegial relationships.
- How do you build trusting relationships across the districts amongst leaders to promote sustained reform?