Structures for Instructional Leadership Development

by

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Structures for Instructional Leadership Development

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to describe the structures districts put in place to support instructional leadership development for principals. Using qualitative data sources (interviews, focus groups, observations, and records review), the study examined the perception of the community of practice of the leaders within a district. The purpose of this study was to explore the structure employed by one successful urban district by examining the professional development of the principals within the district. The study examined the district structures created to support ongoing, job-embedded professional development for principals. The study aimed to describe a structure for developing and supporting the instructional leadership of the principals, further contributing to the research on principal professional development.

Five key themes emerged from the data: (a) district professional development structures; (b) accountability (c) community of practice; (d) principal collaboration; and (e) use of time. Further analysis of these themes revealed the importance of structures that support leaders at the individual and district level, including peer mentoring, principal coaching, and regular systematic professional development for principals.
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CHAPTER 1—OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

School leaders have the complex job of not only managing the day-to-day operations of a school but also serving as the instructional leaders, or “leaders of learning”. New leaders have two challenges: surviving the transition into a new and unfamiliar role and becoming instructional leaders (Boerema, 2011). Instructional leadership skills are the foundation of a school leader’s work in improving teaching and learning for all students. And yet, many formal leadership development programs fail to address instructional leadership skills (Peters, 2010) and most formal leadership development ends when a candidate finishes a program and accepts a leadership position. Research suggests that effective leadership training is ongoing and job-embedded, with reflection time built in (Boerema, 2011). To this end, the district plays a critical role in providing leadership development (Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2008).

Instilling instructional leadership skills in aspiring leaders is the work of University-based preparation programs. Developing and enhancing those skills is the work of district supports and structures. School leaders today serve as the instructional leaders of their sites. Research indicates that school leaders can positively impact student achievement through effective instructional leadership, including the key responsibilities of a leader (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). Research supports the need for districts to be clear and articulate in their model for instructional leadership (Hallinger, 2007). School districts play a critical role in the advancement of principals’ instructional leadership skills (Honig, 2012). Creating mentoring and coaching programs can provide support for the ongoing development of district leaders.
Leaders can be held accountable for development and proper use of their instructional leadership skills through measures such as professional standards and evaluations. The adoption of the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards in at least 40 states in the Unites States provides an opportunity for more common professional standards for leaders, though initial implementation varies across states. Research demonstrates a need for more consistent evaluation practices for leaders. Districts report that the purpose of principal evaluation systems is to improve principal effectiveness, yet these systems are used inconsistently and with mixed results (Corcoran et al., 2013). State policies can also be improved to hire and retain higher quality leaders for schools (Briggs, Cheney, Davis, & Moll, 2013).

The development of professional learning communities amongst teachers improves student achievement (DuFour & Marzano, 2011). The development of professional learning communities, or communities of practice, amongst principals within a school district is vastly unexplored in educational research. Humans are social beings who learn and develop meaning through interaction with others (Wenger, 1998). Instructional leaders need a community of practice within which they can collaborate and reflect with colleagues on their work (Barnes, Camburn, Sanders, & Sebastian, 2010). The role of the principal can be isolating. Research indicates that principals at high-performing schools interacted with peers at the site and district levels of leadership more than principals of low-performing schools, further supporting the need for more formal structures for interaction (Daly & Finnigan, 2012). A leadership community of practice provides support as well as opportunity for professional growth.
Adults do not always learn the same way children learn, and learning situations should reflect adult learning theories (Meyer, 1992; Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). Adults, similar to young students, must see relevance in learning opportunities (Mirci & Hensley, 2010). Malcolm Knowles’ theory of andragogy redefined adult education to include a learner-focused approach, where the learner takes control of the objectives, strategies, and evaluation (Rachal, 2002). Districts facilitating leadership development would be prudent to take into consideration adult learning theories when developing support structures.

**Background of the Study**

While a comprehensive review of research on leadership demonstrates a clear connection between quality leadership and improved student achievement, it also highlights a lack of information on how current leaders continue their learning or enhance their instructional leadership skills throughout their careers (Leithwood et al., 2004). Systematic professional development for principals as instructional leaders is missing in many school districts (Corcoran et al., 2013). There are pockets of excellence in classrooms and schools across the nation, but they are not to scale; every student deserves the best instruction every day (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009). In order to ensure quality instruction in every classroom, schools need to be led by principals with strong instructional leadership skills. These skills must be developed and nurtured through ongoing, consistent structures. Professional development for principals can provide knowledge of leadership, pedagogy, and content to support the improvement of instruction at the classroom level. Districts play a role in supporting such instructional
leadership development (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Honig, 2012; Jerald, 2012; Leithwood, 2010).

Urban school districts face an even greater challenge when it comes to finding, retaining, and supporting quality instructional leaders (Mitgang, 2013). This study focused on the structure one successful urban district employed to develop the instructional leadership of its principals.

**Statement of the Problem**

Districts play a critical role in the hiring, retention, support, and development of principals who serve as instructional leaders (Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, & Newton, 2010). There is a clear lack of structures for principal professional development across the research on leadership (Boerema, 2011; Bottoms & Fry, 2009; Drago-Severson, 2012; Wahlstrom, Seashore Louis, Leithwood, & Anderson, 2010). In this study, professional development for principals focused on the development of instructional leadership skills through structured learning opportunities for principals. This study investigated current structures to support instructional leadership development in one successful urban school district.

**Purpose of the Study**

This study explored the structure employed by one successful urban district by examining the professional development of the principals within the district. The study examined the district structures created to support ongoing, job-embedded professional development for principals. The study aimed to describe a structure for developing and supporting the instructional leadership of the principals within one urban district, further contributing to the research on principal professional development.
The following research questions were addressed:

- What professional development structures build the capacity of principals to influence improvements in instruction?
- What factors influence the effectiveness of district professional development structures in improving principals’ instructional leadership?
- If there is an instructional leadership community of practice, what characteristics describe it?
- What district policies, programs, and practices motivate/support principal leaders to focus upon improving instruction in their schools?

**Overview of the Methodology**

The study began with an in-depth look at the literature. Areas of research included instructional leadership, professional development for principals, professional standards, and district structures for support, as well as communities of practice, adult learning theories, and evaluation practices. The extensive literature review demonstrated a lack of district-wide structures that supported the ongoing instructional leadership development of principals.

This study used a qualitative approach with a case study of a mid-sized urban school district in Southern California. The district will be referred to as Sunset School District, a pseudonym to honor confidentiality. Sunset School District (SSD) was a high-performing district based on California’s Academic Performance Index (API\(^1\)). Not only was the district’s API 869, but all but one subgroup of students (out of ten subgroups)

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\(^1\) API is California’s Academic Performance Index, a number between 200 and 1000 designed to measure the academic performance and improvement of a school or district. The state’s goal is for all schools/districts to reach 800.
had an API score above 800, with four subgroups over 900. Because Sunset School District already had a leadership structure in place, a case study was valuable to investigate the set of events and variables that were embedded in this particular place and time (Merriam, 1998). Creswell described procedures for conducting a case study, which include: identify the case, collect data from multiple sources, analyze the data, and report the themes (Creswell, 2013). Following these procedures, the researcher used a purposeful sampling to identify the district. The study included observations of principal professional development meetings, interviews and focus groups with district leaders as well as principals, and an observation of a coaching session. A purposeful sample within the district was used for in-depth interviews, to provide insight into the structure of the district’s learning module (Merriam, 1998). The study also included a document review of state and local assessment data, as well as district organizational charts, meeting agendas and materials. Descriptive data was generated to support other districts in creating their own structure for ongoing principal professional development.

**Limitations and Delimitations of the Study**

Delimitations are the boundaries of the study and refer to the ways in which its findings may not be generalizable (Glatthorn & Joyner, 2005). Qualitative educational research limits generalizability because each school setting is unique (Berliner, 2002). A case study, by nature, has a small sample size. Both the sample size and the location could be considered delimitations in this study.

Case studies, by nature, are also limited by time and money (Merriam, 1998). The data collected was limited to the meetings that were scheduled within the time of the
study, which determined what was observed, as well as the willingness of the principals to participate.

Researcher bias and inexperience can contribute to limitations. Triangulations, member checks and interview question review were used to increase internal validity (Merriam, 1998). Interview questions were developed after the review of literature, to maintain relevance. The questions were posed to current practitioners not participating in the study, to ensure that the interview questions led to information related to the research questions to be answered by the study. To ensure privacy and confidentiality, the researcher used password-protected files to maintain all research throughout the study.

Research on job-embedded principal professional development is lacking in the field, as evidenced by the review of literature (Peters, 2010; Rorrer et al., 2008). Results from this study may add to the theoretical and empirical research informing superintendents and other district leaders responsible for evaluating and supporting principals as instructional leaders. Results from this study may inform districts seeking innovative structures for principal professional development.

**Definitions of Key Terms**

The following definitions are offered to provide preciseness and context for key terms used in this study:

**District:** A collection of schools within a set of boundaries, overseen by a local education agency, and run by district leaders who are responsible for hiring and maintaining school leaders, along with operational and instructional leadership within the district.
District leader: Also considered central office administrators, this term may refer to a superintendent, assistant superintendents, or curriculum directors, taking on district level management of curriculum, instruction, and operational duties (Honig et al., 2010).

Instructional Leadership: Ability to work with teachers collaboratively to set goals, examine curricula, evaluate teachers, and assess results (Catano & Stronge, 2006).

Principal: The leader of a school site, responsible for its day-to-day management as well as instructional leadership (Catano & Stronge, 2006).

Professional Development: Learning experience for adult educators to improve instruction and achievement within a school or district (Barnes et al., 2010).

Principal Professional Development: Workshops, conferences, study groups, inter-visits, buddy systems, and coaching are forms of professional development with the purpose of helping principals develop and improve their instructional leadership (Leithwood, 2010).
CHAPTER 2—REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This review of literature examines research related to leadership development practices that might inform a study of district structures for instructional leadership development. The research literature might be organized into three categories: studies that address the development of principals’ instructional leadership skills (Braun, Gable, & Kite, 2011; Dana, Tricarico, & Quinn, 2009; Honig, 2012; Stearns, Margulus, & Shinsky, 2012), studies that emphasize the role of professional standards and state policy in influencing instructional leadership development (Catano & Stronge, 2006), and studies that examine communities of practice as learning networks (Wenger, 1998). Relevant themes include developing instructional leadership skills (Dana et al., 2009; Stearns et al., 2012), district structures to support leadership development (Honig, 2012), accountability measures (Catano & Stronge, 2006), communities of practice as learning networks (Wenger, 1998), and adult learning theories (Meyer, 1992; Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004).

The first section will address the development of principals’ instructional leadership skills, highlighting research that illuminates the characteristics of those programs, practices, and policies that promote principals’ leadership. This section includes research focused on the role of the university-based leadership preparation programs. These studies emphasize that aspiring leaders need time to study the theory as well as the practice of educational leadership. As well, this section includes research focused on district supports and structures. Job-embedded learning experiences and opportunities for reflection provide new leaders authentic preparation for the role of school principal (Braun et al., 2011). Districts provide structures such as mentoring,
coaching, professional development, and external partnerships to enhance the instructional leadership of their principals.

A second section will describe studies that emphasize the role of professional standards and state policy in promoting principals’ instructional leadership. Accountability for leaders comes from professional standards, such as the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards, or evaluation. Both standards and evaluation are often driven by state policies that dictate expectations for districts to follow. Professional standards linked to evaluation are supportive when districts provide support for leaders (Creasap, Peters, & Uline, 2005). Standards and evaluations can only be used as accountability measures when they are actually used purposefully (Turnbull, Riley, Arcaira, Anderson, & MacFarlane, 2013).

The final section explores the role of communities of practice in building principals’ instructional leadership as well as adult learning theories. Wenger (1998) defines communities of practice as “sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise” (p. 45). In addition to typical university-based pre-service programs or district-based professional development programs, communities of practice provide another way to consider to structure support for instructional leadership development. Communities of practice can provide a structure for ongoing leadership development and social, collaborative learning. New leaders need systematic supports to learn both the daily operations and the instructional leadership skills necessary to lead a school successfully. District leaders supporting the instructional leadership skills development of site leaders must take into account the learning experiences individual bring to all situations (Rachal, 2002).
Learning Instructional Leadership Skills

The role of the principal has shifted from manager to instructional leader. In order to raise or maintain high levels of student achievement, a principal must be the lead learner of a school site, focused on improving teaching and learning for all. As lead learners, principals must study the elements of effective instructional leadership (Dana et al., 2009), understanding how student success is more likely with system-wide supports, in the form of time, resources, a commitment to the see the work through, and an instructional focus (Honig, 2012). Streshly and Gray (2008) studied key characteristics of effective leaders, similar to Jim Collins’ Good to Great study (Collins, 2001). Effective leaders demonstrated instructional leadership through their unwavering resolve, their establishment of a culture of discipline, their ability to build relationships, and their ambitions for the success of their schools. In today’s schools, leaders need to learn these instructional leadership skills in order to support student achievement for all.

Leadership today involves a different set of skills than in the past (Hallinger, 2007). Successful leadership development programs blend the study of theory together with practical applications of instructional leadership skills while providing time for reflection. More and more districts and universities are creating partnerships to craft strategic leadership preparation programs, in order to better meet the needs of both rural and urban schools (Mitgang, 2013; Stearns et al., 2012).

Beyond university-based preparation programs, districts are beginning to create supports and structures for ongoing principal professional development. Structures and programs such as mentoring, principal coaching, professional development, and external partnerships create job-embedded learning for principals. Research also shows benefits
of a more focused approach to developing instructional leadership skills in principals (Daresh, 2007; Honig, 2012; Jerald, 2012; Leithwood, 2010; Ward, 2011).

Developing Instructional Leaders Through University-based Preparation Programs

In a review of the features of effective preparation programs, there are several common attributes. Orr (2011) found seven distinct features of quality programs: developing a theory of leadership, addressing instructional leadership, integrating active learning strategies with theory, providing internships, recruiting knowledgeable faculty, providing social and professional support, and using standards-based assessments for feedback. In comparison, a district-university partnership program in Grand Rapids, Michigan had similar features, focusing on a balance of theory and practice, a knowledgeable faculty, and social and professional support via communities of practice, all mediated through the structure of a cohort model designed to prepare urban school leaders (Stearns et al., 2012) for their fieldwork. Effective leadership preparation and development programs include ongoing learning experiences with aspects of active learning and social supports. Aspiring leaders in a program that blended face-to-face and online learning found that reflective journals helped them engage and reflect throughout the program (Thornton & Yoong, 2011). The benefits of infusing theory into practice as well as making time for reflection held true in another district-university partnership program where district leaders were trained to be mentors for aspiring leaders (Sanzo, Myran, & Clayton, 2010). As accountability measures increase across the country, preparation programs have been revised to include the features researchers found effective for new leaders. More program developers recognize the importance of
designing social network structures for adult learning with a balance between theory and practical application.

In their study of six principals, Streshly and Gray (2008) recommended that leadership preparation programs focus on what effective leaders actually do; the characteristics and behaviors that make them successful should become their curriculum. Mitgang (2013) recommended that districts communicate with universities about the traits, knowledge, and skills that these districts demand of new leaders in order to strengthen leadership preparation programs. Preparation programs need to provide authentic opportunities for job-embedded learning experiences, such as collaboration, mentoring, and support for leaders to develop their own vision (Braun et al., 2011). These attributes also mattered in a follow-up survey of 471 recent graduates of 13 institutions. When asked to reflect on their preparation programs after stepping into leadership roles, graduates rated programs higher when they were focused more on instructional leadership with fieldwork experiences (Orr, 2011). Reflection and social support within a community of practice are clearly critical components of leadership development.

Grand Rapids Public Schools, in partnership with Grand Valley State University, created an aspiring leaders program that included three theoretical frameworks: leadership theory, change theory and communities of practice, and adult learning theory (Stearns et al., 2012). The purpose of the joint program was to create a customized program focusing on team learning and helping urban leaders understand that schools are living communities of practice. The findings of the qualitative study suggested that a program which aimed to develop aspiring leaders should incorporate a cohort model and work relevant to current leaders. This better prepared leaders to lead urban schools.
Interviews with the 32 participants demonstrated the need for effective leadership preparation programs that incorporate theory and practical application, within a cohort model that provides a community of practice for aspiring leaders (Stearns et al., 2012). When universities and school districts partner to create a program together, there are more opportunities to develop leaders with relevant skills who support the specific needs of the district.

In a partnership between university faculty, county-level leaders, and school principals, a participatory action research study explored the requirements necessary to effectively prepare school leaders to lead during turbulent educational times (Burke, Marx, & Lowenstein, 2012). Researchers created a pilot program to support the new leadership development of eight principals from three districts. The following research questions grounded the study: “What are the skills and capacities that current and future leaders need in order to become effective”, and “How is our own professional practice, working to prepare school leaders, influenced by our learning community’s conversations and collaboration?” (Burke et al., 2012, p. 114). Through the year-long collaboration a safe environment was created, but the principals did not show significant changes to their leadership profiles within that time period. Researchers found it time-consuming to develop a community of practice environment where rich dialogues could occur. Participants did, however, prefer the setting of the leadership development program over traditional university class settings. Future researchers should consider the role of adult learning theory as well as the connection between leadership preparation and the day-to-day demands of current school leaders who work in turbulent situations.
Hybrid leadership development programs are born as districts struggle to find qualified principals to lead low-performing schools. The University of Kentucky and Pike County Public Schools (PCPS) created a program designed to develop new leaders and enhance the skills of existing leaders to successfully lead PCPS schools in this rural, struggling Appalachian area (Browne-Ferrigno, 2007). The unique combination of current and aspiring leaders in the Principals Excellence Program (PEP) was one of its most valuable elements. The PEP included job-embedded mentoring, action research, summer institutes, and weekly support for 30 participants. The program completed regular evaluations through case studies as part of grant requirements. An analysis of the data collected pointed out three findings: socialization, continuous professional improvement, and principal readiness and success planning. The findings supported earlier research about principal preparation: aspiring leaders need time to socialize with current leaders to understanding the role of the principalship; leaders are all on a path of continual growth and all need ongoing support; completing a leadership preparation program makes a candidate eligible for a principalship, but not necessarily ready for the position. Researchers identified two take-aways for other program developers: combine theory and practice through classroom learning and job-embedded application and create mixed cohorts of aspiring and current leaders to enhance learning and communication. These suggestions are relevant to districts and universities hoping to develop and hire successful leaders.

**Developing Instructional Leaders Through District Supports and Structures**

District leadership plays a critical role in shaping and supporting the leadership development of principals. In a review of research on leadership, supported by The
Wallace Foundation, researchers identified three key elements of successful leaders at all levels: setting direction, developing people, and redesigning the organization (Leithwood et al., 2004). Successful district leaders, however, need a more specific set of leadership skills to support principals in their development as effective leaders: capturing the attention of school personnel, building capacity, and pushing the implications of policies into schools and classrooms. Research suggests the need for leaders to better understand distributive leadership and how to employ the distribution of not only tasks, but accountability and ownership, across a system. In addition, two common factors in districts with significant student achievement gains are an “investment in instructional leadership development at the school and district level,” and “district-wide and school-level emphasis on teamwork and professional community,” (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 43).

This review of research highlighted the need for leadership development to be differentiated by need, as we wish to see teachers do for individual students in the classroom. Leaders who serve student populations that are diverse in language backgrounds have different needs than those who serve in upper middle class, predominantly white populations. Successful leaders take into account the needs of their student population; successful development of new leaders provides training and support in cultural proficiency. In another study commissioned by The Wallace Foundation, researchers found “little evidence that most districts have a coherent professional development system for principals. Principals tended to agree,” (Wahlstrom et al., 2010, p. 20). District structures to support ongoing leadership development are needed now more than ever.
Honig (2012) discovered that district and site leaders had inconsistent definitions of the term *instructional leadership*. There was agreement that the core of instructional leadership involves the principal working directly with teachers to improve teaching and learning based on data. District administrators need to know how to support the instructional leadership work of principals at their school sites, coaching them to convey a clear, instructional focus. In this study of three urban school districts, central office administrators provided instructional leadership support to principals. The Instructional Leadership Developers (ILDs) coached principals using five key practices: focusing on joint work, differentiating support, modeling, developing and using tools, and brokering. The results demonstrated that the more coaches used the five key practices, the more likely the principals they supported were to improve as instructional leaders. In addition, the strength of the ILD’s social network enhanced the level of support provided, as each ILD was able to tap into a larger network of resources (Honig, 2012). In order to effectively support the necessary development of instructional leadership skills, districts need to ensure common understanding of the terms exists and is the focus of the work for positions such as ILDs. Taking place in Atlanta, New York City, and Oakland public schools, this study’s findings are worth consideration by districts across the country, especially those which serve urban populations.

A Wallace Foundation study on empowering principals to improve teaching and learning determined two key strategies for successful school reform: providing instructional coherence and investing heavily in instruction-related professional learning for principals (Bottoms & Fry, 2009). In this study, with interviews of 22 Southern Regional Education Board principals, a need emerged for supporting high school
principals in becoming instructional leaders. Data suggested that effective districts created systems for building capacity from the central office to the school leader and from the leader to the teachers. At the least-improved schools, the reform was centralized and lacked a focus on building capacity. The researchers further stated, “Districts must maintain a strong focus on improving instruction and raising standards and achievement by supporting principals to become instructional leaders” (Bottoms & Fry, 2009, p. 6). It is worth noting that this study focused on the leadership development needs of high school principals only, which may differ significantly from the needs of elementary or middle school leaders, due to the nature of the school structures.

Districts do matter in reform (Rorner et al., 2008). In a narrative synthesis of research on the district’s role in reform since 1984, researchers found four roles districts play: providing instructional leadership, reorienting the organization, establishing policy coherence, and maintaining an equity focus. Smaller districts tend to struggle more to implement successful reform, due to the lack of technical assistance and resources available within the system. Districts are institutional actors, from which influence on the system proceeds. Interconnected networks of institutional actors, like learning networks, play a role in the success or failure of district reform. Districts must learn to be flexible, as change is nonlinear. Researchers recommended further study in districts’ implementation of a framework for systemic reform, rather than single-focus changes (Rorner et al., 2008). In order to creating sustainable reform, district leaders need to understand the importance of a structure to support site leaders. Small districts would be wise to create their own structures in order to build a system of resources for ongoing support.
Another Wallace Foundation study on central office transformations found that district and site leader partnerships resulted in significant improvements in system-wide reform (Honig et al., 2010). In the study of three urban school districts’ work to transform their central offices, researchers identified five dimensions for successful transformation: forming learning-focused partnerships with school principals to deepen principals’ instructional leadership practice; providing assistance to the central office-principal partnerships; reorganizing and reculturing all other central office units to support teaching and learning improvement; providing clear direction for the overall central office transformation process; and using evidence to support continual improvement. A growing body of evidence confirms the crucial role districts play in school improvement (Barnes et al, 2010; Bottoms & Fry, 2009; Honig, 2012; Mitgang, 2013).

A comprehensive review of 31 studies of high-performing districts concluded that developing instructional leadership and supporting instructional improvements with professional development for leaders as well as teachers were critical characteristics of success (Leithwood, 2010). These studies comprised a variety of large, urban districts serving many at-risk students. Twenty-one of the 31 studies provided evidence about district-wide, job-embedded professional development and 16 of the studies provided evidence about investing in instructional leadership. Out of the ten characteristics identified in these high-performing districts, these two had the most evidence across the studies. Districts and their principals benefit from structures that support the ongoing development of instructional leadership skills as means to improve teaching and learning. District leaders are wise to take into account the knowledge and training leaders bring
with them from their pre-service leadership development programs. District structures include such supports as mentoring, coaching, professional development, and external partnerships.

**Mentoring.** Daresh (2007) studied principal mentoring within a large urban context, with 20 participants from two large urban districts. The mentors were tasked with developing instructional leadership skills in new principals. Mentors were selected based on their accomplishments as instructional leaders. The mentoring focused on socialization to the new role and fulfilling leadership expectations for new principals. Researchers used Huberman’s model of the natural developmental phases of beginning principals: initial career entry, stabilization, and risk taking or risk avoidance.

Throughout the study, the new principals sought their mentors’ help in fulfilling the practical and technical aspects of their new roles (e.g. building management, student discipline, scheduling) more than any other areas of responsibility. Evidence suggested that new leaders require support in balancing the technical aspects of the job while learning the importance of instructional leadership. Findings further indicated that mentors did not understand the various developmental phases, because “fine tuning” of leadership skills cannot happen until leaders are comfortable in their new role. In addition, mentors needed support in terms of how to develop instructional leadership skills in others (Daresh, 2007). Mentoring programs should consider these findings in order to successfully support new leaders. In addition, programs would be wise to consider the varying needs of veteran leaders when designing mentor programs to support all leaders.
Organizational members experience a process of socialization as they enter a new context, learning the social roles and determining how one fits personally and professionally within an organization (Enomoto & Gardiner, 2006). Organizational socialization includes tactics, efficacy, and agency within a dynamic process. When educators accept a new leadership role, they are new to that position, but not necessarily new to the organizational structures of the school system. When socializing, or acclimating, within the organization, leaders must take account of their new role. Mentoring, coaching, and internships all provide potential structures for resocialization of new leaders.

In a qualitative, ethnographic study of eight interns assigned to eight principals, from three districts where internship was the required last phase of an administrative preparation program, researchers examined how structured internships were designed to serve as professional development and organizational socialization for aspiring leaders. The principals worked as guides and supervisors to the mentees. The researchers set out to study “quality mentoring,” defined as “an active, engaged and intentional relationship between the individuals based upon mutual understanding and serving primarily the professional needs of the protégé” (Enomoto & Gardiner, 2006, p. 35). Four types of relationships emerged from the study, one of which led to quality mentoring: mentor-protégé dyad. In this dyad, quality mentoring occurred due to the development of a trusting relationship through regular communication about the instructional work of the leader. In the absence of high quality mentoring, person-to-person relationships still support organizational socialization. However, the socialization process is better served in the context of a strong mentor-intern relationship. This relationship between a mentor
and an intern can contribute to a new leader’s success leading a school (Enomoto & Gardiner, 2006).

Alsbury and Hackmann (2006) also found that mentorships are not about skill development, but about socialization and professional reflection. Frequent face-to-face interaction was critical to the mentor/protégé relationship (Alsbury & Hackmann, 2006). Challenging the past mentoring paradigm of mentor as sage, an instrumental case study extending over 15 years identified mentoring as supportive of personal and professional growth, professional networking, and organizational structures (Peters, 2010).

Mentoring is a form of learning from experience, focused on continuous growth through relationships, not on mastery of specific tasks (Boerema, 2011). Growth comes when there is both high support and high challenge for a leader. Many leadership skills are learned through on-the-job experiences. Through an appreciative inquiry study of eight new leaders in Canada, researchers identified five key actions by others that made new leaders feel supported: listening, expressing concern for their well-being, giving encouragement, affirming their work, and recognizing their uniqueness. In addition, the researcher found that when mentors gave new leaders challenges, the experiences helped them to prioritize their work. Leadership training doesn’t end at the conclusion of a formal preparation program; ongoing guidance and support for leaders are necessary. Mentorships are one sort of structure that provides leaders with the ongoing support of professional networks (Boerema, 2011).

Additional research further supports the importance of mentoring. Suggestions for district improvements (from The Wallace Foundation study on cultivating the kind of principals needed by urban schools) included investing in early mentoring, continuing
professional development, and helping principals focus more time on instruction and developing the expertise to do so well (Mitgang, 2013). After one year of an embedded leadership preparation program where district leaders were trained as mentors to provide authentic, relevant leadership preparation, researchers concluded that new leaders benefitted from meaningful professional development as well as time for reflection (Sanzo et al., 2010).

Principal coaching. Increasingly, districts apply leadership coaching as a structure for principal professional development. Coaching is part of a continuous learning process within a trusting relationship (Ward, 2011). One midsize district’s development of a coaching program for elementary principals served as context for a qualitative case study involving 16 principals. Each of the principals was either new to their positions within the last three years or serving as a principal at a Program Improvement school. Over the course of six months, principals met with a coach one to two times a week. The coaches met monthly with the district leadership team, and they also met regularly as a coach cohort. The study set out to describe the development of this coaching program. Findings indicated that principals were unclear about district initiatives, even as district leaders assumed they possessed the necessary knowledge of these district-led efforts. Principals shared their frustrations about district initiatives with their coaches, who in turn, shared these concerns with district leaders. The coaches felt their meetings, both with district leadership and alone as a cohort, assisted them in developing a community of coaches within the district coaching program. Coaches

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2 In California, schools that do not make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act receive a Program Improvement school designation (California Department of Education, 2012).
formed their own network and learned together throughout the process. District-sponsored coaching programs benefit from an intentional infrastructure, along with the careful matching of principals to coaches (Ward, 2011). A district can play a critical role in developing the necessary structures to support ongoing leadership development.

Five large urban school districts across the United States participated in a Wallace Foundation program entitled The Principal Pipeline from 2011-2017 (Turnbull, Riley, & MacFarlane, 2013). As part of the initiative funded by the grant, all new principals received one-on-one coaching. The novice administrators overwhelmingly enjoyed and appreciated their coaches. The district leadership, however, wisely noted that their systems needed to do a better job of connecting district professional development for leaders with the coaching support provided. Through mentoring and principal coaching, districts have the opportunity to create structures to support ongoing instructional leadership development. Without these structures, districts are left with leaders who may be ill prepared to provide the instructional leadership that today’s schools sorely need.

Professional development. In a longitudinal study of a mid-sized urban school district in the South Eastern United States, a district-based professional development program (DPD) aimed to transform principals into instructional leaders (Barnes et al., 2010). Forty-eight principals were split up into treatment and comparison groups for the one-year DPD. Because new principals notice superficial similarities between new learning and their existing background knowledge, misunderstandings often occur. The goal of the DPD was to create a social learning environment, or a community of practice for leaders, in which the principals could take their new learning and make sense of it in order to improve their instructional leadership skills. Before the DPD began, data
analysis showed that principals spent most of their time on managerial tasks. After treatment, principals put a greater emphasis on instructional leadership skills. Researchers noted that strong district leadership would be necessary to create and sustain a long-term, functioning community of practice for principals (Barnes et al., 2010).

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation partnered with seven school districts and four charter management organizations to redesign their systems to improve teaching and learning (Jerald, 2012). The report of this partnership suggested three promising areas for principal professional development and support: clarify the principal’s role as an instructional leader, develop principals’ instructional leadership practices through job-embedded supports that build expertise, and enable principals to succeed as instructional leaders by providing them with time and supports. Specific recommendations for systemic improvements include district level leaders who are responsible for helping principals grow as instructional leaders through ongoing, differentiated professional development (Jerald, 2013). This report is relevant to a variety of district leaders because the partnership school systems represent large, urban districts from across the country.

Drago-Severson (2012) also noted the importance of district leadership when studying principal self-renewal as a means of professional development. This qualitative study included 25 principals of varying ages, ethnicities, years of experience, and types of schools. Not only were these principals known for supporting adult learning, but they expressed desires to take more time to reflect on their leadership. Researchers noted the importance each principal placed on reflection, contrasted with how little time they spent reflecting on their own. Principals need support if they are to carve out structured time for reflection. The principals in this diverse study shared an understanding of the value
of reflecting with colleagues, rather than in isolation. The researchers identified the need to support districts in creating a structure for leaders to engage in a community of practice with the purpose of ongoing professional development and leadership growth.

**External partnerships.** When districts enter probation due to low student achievement results, external supports are one component of a system for improvement. In a two year study of the design and implementation of a school probation policy in Chicago’s elementary schools, two central components emerged: external partners and probation managers (Finnigan & O’Day, 2003). The schools selected external partners, often universities or consultants, based on their school-wide improvement plans. Probation managers were seasoned administrators assigned by the district to support the principal in implementing the improvement plan. Research findings indicated a critical need to support capacity-building at the site level. Chicago schools created a good structure for external support, but the structure did not significantly alter classroom instruction. Districts must place a stronger emphasis on training the support providers brought in to assist struggling schools, with a focus on district goals for improvement. Leaders must also learn how to build capacity within a school (Finnigan & O’Day, 2003).

A different structure for district improvement came out of a partnership between Fresno Unified and Long Beach Unified School Districts (Duffy, Brown & O’Day, 2009). Due to continued status as Program Improvement districts, the districts were required to restructure their organizations with the support of a District Assistance Intervention Team (DAIT), as part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act requirements (California Department of Education, 2012). Rather than bring in an external DAIT, the third and fourth largest districts in California created a partnership as
an alternative intervention strategy. The goals of the partnership were to pursue common goals, measure student outcomes, share professional knowledge, learn from each other and support each other. In a brief documenting the collaboration, the California Collaborative on District Reform described the initiation and early stages based on interviews with leaders from both districts. Early indications showed increased student achievement and a promising intervention strategy, but not one recommended for all districts. Crucial elements for success included leaders willing to engage in difficult conversations, holding all stakeholders accountable, and committing to building relationships while focusing on common areas for improving learning (Duffy et al., 2009).

A mid-sized urban district within San Diego County used three external partnerships to enhance their support of improving teaching and learning as well as to support principal professional development (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010). The district developed partnerships with external sources such as Reading First, a DAIT provider, and coaches for all principals. At the same time, the district leadership team restructured principal meetings to focus more on instructional leadership development. The external partnerships provided knowledge and support at the district and site leadership level as well as the teacher level. Communication was enhanced while programs and policies were created or improved. Researchers explored various linkages between the district and the site level, noting that a trusting relationship between the district and the sites is critical for systemic improvement. External partnerships provide districts with additional sources of information to enhance professional learning, which is especially critical in under-performing districts. Those linkages noted support the relevance of external
partnerhips for similar mid-sized, urban districts with a variety of needs and limited internal staff, in order to support a large reform effort.

Supported by The Wallace Foundation, the School Administration Manager (SAM) project began in Louisville, Kentucky in 2003 (Turnbull et al., 2009). The project focused on changing the conditions in schools that inhibited principals from spending time on instructional leadership tasks. The SAM project provided support to principals to improve their instructional leadership. The project assigned additional personnel, a SAM, to take on managerial tasks from the principal (i.e. student discipline) in order for the principal to spend more time on instructional leadership tasks (i.e. classroom observations). The SAM was also tasked with supporting the principal in delegating non-instructional tasks and managing his/her time more effectively. Participating principals made a commitment to increase the time they spent on instructional leadership tasks. Over time, the project shifted from hiring a new staff member to serve as a SAM to delegating different responsibilities to existing staff members, due to budgetary constraints. As of 2009, 37 districts in nine states implemented the SAM project, with a total of 160 principal/SAM teams. In a program evaluation of quantitative and qualitative data from the SAM project, instructional leadership focus improved significantly. The mean percentage of time principals spent on instructional leadership tasks rose from 32% to 45% among 75 principals. The evaluation noted, however, that principals needed additional coaching on providing feedback to teachers and the implementation of instructional leadership behaviors to improve instruction and impact student achievement. While the principals in the SAM project spent more time observing classrooms, they didn’t necessarily have the instructional leadership skills to provide effective feedback to
ensure improvements to teaching and learning. The SAM project noted a significant lack of district support as well, which further supports the need for districts to provide structures for principals’ instructional leadership development.

The Principal Pipeline study, commissioned by the Wallace Foundation, has adapted since its inception in 2011 (Turnbull, Riley, & MacFarlane, 2015). Created to support districts in preparing, hiring and supporting high-quality principals to improve student achievement, the pipeline has expanded in both its scope and direction within each of the six large, urban school districts. While the initial goal centered around the need to ensure districts had access to new principal candidates and supports to enhance their leadership skills, the work has expanded to the structures, policies, and programs districts can implement for ongoing professional development for principals. Each of the districts has created mentoring, coaching and professional development programs for their novice principals. Significant work has gone into training and supporting the mentors and coaches who support the new principals within each district. Leaders in several of the districts have plans for differentiated, individualized support for principals as they move forward. District leaders reflected about the positive impact that standards and data have had on their programs and policies (Turnbull et al., 2015).

**Developing Instructional Leaders Through Standards and Policy**

Accountability for principals takes on different forms, based on state education systems, district procedures, and individual follow through. All fifty states in the United States have licensure requirements for school administrators (Davis et al., 2010). Forty states adopted or adapted the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards. The ISLLC Standards provide a national benchmark for aspiring and current
leaders (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008). These standards, when used in university-based preparation programs and by districts as part of the principal evaluation process, can enhance school leadership and affect student achievement. State policies can also affect leadership (Briggs et al., 2013).

On behalf of the California Professors of Educational Administration (CAPEA), Davis et al. (2010) summarized the requirements for professional endorsements from all 50 states, noting how inconsistent policies are across the United States. Some states, such as California, require a two-tiered credential to become and remain an administrator, while other states required one endorsement. Most states require an additional endorsement to become a Superintendent, though California does not. Researchers noted that these data were not easy to obtain from State Departments of Education and decisions were not often connected to theoretical frameworks of leadership. These findings led to a specific list of recommendations from CAPEA to reform the current administrator licensure process in California. Recommendations of note include a continuation of the two-tiered licensure process, with a mandatory start within the first year of an administrative role; job-embedded mentoring to support new administrators with tier two requirements; and a system to assess and advance professional competency (Davis et al., 2010).

In a national study of 43 school districts, across nine states, researchers found effective leadership depended on expectations, efficacy, and engagement (Wahlstrom et al., 2010). This mixed methods study analyzed data from a wide variety of stakeholders across district systems. “Expectations are effective only when they are paired with accountability measures enabling observers to determine whether expected outcomes are
reasonable and whether they are being attained,” (Wahlstrom et al., 2010, p. 30).

Researchers deemed expectations and accountability critical components to successful systems at the state, district, and classroom level.

Browne-Ferrigno and Fusarelli (2005) summarized Kentucky’s 1998 adoption of the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards through the framework of transforming principal leadership. Kentucky was one of eight states that adopted the ISLLC Standards as a whole; a total of 40 states adopted at least a partial version of the Standards. Full implementation of the ISLLC Standards led Kentucky to reform their preparation programs and certification process, their inductions and evaluations of principals, and continuous professional development. While the standards call for the principalship to be more of an instructional leader than in the past, a complete overhaul requires significant change, and is not without concerns. Researchers found the following unanticipated stumbling blocks in Kentucky: new certification process allowed younger, novice teachers to prepare to be leaders, a shortage of principal candidates, new processes for school-based decision making created challenges in selecting new principals, and veteran principals were unwilling to commit to new practices (Browne-Ferrigno & Fusarelli, 2005). Further research requires a more in-depth look into the standards and expectations of principals as well as the evaluation procedures used to monitor principals’ effectiveness.

**Professional standards and evaluation.** A two-year instrumental case study revealed the benefit of guided reflection paired with mentoring for new principals learning the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards (Creasap et al., 2005). The study followed the Administrative Leadership Academy:
Entry Year Program, which was “created to address the professional development needs of early career principals” (Creasap et al., 2005, p. 353). Participants completed administrative portfolios, received ongoing professional development from a mentor, learned the state’s new Administrative Competencies, which were the adaption of the ISLLC Standards, and completed a portfolio assessment for their licensure.

The study revealed benefits to mentoring and reflective writing to develop the instructional leadership skills of new principals. In addition, the study clarified the need for states and districts to create a structured plan for implementation of standards that aligns with the district’s vision and the work of the school principal. When reflective dialogue or portfolios affected evaluation, new principals hesitated to share honest reflections about their challenges. The ISLLC Standards provided opportunities for leaders to develop their vision but not in isolation. District support, mentoring, and guided reflection enhanced the implementation of the ISLLC Standards and the development of new leaders in this study (Creasap et al., 2005). Other districts can enhance their implementation of professional standards by reviewing the findings of this study. Districts should take caution when connecting expected practice to evaluation, as honest reflection does not always follow mandates.

The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) published a bulletin examining the alignment between state and professional standards and evaluation instruments for principals (Catano & Stronge, 2006). This mixed method study reviewed 100 instruments from 97 districts within Virginia. Using coding based on the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards, researchers found that all
district evaluation documents contained language from five categories developed from the ISLLC Standards.

Overwhelmingly, district evaluation documents mentioned instructional leadership as a major responsibility for school principals, though management skills were still listed as a requirement for an effective leader. Not one district document mentioned the ISLLC Standard that calls for principals to act in an ethical manner, with integrity and fairness. Results demonstrated that the state of Virginia spent time and effort to align the job descriptions and role responsibilities for principals to state accreditation expectations as well as professional standards.

However, evaluation instruments aligned to the standards with less frequency than other district documents. Districts have a responsibility to clarify the role for and expectations of principals and to evaluate them based on those clearly stated expectations. District expectations should be aligned to state and professional standards, such as those of the ISLLC. This study raised concerns about districts’ assumptions about principals’ behaviors. Not a single district mentioned fairness, integrity, or ethical behavior in their principal job descriptions or evaluation instruments. Districts cannot simply assume principals will behave in a certain way; researchers recommended that expectations be articulated and aligned to the professional standards (Catano & Stronge, 2006). Principal evaluation tools support instructional leadership when they are aligned to professional standards and clear expectations.

Five large urban school districts across the United States began The Wallace Foundation’s Principal Pipeline Initiative in August of 2011 (Turnbull, Riley, Arcaira et al., 2013). The goals of the initiative were to strengthen leader standards, high-quality
training, selective hiring, and evaluation and support of school leaders. This qualitative study documented the results from the first year of the initiative and the progress of each district, through document review, interviews, and observations. In the first year each of the districts made progress on all of the goals. Each district involved principals in a collaborative process to develop professional standards for leadership, using the ISLLC 2008 standards and the Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education (VAL-ED) as models. Addressing the goals of leadership standards as well as evaluation of leaders, “In each district, officials said that developing and using standards and competencies would lend coherence to the district’s leadership policies and practices” (Turnbull, Riley, Arcaira et al., 2013, p. 21). Districts wanted to create a consistent language around leadership and to set the bar high, with room for growth and development for all leaders.

It is hard to develop evaluation instruments without defining professional standards first. All of the districts in the initiative wanted to create an evaluation instrument that identified gaps in leaders’ skills or knowledge in order to provide support addressing those gaps. Many of the districts used the VAL-ED as a diagnostic tool to determine needs, but not a formal evaluation tool. After the first year, no district finalized a formal evaluation instrument. Each district was, however, revamping their leadership support systems. Principal supervisors serve as evaluators and coaches, but these districts also employed additional coaches to support novice principals. A clear need to build capacity emerged in each district. Support providers also needed support in their role as coach, so they didn’t become rule enforcers but rather supported the development of instructional leadership and problem solving skills in new principals. The Principal Pipeline Initiative will continue through 2017 and further research will detail the
outcomes within each of these five districts in relation to the four goals of the initiative (Turnbull, Riley, Arcaira et al., 2013). It would behoove districts across the country to follow this research, as hiring, supporting, and retaining effective instructional leaders is vital in this age of accountability. The districts in this study represent large, urban school districts in various geographic areas of the United States (from the south east to New York to Colorado) and their work could inform other large, urban districts.

In addition to a focus on developing instructional leaders, The Principal Pipeline Initiative participated in another study through a Wallace Foundation grant in order to determine the structures of principal supervision and evaluation (Corcoran et al., 2013). The Council of the Great City Schools led the study, beginning with a survey directed to the principal supervisors in all Great City Schools districts. After the survey, researchers visited the districts participating in The Principal Pipeline to observe the role of principal supervision. All six of the pipeline districts had a position directly below the Superintendent who supervised principals. Each district had a specific structure for grouping schools and providing professional development to the supervisors as well as their office staff. Each district also offered some form of coaching or mentoring to all new principals, with a focus on developing instructional leadership skills. Regardless of the structure, or how far removed principals were from their direct supervisor, critical components of successful districts included collaboration and communication between the sites and the district. Many principal supervisors in these six districts were former principals, relatively new to their positions. In these large urban districts, each supervisor supported anywhere from 16-67 schools. While they all reported receiving professional development from their district, there were no systematic programs within any district for
ongoing development of principal supervisors. Without district structures, principal supervisors do not have the instructional leadership skills necessary to be effective in their current role of supporting principals to be the instructional leaders of their schools. In most of the pipeline districts, principal supervisors do not participate in the hiring or reassigning of principals, which is contradictory to their role as principal supervisor. Most supervisors rated their principal evaluation tools as excellent or good, however “the usefulness of the evaluation process in promoting professional growth depends on such components as the setting of meaningful performance targets and the frequency of meetings between principals and their supervisors to review progress throughout the year- components that were strong in some systems and very weak in others” (Corcoran et al., 2013, p. 36).

Large, urban districts seeking to create effective structures for principal supervision and evaluation should consider the nine recommendations made in this study. In order to support successful instructional leaders at the site level, a district needs focused support at the district level. The use and role of a principal evaluation tool is only as valuable as the support and expertise provided by the principal’s supervisor (Corcoran et al., 2013).

Policy. Not only do districts play a critical role in the development of instructional leaders, but state policy also contributes to the leadership available for schools. In a six-month study on state principal preparation, licensure policy, principal tenure, and data collection, researchers found most states do not effectively use their authority to improve the supply of high quality principals and most states do not have data on the supply or quality of principals within the state (Briggs et al., 2013).
Researchers sent a survey to the Chief State School Officer of all 50 states and the District of Columbia, with follow up calls and emails. All data were reported directly by the states.

The United States has 978 principal preparation programs, yet 19 states are unable to report the number of graduates from said programs. Forty-seven states have principal effectiveness standards, with 32 using the ISLLC in whole or a modified version. Twenty-nine states do not collect or require any outcome data of principal preparation programs. Only six states reported requiring principals to prove that they are effective school leaders to renew their licenses. The researchers from the George W. Bush Institute, which funded this report, made recommendations based on the findings, to improve the state’s role in the supply and quality of effective school leaders (Briggs et al., 2013). In addition to states using their authority more effectively, districts should take these data into account. New leaders may have completed a preparation program, but that does not ensure that they can meet professional standards nor are prepared to lead a school.

Proactive schools districts partner with universities to create administrative preparation programs that produce high quality leaders for today’s urban schools; this partnership can also lead to state-level policy change (Orr, King, & LaPointe, 2010). Universities design programs based on state policy requirements. When a partnership exists between universities and school districts, programs can more specifically address the needs school districts identify. This can inform state policies, leading to more specific, rigorous expectations that can lead to a better pool of well qualified leaders.
Communities of Practice as Learning Networks

Everyone participates in a variety of communities of practice throughout their personal and professional lives (Wenger, 1998). Communities of practice exist everywhere and are often informal and not explicitly defined or studied. In his study of communities of practice, Wenger (1998) defined a social theory of learning as meaning making, social practice, community, and identity. He expounded on his theory by stating, “We are all social beings” (p. 4). Further, knowledge results from active engagement in the world, with a goal of making meaning. A social theory of learning embeds the learning process within the context of our everyday lives and experiences. “Our perspectives on learning matter: what we think about learning influences where we recognize learning, as well as what we do when we decide that we must do something about it - as individuals, as communities, and as organizations (Wenger, 1998, p. 9).

There are two key elements in making meaning within a community of practice: participation and reification. Participation, in this context, involves action and connection, taking part in discussions, and relating to others. Reification entails making meaning of something abstract by assigning it a symbolic representation. Communities of practice balance the duality of participation and reification; a symbol isn’t meaningful without social interaction. Members within a community use participation to make meaning of reified concepts, and the reification of those concepts informs others who did not participate. The development of instructional leadership skills within this sort of network supports principals’ through the creation of meaningful symbols or representations of the work, in combination with the social interactions required to run a school and collaborate with other leaders.
Participation in communities of practice encourages the reflective process as people negotiate their understanding of learning within the community. When leaders identify the professional communities of practice to which they belong, they can begin to find support for their own ongoing professional learning through such communities. These communities can support aspiring leaders, new leaders, and veteran leaders in expanding their knowledge of instructional leadership in support of students and teachers. Communities of practice have the potential to alter the current professional development system in most educational organizations; “as a locus of engagement in action, interpersonal relations, shared knowledge, and negotiation of enterprises, [communities of practice] hold the key to real transformation” (Wenger, 1998, p. 85).

Networked learning communities focus on learning, which separates them from other networks with other purposes (Katz & Earl, 2010). Key features of successful networked learning communities include: purpose and focus, relationships, collaboration, enquiry, leadership, and capacity building and support. Katz and Earl’s theory of action stated that changes in student learning depend on major changes to the practices and structures of a school, based on professional learning within a school and across networks. Katz and Earl hypothesized that there could be no significant changes to student achievement without significant changes to the thinking of the adults; and these types of networks had the potential to create structures for adult thinking to change.

They surveyed a random sample of 50% of the schools within the Networked Learning Communalities Programme, developed in England, which was comprised of 662 schools in 60 networks. The network was created for schools to work together, enhancing professional learning and strengthening capacity for continuous improvement.
Survey results indicated a positive correlation between participation in the network and changes to student learning, as well as to leaders’ thinking and practice. Key enablers, linked to increased student learning outcomes, included school formal leadership, school distributed leadership, school relationships and collaboration, network relationships, network collaboration, and school professional learning. The more teachers were engaged in the network, the more their teaching practices benefited from the collaboration. In addition, teachers were more engaged in the network when they had a school leader who was engaged and who encouraged others to participate actively in the network. A successful network challenges accepted thinking and practices, providing forums for reflective dialogue and ongoing collaboration about improving teaching and learning. Therefore, a connected leader, who supports engagement within a professional social network, has the potential to transform student learning by changing teacher thinking and practice.

Collaboration is a critical element to successful communities of practice (Katz & Earl, 2010). The evaluation of collaboration is important for leaders to understand, whether they are supporting site-based professional learning communities, or district-level communities of practice. Gajda and Koliba (2007) define six key traits of interpersonal collaboration: shared purpose, cycle of inquiry, dialogue, decision making, action, and evaluation. These researchers developed methods for evaluating the quality of collaboration within a community of practice using their Community of Practice: the Collaboration Assessment Rubric (Gajda & Koliba, 2007, p. 33). Woodland and Hutton (2012) built upon the work of Gajda and Koliba in collaboration theory development to
develop their Collaboration and Evaluation Improvement Framework (CEIF). The CEIF outlines phases for evaluating organizational collaboration:

1. Operationalize collaboration
2. Identify and map communities of practice
3. Monitor stages of development
4. Assess levels of integration
5. Assess cycles of inquiry

Both evaluation tools support organizational leaders in assessing and improving collaboration. The recommendations for evaluations of collaboration are relevant to leaders seeking to create or enhance communities of practice within their own school settings.

A longitudinal study of a mid-sized urban district’s professional development program focused on a leadership curriculum designed to develop instructional leaders. The goal of the program was to engage leaders in the work of improving instruction and raising student achievement (Barnes et al., 2010). The conceptual framework for leadership development relied upon both job-embedded work and communities of practice as essential to affecting changes in leadership development. The district-based professional development program created a social learning environment, or a community of practice, in which principals could acquire new content and make sense of it in order to apply it within their work. The mixed methods study split 48 principals from elementary, middle and secondary schools into treatment and comparison cohorts. The treatment cohort interacted together for one year. The community created authentic opportunities for principals to make connections between new learning and prior
knowledge, moving beyond the superficial connections made before the community existed.

After treatment, the principals shifted their focus more towards instructional leadership. Eight out of ten principals attributed the professional development to helping them refine their practice and increase their use of strategic planning and improvement cycles. The comparison group, however, spent significantly more of their time on managerial and political leadership tasks rather than instructional leadership tasks. Researchers found that developing a long-term, functioning professional learning community for principals required broad, sustained support from strong district leaders. As districts create and sustain communities of practice within their leadership development systems, they will likely increase their capacity for district-wide improvement. Unlike other similar studies, this research considered leadership development for principals at elementary, middle and high school levels, which is especially relevant for district-wide reforms.

Boerema (2011) found that new leaders valued participation in a professional network of other leaders facing similar challenges. These new principals deemed these supportive interactions to be their primary source of growth. On the job experiences create learning opportunities for leaders. Leaders connected to a professional network, or a community of practice, learn leadership traits from one another. A community of practice also provides ongoing support for reflection on leadership traits and their application. Researchers found professional learning for school leaders, within a community of practice for nested learning, developed critical skills in new leaders (Braun et al., 2011). Principals benefitted from networks intended to encourage collaboration
between and among leaders. They can also replicate this collaborative process within professional learning communities at their schools, which can then lead to teachers developing the same opportunities for their students.

A study of continuing professional development in Scotland also found that communities of practice supported learning (Reeves, Turner, Morris, & Forde, 2005). An in-depth examination of two cases, out of 31 initial participants, revealed that participants adapted their practice and ideas through reflection and participation, rethinking their leadership roles. The researchers suggested that learning to change practice involved both internalization and externalization. Participants’ beliefs in their leadership grew stronger as they reflected (internalization) and as they adapted their daily work based on their reflection (externalization). These processes were simultaneous. Participants constantly questioned their previous knowledge and understandings as they gained new information. Changes to practice occurred when participants adapted their beliefs and actions based on new information and reflection, after opportunities to collaborate with colleagues. Job-embedded learning opportunities that provided social interaction were critical for change within the school system. Participants’ responses throughout this case study demonstrated the importance of collegial approaches, reflection, and opportunities for distributed leadership.

In his study of social network theory, Daly (2010) examined social capital, stating that networks build people capacity through relationships and connections. Reform occurs “through the interaction of participants” (p. 3) and “who you know defines what you know” (p. 2). The relationships people build within a system, and the support they receive from those relationships, affect retention of information, increased
professionalism, and the depth of the engagement of educators within the system.

Relationships and the flow of information, within both formal and informal structures, matter. Daly studied district leadership within a district of 16,000 students, conducting a survey and a social network analysis, with a 98% response rate, followed by an intervention and multiple social network analyses over time after the intervention. Participants answered questions about the frequency of their collaboration and how they shared and received information and knowledge. The social network analysis created a visual representation of the collaboration network pre and post-intervention. Initially, district administrators were the key information givers and receivers and various isolated administrators were unconnected across the district. The intervention provided a formal change strategy focused on building collaborative opportunities within the district administrators. After four years district and site administrators collaborated equally across the entire district network. Overtime the network changed to a more collaborative, integrated group, with fewer and fewer isolated members. This supports the need for districts to create structures of support for collaborative leadership development. We build leadership capacity through relationships and connections (Daly, 2010).

Advancing on Daly’s social network theory, Spillane, Healey, and Kim (2010) found that instructional leadership and distributive leadership affected school reform. A school’s instructional advice and information network can affect reform more than other factors. In a study of 28 out of 30 elementary schools in a midsized urban school district, researchers found that principals were infrequently the primary advice givers within schools. Informal leaders, such as coaches, resource, and lead teachers, provided the most instructional advice and, more often, affected change within a school. This research
reinforced the need for principals to know how to build capacity within their teacher leaders through the lens of instructional improvements. Principals need to know where information comes from, because the “… dimension of leading and managing instruction involves knowledge development or, more specifically, the building blocks of knowledge- advice and information” (p. 129). As the instructional leader of his or her school, an effective principal also knows and understands the network of relationships present within the school. This requires deep knowledge of social network theory, as well as relational knowledge of one’s staff and the subgroups within a staff. Armed with this knowledge, a strong instructional leader builds capacity to produce sustainable reform.

Leadership and learning are social acts within a school (Penuel, Frank, & Krause, 2010). Similar to Spillane et al. (2010), Penuel and colleagues found that school leaders who understood the structure of interactions enhanced distributive leadership as a means to positively affect reform. A study of 425 school staff members from 21 schools within one state identified 115 subgroups across the schools. Through a biannual survey, researchers found that teachers’ perceptions were strong predictors of influence within a school’s reform process. The more teachers perceived a collective responsibility to improve teacher practice, the stronger the predictor of influence on the reform of their practice. Researchers deemed social interactions within networks, or subgroups, as key supports of school reform. The more a school leader understands the interactions within the school network, the more powerfully and effectively he/she can distribute leadership to support reform efforts (Penuel et al., 2010). Building capacity and distributing
leadership are instructional leadership skills that leaders can develop through communities of practice.

In addition to understanding social network theory at the level of individual schools, district leaders would be wise to study the interactions across school principals and district leaders in their systems (Hite, Williams, & Baugh, 2005). Districts are often comprised of multiple networks, and the flow of information can help or hinder the change process. “The network perspective implies that educational leaders should develop a greater awareness of their own direct network ties across various networks and seek to develop these ties into genuine, rich, trusting dyadic relationships that are mutually beneficial” (Hite et al., 2005, p. 115). In this study of a small district, four distinct networks emerged across site and district leaders. Networks served different purposes and some administrators had more control over resources and the flow of information than others. The relationships among participants mattered; the stronger the tie to other members of the community, the more active was the participation of individuals within that community. District structures can be created to support greater connections within school communities, enhancing the leadership skills of all the leaders with the system.

Combining the notion of communities of practice with the need for ongoing leadership development, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform created the Critical Friends Group (CFG). The CFG created a collaborative professional learning experience for new leaders to continue to learn about leading. Three superintendents from various Massachusetts school districts joined professors from Salem State College to use the CFG design to support their school leaders. Principals from the districts came together to
study a leadership problem of practice. Applying a case study design, Fahey (2011) studied the CFG in-depth. The CFG’s professional community centered on reflective dialogue, deprivatization of practice, collaboration, focus on teaching and learning, and shared norms and values. Two essential elements characterize a CFG: regular, intentional use of protocols and skilled facilitation that supports professional learning.

Through an open-ended interview process, the principals shared that the CFG structure supported their continued learning in more profound ways than their district’s administrative meetings. Participants felt comfortable discussing leadership challenges and success because of the trusting professional community created by the use of structured protocols, such as the Tuning and Consultancy Protocols. Each protocol was facilitated in such a way as to allow all participants to learn to collaborate, reflect, and both give and receive feedback. Members felt that their participation improved their leadership practice by refocusing them on issues of school culture and their professional community, providing structures and tools to use with their own staff, and affecting the work of their district leadership teams. Researchers concluded that ongoing, structured support is needed for new and continuing leaders (Fahey, 2011). Communities of practice can take on many forms. Leaders need ongoing, job-embedded support structures to develop and enhance their instructional leadership skills. Communities of practice as social learning networks can support the development of instructional leadership skills. The more structured the community, the more likely a district is to see positive results.

As part of the National Education Technology Plan, the U.S. Department of Education began research into online communities of practice and connected learning for teachers and leaders (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). When educators connect
online, they have access to individualized professional development and collaboration 24 hours a day, seven days a week. An online community of practice is grounded in collaboration; “Collaboration is an effective approach for strengthening educator’s practices and improving the systemic capacity of districts and schools- and, ultimately, improving student learning” (U.S. Department of Education, 2011, p. 3). This report recommends the development of online communities of practice to enhance the professional development of educators.

Whether online or in person, educators, especially leaders, need to collaborate with colleagues to reflect and enhance their practice. Finnish researchers recommended that organizations embarking on reform initiatives would be wise to create and sustain professional learning communities for the leaders of said initiatives (Pyhältö, Soini, & Pietarinen, 2009). Their quantitative study on the perceptions that principals and chief education officers have about implementing school reform led to relevant connections between reform and leadership development. Communities of practice support leaders in their own learning in preparation for leading significant reform efforts.

**Adult Learning Theories**

Developing structures for on-going professional development of leaders requires knowledge of adult learning theories. Adults do not learn in the same way as children and adult learning opportunities should not be modeled off of traditional school experiences. Facilitating adult learning takes skills that may overlap with, but are not the same as, skills of traditional educators and leaders (Meyer, 1992; Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). Leaders structuring new learning for adults must find a balance between theory
and practice while acknowledging adult learners at their current place of experience (Hall, 2004).

In order to learn, people must see relevance (Mirci & Hensley, 2010). It also takes critical self-evaluation to change one’s behavior. If site leaders are expected to create and maintain cultures of continuous learning in order to initiate change, adult learning theories must be taken into account. District leaders charged with supporting and facilitating the on-going development of instructional leadership skills in principals should incorporate change theories, systems thinking and adult learning theories into their structures (Mirci & Hensley, 2010).

In 1968 Malcolm Knowles adapted the European concept of andragogy, or adult education, to be the art and science of helping adults learn (Rachal, 2002). Knowles’ conceptual framework of learning centers on andragogy, in direct opposition to the theory of pedagogy, in which the teacher is the expert there to tell learners everything they need to know (McGrath, 2009). Andragogy assumes that the teacher does not know all and that the learner’s experience plays a role in forming to learning. Motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic, also plays a role in defining the learning experience. As a professor, Knowles began each class with an open acknowledgment of the fact that some students were there for compulsory reasons only, not out of their own desire to learn his course material. His students had to first get past the negativity of the requirement right away before he could help them motivate themselves to learn (Knowles, 1989).

Teachers must acknowledge that all learners come with varying degrees of self-esteem and motivation when it comes to their own learning. Knowles’ theory was one of the first learner-centered theories brought to the world of adult education (McGrath,
Knowles’ theory centered on creating self-directed learners by facilitating relevant learning opportunities. Learning was created through contracts developed between the learner and the teacher (acting as facilitator). The learner has key control over the learning objectives, strategies, and evaluation (Rachal, 2002). Today’s leaders can learn from Knowles by taking into account that the needs of adult learners must be acknowledged, just as we expect teachers to plan for the needs of young learners. A learner-centered experience for adults is valuable, especially in order to create self-directed learners.

Rachal (2002) analyzed 18 empirical studies on andragogy, in order to better define the criteria necessary for adult education to truly be andragogical. His seven criteria included: voluntary participation, adult status, collaboratively-determined objectives, and performance-based assessment of achievement, as well as measuring satisfaction, appropriate adult learning environments, and technical issues. Rachal (2002) recommended, based on Knowles original theory of andragogy, that all adult learning situations be designed to be at least quasi-andragogical.

Osterman and Kottkamp (2004) offer detailed descriptions of reflective practice as a learning strategy that can transform individuals and schools. “Reflective practice is based on a belief that organizational change begins with individuals,” (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004, p. 1). Leaders should not assume that school reform can occur by telling people to do something new or different. Change happens when people change. This occurs when an individual’s espoused theories, or what we say we believe, match our theories-in-use, or what actually guides our behaviors (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004).
When an organization embeds reflective practice into its culture, theory and practice can be aligned, and real change can occur.

The process of reflective practice outlined by Osterman and Kottkamp is a four part cycle. The first step in the cycle is to identify the problem. Leaders must recognize a problem as a place in their leadership and/or organization where there is a gap between reality and the ideal. This problem must also be relevant to the leader, or they will not truly engage in reflective practice. The second step in the cycle involves observation and analysis. The leader must engage in deep observation and critical analysis of their own practice. This is not easy and it takes time to learn and practice, but can lead to great realizations.

Next the leader conducts research to find information that will support the changing of his behavior and theories-in-use. This third stage is called abstract reconceptualization. Only when the leader has a clear understanding of the problem identified in stage one, and information about his own behaviors through the observation and analysis in stage two, is he ready to seek out new ideas and strategies to change his own behavior. Armed with this information the leader can move into the final stage of the cycle: active experimentation. It is here where he is actually trying something new to change his behavior.

“Effective supervisors- whether administrators, mentors, or peer coaches- use reflective practice to foster professional growth,” (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004, p. 66). The critical elements of reflective practice that are relevant to district leaders include relevant problems, timely research, and active application. When a leader is provided the opportunity to study his own practice, identify important problems, research relevant
solutions, and experiment with new ideas, he is more likely to make permanent changes to his theories-in-use that will either match his espoused theories or those of a high-achieving organization.

Another adult learning theory that connects reflection to action is Transformation Theory (Mezirow, 1991). Mezirow’s theory is based on the Constructivist theory of learning, in which a learner’s experience and interpretation influence their meaning. Mezirow’s theory is widely debated in research; his belief is that this debate stems from a lack of comprehensive adult learning theories (Mezirow, 1994). Transformation theory centered on the belief that adults and children learn in very different ways; adults bring the ability to question paradigms. Modern classrooms demonstrate that young learners bring this ability as well, but it is often stifled by the adults in the room.

Transformation theory identifies 11 phases of learning, similar to the four step cycle of reflective practice outlined by Osterman and Kottkapm (2004) (Mezirow, 1991). Adult learners reflect on their assumptions. Their learning becomes transformative when they find a gap between their assumptions and reality. The learner reflects on what they need to change. The learning process is only complete when one has taken action as a result of reflection that led to the decision to change behavior. “Learning is defined as the social process of construing and appropriating a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience as a guide to action,” (Mezirow, 1994, p. 223). It would befit educators responsible for adult learning to facilitate learning opportunities that lead to reflective action.

If districts do not take on the responsibility for creating structures for facilitating on-going instructional leadership development, principals who wish to learn more will
seek out information elsewhere. Many private companies, universities, and states offer leadership development courses (Peterson, 2002). Random, unintegrated, independent programs do not necessarily make relevant connections to the work of individual school leaders, however. They also do not provide the opportunity for leaders to build a community of practice within which they can continue to learn and prosper.

“Adult learners bring prior knowledge to every learning experience.” (Wells & Keane, 2011, p. 26). Knowledge of adult learning theories benefits those responsible for developing the instructional leadership skills of adult leaders, whether they be university professors or district leaders.

To date, research on leadership development has largely focused on individual components that enhance instructional leadership, such as mentoring or the curriculum of a preparation program. Much of this research has been qualitative in nature. Further research in this area might look to districts with successful student achievement results and social network structures for ongoing leadership development. A case study describing the structure of an existing leadership network within the district would enhance the educational leadership field. Such a study has the potential to identify replicable models for ongoing leadership development. The district also plays a critical role in creating a job-embedded structure for leadership development. An in-depth look into such a system would assist district leaders in the creation of leadership development structures within their own systems.
CHAPTER 3—METHODOLOGY

As school districts across the country continue to create and refine ways to support the ongoing instructional leadership development of their principals, some districts address this struggle by creating their own structures of support. An in-depth study of a highly successful urban district and their instructional leadership support structure may help to inform other districts seeking methods for the ongoing professional development of their principals.

The research questions this study addressed included:

- What professional development structures build the capacity of principals to influence improvements in instruction?
- What factors influence the effectiveness of district professional development structures in improving principals’ instructional leadership?
- If there is an instructional leadership community of practice, what characteristics describe it?
- What district policies, programs, and practices motivate/support principal leaders to focus upon improving instruction in their schools?

Study Design

To answer the research questions outlined above, the researcher employed the qualitative tradition of the case study. Case studies have been used to describe the leadership development of principals (Dana et al., 2009), the social networks of urban school leaders (Daly & Finnigan, 2012), and how district structures support instructional leadership development (Honig, 2012). This approach allows researchers and practitioners an opportunity to understand the specific elements of programs or events.
“Educational processes, problems, and programs can be examined to bring about understanding that in turn can affect and perhaps even improve practice” (Merriam, 1998, p. 41).

Qualitative research collects “data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study,” and includes “data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes” (Creswell, 2013, p. 44). Creswell further defined a case study as research that studies a real-life bounded system, or case, over time. The data collection within a case study must be thorough, detailed, and include multiple sources of information, such as observations, interviews, documents, and reports (Creswell, 2013).

This study was a single instrumental case study wherein the study of the case (i.e. a mid-size urban elementary school district) was undertaken to gain insight into a particular issue or concern, with the case facilitating understanding of something else (i.e. a structure for district-provided instructional leadership development) (Stake, 1995).

**Delineation of the Case**

This study was conducted in an urban elementary district that was purposefully selected based on the following inclusion criteria: (a) the district demonstrated consistent growth in student achievement as measured by standardized assessment scores; (b) the district implemented a leadership development program to support instructional leadership; and (c) the district’s leadership development program employed the concepts of a community of practice/professional learning community.

Sunset School District (a pseudonym used for confidentiality) is an urban elementary district in southern California and was selected for the purposes of this study. At the time of the study, the district served approximately 29,000 students within 45
schools. The district student demographics consisted of 68% Hispanic, 13% White, 11% Filipino, 4% African-American, 3% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1% other. English Learners made up 35% of the student population. The district made annual progress on the percent of students reaching proficiency in both English-Language Arts and Mathematics on the California Standards Test, as measured by the California Department of Education. The district’s Academic Performance Index (API\textsuperscript{3}) grew over 100 points over nine years prior to this study.

Tables 1 through 3 below illustrate the district’s growth in student achievement on the California API and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), as measured by the California Standards Test (CST) and the Title III Annual Measureable Achievement Objectives (AMAO) specific to English Learners. Table 1 shows growth in district-wide data, as well as two significant subgroups of typically underserved student populations in urban schools, students from low socioeconomic status and English Learners. SSD grew almost 20% on the AYP measure from 2007-2013, though that did not keep them from entering into Program Improvement status in 2013. Table 3’s data are specific to English Learner annual progress on the California English Language Development Test (CELDT), as measured by three specific objectives. SSD exceeded all CELDT targets set by the state (AMAO 1 and AMAO 2), but did not meet the percent of English Learners reaching proficiency on the CST every year (AMAO 3).

\textsuperscript{3} Academic Performance Index is California’s measure of school and district achievement and improvement, with scores ranging from 200 to 1000 and a statewide target of 800.
Table 1

Sunset School District Growth Academic Performance Index (API)

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LEA-wide</td>
<td>863</td>
<td>870</td>
<td>861</td>
<td>827</td>
<td>828</td>
<td>811</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>819</td>
<td>825</td>
<td>817</td>
<td>801</td>
<td>779</td>
<td>749</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EL</td>
<td>819</td>
<td>830</td>
<td>818</td>
<td>796</td>
<td>777</td>
<td>741</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. LEA-wide = Local Education Agency, or district. SES = subgroup of students considered Socioeconomically Disadvantaged; EL = subgroup of students classified as English Learners.

Table 2

Sunset School District Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) Criteria

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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Criteria</td>
<td>25/41</td>
<td>37/45</td>
<td>40/45</td>
<td>39/41</td>
<td>41/41</td>
<td>41/41</td>
<td>40/41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELA -LEA</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math -LEA</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Met AYP?</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: SH = Safe Harbor, an alternative way to meet AYP requirements

Gaining Access

The researcher gained access to the participants initially through contact with the Superintendent of the District and later the Assistant Superintendent of Instructional Services. The district under study was specifically selected due to the increases in student achievement over the previous nine years. Prior to the commencement of the study, the researcher asked for the cooperation of the district in order to analyze and review the data pertaining to these urban elementary schools. Further, the researcher
Table 3

*Sunset School District Title III Accountability Reports*

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AMAO 1 Target</td>
<td>57.5%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>54.6%</td>
<td>53.1%</td>
<td>51.6%</td>
<td>50.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEA percent</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>61.2%</td>
<td>63.2%</td>
<td>59.8%</td>
<td>59.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AMAO 2 Targets</td>
<td>21.4%/20.1%/1.7%/17.4%/30.6%</td>
<td>28.9%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEA percent</td>
<td>30.8%/32.9%/28%/26.4%/46.4%</td>
<td>46.9%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>meeting targets</td>
<td>61.4%</td>
<td>59.1%</td>
<td>47.2%</td>
<td>48.3%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AMAO 3 ELA</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AMAO 3 Math</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* AMAO= Annual Measureable Achievement Objective *= CA split AMAO 2 into two cohorts, students in the country 5 or more years, and students in the country less than 5 years.

asked the Assistant Superintendent, Executive Directors, and various principals of this urban elementary school district to participate in this case study. Additionally, the researcher asked permission of the school board to study the leadership structure within the district. All participants in this case study received an introductory letter describing the study and the specifics of the interviews and observations that would occur. The letter explained the role of the researcher and the purpose of the study (see Appendix A, B, and C).
Participants

The participants in this study consisted of district and site administrators who facilitated and/or participated regularly in the district’s leadership development programs and activities.

Site administrators. A total of 12 site administrators from Sunset School District (SSD) participated in this study. Of these administrators, eight were female and four are male. 58% were principals of Program Improvement schools (California Department of Education, 2012) and 1% were principals of charter schools. While SSD was a high-performing district, not every school was considered high-performing. This study aimed to give a broad picture of district structures, which includes elements from high-performing schools, schools in Program Improvement, and charter schools. The average years of administrative experience of the group were six years. These administrators were selected from a pool of principals who meet the following inclusion criteria: (a) they were a site principal with at least one year of administrative experience; (b) they participated in the district professional learning community; and (c) they were willing to participate in this study. Thus, these site administrators were all members of a district community of practice for instructional leaders.

District administrators. A total of six district administrators participated in this study. Of these administrators, three were female and three were male. These district administrators served as Assistant Superintendent and Executive Directors. They were selected from a pool of district administrators who met the following inclusion criteria: (a) they were in a district administrative position; (b) they facilitated and/or participated in the district professional learning community; and (c) they were willing to participate in
this study. These administrators supported the ongoing instructional leadership
development of site principals through various professional development structures.

**Data Collection Methods**

Yin (2009) identifies six key sources of evidence for case studies: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant-observation, and physical artifacts. Direct observations, interviews, focus groups, and record review served as the primary methods for collecting data.

**Observations.** Observation provides a researcher with an in-depth look at what people actually do, not just what they say they do when asked outside of the context of their work (Gillham, 2008). Direct observations are a critical component of case study data as they represent the context of the case in real-life (Yin, 2009). District principal professional development sessions were observed on two different occasions in order to capture the structure and content of principal professional development. Each observation lasted the entire length of the scheduled meeting. Each observation took place in the location determined by the district structure. One site visit, conducted by a district administrator coaching a principal, was also observed. The observation lasted the entire length of the scheduled visit and took place at a school site determined by the district administrator. Extensive field notes were collected during all of the observations using the observation protocol (see Appendix D). Both district principal professional development meeting observations were conducted before any interviews or focus groups with site or district administrators in order to inform the interview process.

**Interviews.** Interviewing is an important aspect of the research sequence (Creswell, 2013). Focused interviews provide insightful data about participants’
perceptions of the case in question (Yin, 2009). The Assistant Superintendent was interviewed using a semi-structured protocol (see Appendix D and Appendix E). The interview took approximately 60 minutes and was digitally recorded and transcribed. The interview occurred in the Assistant Superintendent’s office, at a time convenient to his schedule. The questions included opportunities to describe a typical leadership development meeting, to explain instructional leadership development opportunities, to comment on the community of practice, and to explain how the district leadership development is used to improve teaching and learning at the site level (see Appendix D).

**Focus groups.** Focus groups allow the researcher to gain a variety of perspectives in a short time (Patton, 2002). The Executive Directors were interviewed in a focus group setting using a semi-structured protocol (see Appendix F). Nine selected principals were assigned to focus groups of four or five people for principal focus group interviews (see Appendix G). The focus groups took between 60 and 90 minutes and were digitally recorded and transcribed. The focus groups were scheduled at a time convenient to the administrators’ availability. The questions included opportunities to describe a typical leadership development meeting, to explain instructional leadership development opportunities, to comment on the community of practice, and to explain how the district leadership development is used to improve teaching and learning at the site level.

**Record review.** Reviewing documents, both public and private, can support a researcher in answering questions, diving further into information in a shorter time frame, and provide unbiased information for the study (Merriam, 1998). The researcher conducted a record review of publically-available student achievement data, agendas and minutes from district leadership development meetings, principal evaluation tools, and
records of principal assignments, cohort groups, and coaching lists, provided by district administrators. Records were reviewed both before and after observations, interviews, and focus groups. Student achievement data was accessed through the CA Department of Education website. District data as well as agendas, minutes, and evaluation tools were accessed through the district administrators.

**Second round interviews.** A follow up interview took place after the observations, focus groups, and record review. The follow up interview was conducted with a site administrator who served as a lead principal. The district was divided up into cohorts, led by a Lead Principal. This interview used a semi-structured protocol with questions including opportunities to reflect on her role as a lead principal, to explain the increase in student achievement data, to comment on the perceived impact of the district leadership development program on site professional development, and to describe the impact of the professional development program on the leader’s personal growth (see Appendix H).

**Data Analysis**

“Data collection and analysis is a *simultaneous* activity in qualitative research,” (Merriam, 1998, p. 151). Throughout the data collection the researcher did not ignore analytical thoughts that occur, as tracking these thoughts was both fieldwork and analysis (Patton, 2002). Immediately following each interview or observation, the researcher wrote initial thoughts, as well as pseudonyms for all participants, on the notes. The extensive review of literature provided the basis for the research questions driving this study as well as the initial list of codes for analysis (see Appendix I).
The analysis began with the data from the principal professional development observations. The researcher read the observational notes, marking thoughts, questions, observations, and codes relevant to the research questions. As the notes were reviewed, sections of the data were coded and emerging themes and new codes were recorded, adding to the initial list of codes (see Appendix J). Next the researcher analyzed the data from the interviews and focus groups, one at a time. After marking the transcripts with relevant codes and emerging themes, the researcher went through the transcripts, taking note of emerging patterns within the data. The researcher also analyzed the records, which were both publically available and provided by the district, looking for codes and noting connections to emerging themes. Merriam describes the process as “the simultaneous coding of raw data and the construction of categories that capture relevant characteristics of the document’s content” (Merriam, 1998, p. 160).

The analysis began with a review of the data for coding purposes. The researcher used both inductive and deductive logic to interpret the data, seeking to identify patterns within the data and answers to the research questions. The researcher relied on theoretical propositions, using pattern matching as the main analytical technique (Yin, 2009). The researcher used tools such as Microsoft Word, Excel, and Evernote to organize the case study data base or case record (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002).

**Limitations**

Like every study, this investigation had a number of limitations. The pool of administrators was limited to those within a district system that had a leadership development program. As a result, the findings could be different if data were collected from administrators with different leadership experiences. The sample size of this study
was limited based on the number of administrators within the district who met the inclusion criteria. The study was also limited by the length of the investigation, as the researcher had a finite amount of time to complete the study.

Merriam (1998) described triangulation and member checks as two of the basic strategies that researchers can use to enhance internal validity. Data was triangulated. The findings were shared with members from the study who were purposefully selected based on their willingness to participate in a member check. This provided an opportunity for the researcher to have an outside view of the findings to see if they were plausible. Interview questions were developed after the review of literature, to maintain relevance. An interview question review was also conducted before scheduling interviews. The questions were posed to current practitioners not participating in the study, to ensure that the interview questions led to information related to the research questions to be answered by the study.

Researcher bias is another limitation in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). To avoid personal bias the researcher conducted the study in a district outside of any in which she has been employed. In addition, interview question checks and member checks were conducted to ensure that the researcher was not inserting personal agendas into the interview questions or data collection summaries.

Ethical Considerations

Finally, Chapter Three addresses, in detail, all ethical issues related to the research and outlines how confidentiality of subjects was maintained throughout every aspect of the study. All participation was voluntary and all participants were given the option to opt out of the study at any point in time. The confidentiality of all participants
was maintained throughout the study; the data were kept in password protected computer
files or locked cabinets at all times throughout the study to maintain this confidentiality.
No details about the case, the district, or the participants will be shared outside of the
report of the research. Consent forms were used throughout the process. If interested,
participants had the option to receive a summary of the results upon the conclusion of the
study. All aspects of the study, including the consent forms and interview questions,
were reviewed by the San Diego State University Institutional Review Board for
approval.
CHAPTER 4—DATA–COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Research confirms principals have an indirect but significant effect on student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2004; Marzano et al., 2005). School districts hire novice principals with university-based leadership skills, as well as principals with previous leadership experience. Districts have an opportunity to enhance the instructional leadership skills of novice and experienced principals through professional development, and yet, district support of principals varies across the United States (Honig, 2012). This study explored the structure of support employed by one successful urban school district by examining the professional development of the principals within the district. The study examined the district structures created to support ongoing, job-embedded professional development for principals. This chapter will present the data collected and analyzed by means of qualitative case study methods.

This case study was conducted in Sunset School District (SSD, a pseudonym used for confidentiality). SSD is an urban elementary district in southern California. The district was purposefully selected for this study due to the increases in student achievement over the last nine years and the structure created to support principal professional development. At the time of the study, the district served approximately 29,000 students within 45 schools. The district made annual progress on the percent of students reaching proficiency in both English-Language Arts and Mathematics on the California Standards Test, as measured by the California Department of Education. The district’s Academic Performance Index (API⁴) grew over 100 points in the last nine years.

⁴ Academic Performance Index is California’s measure of school and district achievement and improvement, with scores ranging from 200 to 1000 and a statewide target of 800.
Data Collection

Participation in the study was voluntary. Upon approval by the Institutional Review Board, the researcher worked with the staff of the district office to communicate with possible participants. All district administrators received the recruitment letter appropriate to their position. Willing participants contacted the researcher, who then scheduled interviews at times and locations that were convenient to the participants. Participants in the study included site principals, Lead Principals, and district-level administrators (Executive Directors and an Assistant Superintendent). The researcher transcribed all interviews and analyzed data, coding for themes. To protect the confidentiality of participants, pseudonyms will be used throughout. The next section will explain the data collection methods employed during the study. The subsequent sections will describe in detail the data collected and the analysis that followed, aligned to the research on professional development for instructional leaders explored throughout the literature review, as well as the themes that emerged. Predominant themes emerging from the data included: (a) district professional development structures; (b) accountability (c) community of practice; (d) principal collaboration; and (e) use of time.

Observations

The researcher conducted two observations of the district’s monthly principal meetings, as well as an observation of a principal coaching session at a school site. The observations will be described following the data collection section.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Individual interviews were conducted with the Assistant Superintendent and a Lead Principal, separately. The interview with the Assistant Superintendent, hereafter
referred to as Mr. Anderson, took place in his office at the district. The interview with the Lead Principal, hereafter referred to as Ms. Ramirez, took place in her office at her school site. Each interview began with a review of the consent form (see Appendix K, L, M, and N) and an overview of the purpose of the research. The researcher used the interview questions approved by the Institutional Review Board for each interview (see Appendix E and Appendix H). The questions centered on the structures of principal professional development, the elements of a community of practice, and the ways in which participants learn best. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The researcher coded the transcriptions (Appendix J). This provided the ability to see emerging patterns and trends and to summarize the findings.

**Focus Groups**

Focus group interviews were conducted with two groups of principals and a group of the Executive Directors. Group A consisted of four principals, with leadership experience in the district ranging from one year to 15 years. Group A included a principal of one of the district’s Charter schools and a principal who served as a Lead Principal. Group B consisted of five principals, with leadership experience ranging from four to nine years. Group B include a Lead Principal as well. Principals will be referred to according to their groups moving forward. Group C consisted of five Executive Directors, with leadership experience in the district ranging from two years to 10 years. The researcher used the interview questions approved by the Institutional Review Board for each focus group interview (see Appendix F and Appendix G). The questions centered on the structures of principal professional development, the elements of a community of practice, and the ways in which participants learn best. Focus group
interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The researcher coded the transcriptions. This provided the ability to see emerging patterns and trends (see Appendix J).

**Record Review**

The researcher reviewed publically available academic achievement data for the district. The researcher reviewed meeting agendas and supporting documents from various principal meetings during the 2014-2015 school year, as well as the principal job description and evaluation tool used by Sunset School District. In addition, the researcher reviewed district organizational charts, outlining site, cohort, and coaching assignments for principals.

**District Professional Development Structures**

At the time of the research, the Sunset School District (SSD) Superintendent had been in his position for four years, with the previous Superintendent holding the position for nine years. The Assistant Superintendent of Instructional Services worked under the current and the previous Superintendent in the same role. The Superintendent’s Cabinet consisted of the Assistant Superintendents of Instructional Services, Business Services and Human Resources, and five Executive Directors. The Superintendent was solely responsible for evaluating all 45 school principals. The Assistant Superintendent of Instructional Services and the Executive Directors collectively shared the role of supporting and coaching school principals. School principals were supported in a variety of professional development structures: monthly meetings, mentoring via Lead Principal cohorts, and principal coaching. The district administrators who supported principals also
worked and learned within their own formal and informal leadership structures. Each of these structures will be discussed below.

**Principal Professional Development Meetings**

During the 2014-15 school year, principal meetings took place once per month and were scheduled to last two to three hours. The meeting agendas were created by the Assistant Superintendent, with content provided by various departments or outside presenters as needed. The Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, Executive Directors, site principals and associate principals attended these meetings. In addition, lead psychologists were also invited to attend.

**Observation one.** The first observation took place off-site, at a location unfamiliar to the district. The content of the meeting was centered on Visual and Performing Arts (VAPA) and therefore the meeting took place in an art gallery. Figure 1 is the agenda for the meeting. As participants entered the large room, they signed in, received a folder, and were offered coffee and a chance to take a tour of the gallery.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Principals’ Meeting</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wednesday, October 22, 2014</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>7-10:00 a.m. • Art Gallery</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>A G E N D A</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Visual and Performing Arts Strategic Plan Rollout: Resource Teacher, SDCOE Coordinator</td>
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<td>2. CAASPP Assessment Update: Resource Teacher</td>
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<td>3. RISE Information: Resource Teacher</td>
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<td>4. 2015 CABE Conference Information: Executive Director</td>
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<td>5. Announcements</td>
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<td>2014-15 Meetings:</td>
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<tr>
<td>November 19, 2014</td>
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<td>December 17, 2014</td>
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<td>February 25, 2015</td>
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<td>April 15, 2015</td>
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<td>May 13, 2015</td>
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Group Norms

**VALUE ONE ANOTHER/ MUTUAL RESPECT**
- No Side Conversations
- Cell Phones on Quiet Only
- Respectful Listening
- Listen to Understand
- Be on Time/Start on Time/End on Time
- Establish Roles (i.e., Facilitator, Time Keeper, Process Observer)
- Model Gradual Release of Responsibility

**RISK FREE/SAFE TO BE HONEST**
- Provide Clarity
- Honoring All Voices
- Action Plan
- Avoid Acronyms
- No “Buts”

**FOCUS ON STUDENTS TIME FOR SOCIAL INTERACTION**
- Humor

*Figure 1. Meeting agenda #1.*
The walls of the room were covered in art displays. Along the back section of the room were sculptures and pieces of art work. The tables were large, rectangular, high black work tables with stools for seats. Each table had a list of names on it, representing the assigned seating arrangements for the meeting. The participants were assigned to sit with colleagues from their cohorts, with a lead principal or a district administrator at each table. There were approximately 70 participants present in the meeting, not including the out-of-district presenters, who sat along the side walls. The front of the room had a large screen and projector for presentations.

The meeting was scheduled for 7:00-10:00. For the first 15 minutes, participants arrived, took tours, and socialized. At 7:15, the Assistant Superintendent, Mr. Anderson, greeted everyone and asked participants to find their seats. There were approximately 35 people sitting, and 20 more people entered as Mr. Anderson explained that participants had the agenda and all materials in the folder they picked up upon entering the room. At 7:17, the Superintendent of the district, Dr. Winchell, addressed the participants. During his opening remarks, Dr. Winchell (a pseudonym), referenced the book *Unbroken* and told the group that “being a leader is difficult; we need one another”. Dr. Winchell told the participants that he appreciated their leadership. He then said that creativity, communication, and critical thinking were all around, in the gallery and in the district goals. Dr. Winchell explained that the district’s Local
Control Accountability Plan (LCAP)\(^5\) set goals related to 21\(^{st}\) Century skills and the arts, and that the arts come alive at different schools in different ways, thanks to site-based management. He told the leaders that the district needed their creativity and their talents to support the district goals. Dr. Winchell then called up Mr. Anderson to continue the meeting.

Mr. Anderson introduced a resource teacher new to the district, whose job focused on supporting Visual and Performing Arts (VAPA). The resource teacher, Ms. Revelle, told a story about a struggling student who didn’t enjoy school and was not seen as a high achiever academically. That student was exposed to music and found a passion that helped her succeed in school and beyond. That student was Ms. Revelle. She went on to show a video of a student from one of the district’s schools. The video portrayed a student who struggled with academics but who loved participating in the music program offered at his school. He explained the impact that music had on him. After the video, Ms. Revelle showed specific data that demonstrated academic growth as that student continued in the music program. Ms. Revelle then asked the participants, “Where do you think VAPA plays a role in a child’s career here in Sunset School District? Discuss at your table and assign one person to share out to the group”.

At this point, participants who had arrived late and were standing on the side or back of the room moved to their assigned seats and Lead Principals and district leaders facilitated table discussions. Mr. Anderson facilitated the

\(^5\) In 2014 California adjusted state-level funding for schools, eliminated Categorical Programs and creating the Local Control Funding Formula. All school districts in CA are required to write an annual Local Control Accountability Plan to demonstrate how they will use their funds to meet their goals to improve student achievement.
discussion at his table. He began by asking each principal to share his or her thoughts. Principals discussed how valuable it would be to integrate elements of the arts into their current curriculum, and some shared how beneficial the arts were for them as young students. Mr. Anderson referenced two types of art instruction: “arts for arts sake and arts integration”. He said, “We have a generation of teachers who have never thought about integrating art”. One principal said, “We haven’t had any training on that. Teachers don’t know how to do more than just coloring. Learning about the history, the culture, you need to know how to teach it”. Another principal told a story about a music teacher at his site who had tried to get more teachers involved in a program. The principal shared about the program and the student success:

Some of our challenging behavior kids were held accountable in this program. It wasn’t a discipline thing, it was a different ambiance and they were held accountable within that program. Behaviors decreased with some students.

After seven minutes of table discussions, Ms. Revelle got the group’s attention. She asked each table representative to share something from their discussion with the entire group. Some tables had one principal with an established VAPA program share what they did, how it worked, and why it was successful. Other tables shared that they all valued VAPA but weren’t sure how to begin a new program. Ms. Revelle shared a visual that demonstrated two strands of arts education: Arts for Arts Sake and Arts Integration (just as Mr. Anderson had shared at his table discussion). She then asked participants to read the article included in their folder, entitled “Using Arts Integration to Enhance Common
Core”. The prompt on the screen asked them to discuss the following after reading, “Thinking about Common Core, how do we begin to integrate VAPA into our instructional program?”

Participants read silently and then had a brief table discussion about the article. After ten minutes Ms. Revelle asked for volunteers to share something they had discussed. Principals expressed desires to continue or begin programs that celebrated creativity. They also admitted they needed help to build teachers’ knowledge about VAPA and integration. Ms. Revelle then introduced four different community members from different arts organization across the county. Each community member shared information about their organization and how they could help schools with VAPA programs. Some of the organizations had existing programs in some district schools. After the community presentations, Mr. Anderson gave the group a ten minute break.

Upon return from a break, during which some more people took a tour of the gallery, Mr. Anderson asked one of the community members to lead the group in an activity. She explained that they would be doing a version of the children’s game Rock, Paper, Scissors. Participants were to all stand and find a partner. Each pair was to play a quick game of Rock, Paper Scissors. The winner of that game was to then challenge a winner from another pairing. When someone didn’t win, they were to follow their opponent to the next match, cheering them on. The game would end when there was only one winner left. The game lasted five minutes, and the crowd got louder and louder as they cheered for one another. The final show down took place in the middle of the room, with all participants in
a large circle around them, cheering and yelling. Participants were laughing and high-fiving during the game and as they moved back to their seats. The community leader asked the group to reflect on what skill set they used during the game. Participants called out: fun, competitive, get to know someone, pattern, movement, activity, physical, strategy, don’t focus on failure, transition to support, and positive. The community leader thanked the group for their participation.

At 8:48 Mr. Anderson introduced the VAPA Coordinator from the county office of education, Mr. Smith, who shared his passion for arts education, as well as a video about empowering arts throughout the county. Mr. Anderson thanked Mr. Smith and explained that Mr. Smith served as a facilitator for the team that wrote the district’s Strategic Arts Education Plan. Mr. Anderson had the six principals who also participated on the team stand up to be recognized. Ms. Revelle pointed out a flyer in the principals’ folder of professional development workshops available for teachers across the district throughout the year. She then gave the group a task: Knowing that this plan reflects the work over the next five years for student access to VAPA, what are some questions that you have about the plan and how it effects your campus? No mention of time or money allowed. We know it can work, and I am here to help!

Ms. Revelle explained that each table had a sentence strip to record their questions. She also explained that there were two committees, for programming and planning, who would use their questions to support future VAPA programs and support. She gave tables ten minutes to record their questions. Then she
gave the group a final collaborative task. Each group had to write a commitment statement regarding how they would support VAPA in their schools. The room got loud as participants talked and wrote out their commitment statements. Ms. Revelle wrapped up this segment by pointing to a survey in the folder, where principals could provide her with feedback on their current programs and future needs.

To transition from the professional development portion of the meeting, to the updates, Mr. Anderson called up the next presenter, a principal, who shared a quick update on a fundraiser for their administrator’s social organization. Next a resource teacher from the district’s assessment office shared an update on upcoming statewide assessments. There were a variety of questions asked about the Interim Assessment referenced, which hadn’t been released by the state yet, but which was anticipated to be available by January. Principals asked if they had to take the assessments. The resource teacher turned to Mr. Anderson who said, “I would highly recommend it. Why wouldn’t we?” After answering other questions, the resource teacher transitioned to share information about an after school intervention program. When the resource teacher finished, Mr. Anderson thanked everyone for their time. The meeting ended at 10:10.

Observation two. The second observation took place at the district office, which is where the principals’ monthly meetings typically took place. The meeting was scheduled for two and a half hours (7:00-9:30). There were approximately 70 participants present in the meeting, not including the out-of-district presenters. The content of the meeting included a presentation related to technology (both in district and a
possible partnership), and three updates from other departments. Figure 2 is the agenda from this observed meeting.

**Principals’ Meeting**

**Wednesday, December 17, 2014**

7-9:30 a.m.  ●  Ed Center

**A G E N D A**

1. Holiday Breakfast
2. Superintendent Visit to White House Highlights: Superintendent
3. USD Research on Technology Implementation: Rich Thome
4. 504 Plans/CAASPP Testing: Executive Director/Resource Teacher (bring your lists)
5. CAL200/ Physical Education Instruction: Executive Director
6. Comprehensive Youth Suicide Prevention: Principal

**2014-15 Meetings**

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Figure 2. Meeting agenda #2.

The meeting was scheduled to begin at 7:00. As participants entered the room, they were encouraged by district administrators to sit anywhere and help themselves to breakfast. A holiday breakfast buffet was set up along the back of the room. The rest of the room was filled with round tables that sat seven to eight people. The front of the room had a large screen and projector for presentations. As more people arrived, many were heard asking whether or not they had assigned seats. From 7:00-7:30 people ate breakfast and chatted, standing and sitting around the room.

Mr. Anderson greeted everyone at 7:30 and introduced the Superintendent, Dr. Winchell. Dr. Winchell began his presentation with a slide that showed the two district initiatives: Eliminate the Achievement Gap and Embed 21st Century Fluencies (technology). He continued his presentation by reviewing achievement data that showed a decrease of Long Term English Learners in the district over the last four years. Dr. Winchell shared a summary of his recent visit to the White House. Over 800 districts across the country were recommended to apply for this opportunity, and SSD was one of 100 districts selected. Participants around the
room said, “Wow!” and cheered. Dr. Winchell shared that their application and presentation included how the district is currently using technology and how they will be opening a new school in a few years. He stated, “Our professional development must include technology; pedagogy has to connect to technology”.

Dr. Winchell introduced a professor from the University of San Diego and his assistant to share their program. The USD presenters shared a presentation on Competency Based Personalized Professional Learning, and the work they had done to support other districts.

The Superintendent stepped back up after their 25 minute presentation. He explained that this was time for principals to reflect. Dr. Winchell passed out a copy of the Substitution Augmentation Modification Redefinition (SAMR) Model and asked principals to reflect on where their school was in utilizing technology (see Figure 3). He showed a brief video on the SAMR Model. After the video, Dr. Winchell said “Individually, write a percentage for your school. Where are you on the SAMR Model? Then take the next ten minutes to share where you are, [and] help each other think about how to move up the SAMR Model”.

Principals spent ten minutes talking in their table groups about their school’s use of technology. During this collaboration they listed the elements of technology currently in use across their schools. Principals were honest in their groups about the majority of their staff being at the lower levels of the SAMR Model, with 50-75% of some schools in Substitution and Augmentation, as reported by individual principals. One shared: “When I look at the transformation
level [Modification and Redefinition, the top two levels] that is a big word. I think we are making changes, but we are not transforming our work. We are enhancing it [levels one and two].” After the discussions, Dr. Winchell stepped up to remind principals that they are the “CEO” of their school. He said that they make the decisions and they have partners available, such as the USD presenters today. He said, “It is our commitment to integrate technology. We don’t want to create an achievement or access gap.”

This ended the professional development portion of the meeting. At 8:25, Mr. Anderson called up the next presenter on the agenda, an Executive Director, to discuss Physical Education (PE). This Executive Director said that his goals were to be concise and clear and to provide time for principals to collaborate. He reviewed a legal situation regarding Physical Education and the required
instructional minutes for PE. He explained new resources that his team had developed and shared electronically. He showed principals new forms that all teachers and principals would be required to complete monthly, ensuring that PE was taught each month. After sharing the information, he gave principals ten minutes to review the online resources and discuss the requirements. The Executive Director called the group back together, reminding them of the expectations of this new requirement. He encouraged principals to help teachers see this as an opportunity for improvement instead of just compliance.

Mr. Anderson called up another Executive Director and a resource teacher from her team. This team discussed 504 Plans. They explained that the district needed a centralized process to track district-wide 504 Plans. The resource teacher demonstrated step one of their new process, which was to input a code in the district’s Student Information System identifying all students with a 504 Plan. The resource teacher explained that he included a user guide in Edmodo, their electronic resource. Principals began to ask questions. The resource teacher said, “I’m willing to entertain questions, but I strongly suggest you review this user guide. It’s pretty self-explanatory.” Principals continued to ask questions related to who would be responsible for coding this information in the system, how people would be trained, and why this was necessary. The Executive Director answered questions and reminded the principals that they needed to identify a new system due to inconsistent processes across sites. She explained that this was a

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6 A 504 Plan refers to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in programs or activities that receive Federal funding from the U.S. Department of Education. A 504 Plan is the document a school can create to support students with disabilities covered under Section 504.
compliance procedure, necessary to ensure their data were accurate across systems. When a principal asked a question about how this 504 information was connected to upcoming state testing, the resource teacher shared a quick update on state testing.

At 9:35 Mr. Anderson called up a Lead Principal to discuss suicide prevention. Because the meeting was scheduled to end at 9:30, the principal said she would go quickly. The principal had worked with a team from Pupil Services to create a protocol to support principals with suicide prevention. The Lead Principal discussed the protocol and a recent situation that occurred at her site. She answered questions and said she was available to share more. Principals asked questions related to specific situations they had experienced at their sites. They asked who to call in an emergency. After ten minutes of questions and answers, Mr. Anderson thanked everyone for coming and ended the meeting.

Both meetings observed consisted of professional development for principals, as well as information and compliance updates. Within the professional development portion of each agenda, district leaders included direct presentations, professional resources to read and view, and time for principals to discuss and collaborate with peers. The updates that followed the professional development portion of the meetings were shared in the form of quick presentations with minimal discussion, which consisted of direct questions and answers. As discussed later in this chapter, subsequent observation and focus group interview data reflect principals’ expressions of appreciation for the time they were given to collaborate during these meetings.
In previous school years, principal meetings were scheduled every other week for approximately two hours. In addition to these principal meetings, principals attended regular full-day professional development workshops with their Instructional Leadership Teams (ILT) throughout the year. A principal’s ILT included a teacher representative from each grade level. During these workshops, the ILT and principal received the same professional development, and had time to plan how they would take the information back to their sites to share with the rest of their teachers. This former structure was referenced frequently during principal focus group interviews as a structure principals appreciated. Principals felt this joint professional development supported their instructional leadership skills. They specifically referenced an initiative centered on close reading and collaborative conversations. In addition, the Assistant Superintendent reported a significant impact on teaching and learning generated by a similar district-wide professional development series centered on changing math instruction. According to one principal,

The reasons the growth happened was because there was a clear focus on certain professional development for all of us. Teachers were pulled to the district for the same information. We (principals) followed up with teachers, worked with them, and provided feedback. [This] district-wide coordinated training, and the way they held principals accountable for growth on our individual campuses, [led to improvements in student achievement].

Under the 2014-2015 monthly-meeting structure, time was a clear challenge communicated by participants in all interviews, focus groups, and in the meetings observed. Mr. Anderson, the Assistant Superintendent said, “I succumbed to principal
pressure and decreased the number of meetings [this year].” Mr. Anderson stated that he believed the past schedule of shorter, more frequent meetings resulted in increased progress across the district. Principals were more equipped to hold teachers accountable for applying learning from professional development in their classrooms. Mr. Anderson believed that principals felt more confident in their instructional leadership skills. With the 2014-15 meetings scheduled a month apart, there were so many practical and necessary information items to report, meeting facilitators were only able to provide two hours of professional learning content with an hour taken up by updates and compliance items.

Both meetings observed by the researcher extended beyond the scheduled end time, with the last 15-20 minutes being dedicated to answering principals’ questions about the updates and compliance items on the agenda. One principal, from Group A, described the 2014-2015 structure by stating, “[The amount of] content in one meeting is a lot this year, because it is just once a month.” Another principal, from Group B, said, “Once upon a time we used to have lots of meetings. We asked for fewer meetings. Now we have fewer [meetings] that are crammed with information”. Another Group B principal added,

I think they tried to say they were listening to us by cutting back the meetings. It wasn’t about cutting back the number of meetings. It was about having a meeting only when there was content that was necessary. I would rather have a meeting scheduled every week, and then cancelled if there isn’t enough content to necessitate a face-to-face meeting with all of us.
The last item at the second observed principal meeting addressed suicide prevention. A district leader and a principal presented this item in about ten minutes, with no available time for discussion between and among principals. They were provided time to ask questions. The remainder of the meeting, which ran late, was filled with a wide variety of questions from many principals. Ms. Ramirez, the Lead Principal who presented the suicide prevention information, summarized by saying:

We tend to have agendas that are filled with information items that we need to know, with professional development [provided], but at the end [of the meetings] are things that are urgent; things we need to take care of [like suicide prevention or PE]. [Those important items] often makes the meetings run longer [due to the questions and clarifications that follow].

An Executive Director stated, “Now that [our principal meetings] are once a month, [they include a great deal of information]. There’s professional development, but there is also business because we have less opportunity to see the principals”.

District-level leaders clearly stated that the purpose of principal meetings was to provide professional development for principals, with additional updates and compliance items shared as needed. In both of the observed meetings, the first portion of each meeting’s agenda was dedicated to a large learning topic (VAPA or technology), with time for content to be shared and for principals to discuss implications for their site-based instructional work. The rest of the agenda included a variety of updates from Executive Directors or other district staff, including some compliance items that required principals’ immediate attention. Mr. Anderson explained, “For the last nine years we have created
our principal meetings to be around professional development--professional learning on content or pedagogy according to what the district is focused on”.

One Executive Director (ED) also shared his thoughts regarding the purpose of district-wide principals meetings. “[The meetings are] very focused on professional development and content information for principals, [which is a] very noticeable shift for me, coming from another district where they were much more management-focused.”

Another Executive Director added:

We’ve always been about improving instruction. It’s really about how principals can support their teachers at the site, with the content. [It’s about how they] provide feedback as our teachers receive professional development. It’s all about building the capacity of our leaders as instructional leaders.

During Group C’s interview, some of the Executive Directors shared their perspectives, having been principals in other districts before entering SSD as district leaders. When reflecting on the content and structure of SSD principals’ meetings, one shared:

I was so impressed with the first principal meeting. I felt like I just got hired to the best- the A team. You could feel it in the room. But it was overwhelming--the size, the scale. I’ve worked in another district. The principals’ meetings could be in this [small] room. And now [in SSD] you’re in this huge room, and people are talking, and there is a structure [for professional development].

Another Executive Director, who has worked in two districts previous to SSD shared a reflection about site-based management as it relates to principal professional development:
The structure here is REALLY different. The top-down, was one of things I just didn’t like [in my previous district]. I don’t believe there is just one imparter of information that helps kids- that was a real struggle for me [and why I left]. So I appreciate what we have here [with our district professional development and then site-based decision making for principals].

Principals in both focus group interviews reflected on the connection between their own professional development and the professional development provided for teachers in the district. During 2014-2015, the district offered all day workshops for teachers by grade level cohorts, in response to teacher feedback. The content for the year was focused on the implementation of Common Core State Standards\(^7\) for mathematics. In previous years, when principals and Instructional Leadership Teams (ILT) would attend professional development together, not every teacher had the opportunity to attend. They had to rely on their ILT to provide the information back at their site. Teachers gave the district feedback that they wanted the opportunity for all teachers to attend and hear the same message. During the previous ILT structure, principals got a preview version of the district professional development during their principal meetings, and were able to hear what their teachers heard at the same time during the ILT workshop. Within the 2014-15 structure of once a month principal meetings and individual grade level professional development workshops, principals were not necessarily able to hear the message alongside their teachers. Principals would have to be away from their school site for up to seven separate workshops, to attend with each grade level team. One Group A principal shared:

\(^7\) Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were adopted in California in 2010. SSD began implementing both the English-Language Arts and Mathematics CCSS in 2013-2014.
Principal professional development has really changed. We used to get modified versions of the presentations our teachers were going to get in their all day workshops. We got the same, and we knew our expectations. We aren’t getting that now. We are encouraged to join our teachers [now]. That isn’t always possible [when there are different workshops for different grade levels offered all the time], so sometimes you are out of the loop.

Group B principals expressed similar concerns regarding missing the past practice where principals received a modified version of what teachers received in professional development. Both groups shared positive reflections of past professional development delivered by specific outside consultants with significant expertise in literacy content. They also shared concerns about a lack of professional development for principals this year; they referenced many more compliance items taking over the monthly agendas. As one Group B principal stated, “In the past, I felt there was more clarity on what principals’ meetings were- they were places where we actually went and got training. We’ve departed from that, but we haven’t found our course yet”.

In Group B, the idea of instructional leadership was linked to principals’ needs for professional development and to site-based professional development. Principals were also asking for more of their own professional learning. One said:

I still think there needs to be a clear focus of the professional learning [for principals]. The [instructional] leadership learning and then nuts and bolts [updates and compliance items]. Like we run our schools [and our professional development]. You’re trying to build capacity with leadership, so you need to build professional development with accountability [for principals].
Principals felt that when they attended professional development with their Instructional Leadership Teams (ILT) in the past, they were able to be stronger instructional leaders. Principals in Group B were concerned about their ability to be instructional leaders under the newly adopted Common Core State Standards, when they had never taught these standards themselves. Principals expressed the need for this type of continuing support, especially alongside their ILT. One principal reflected on past ILT professional development and her needs as an instructional leader, “The key to our professional development is that it has to be based on instructional [practices], not [specific academic] content. We can make any instructional practice or framework work with any of our [site-based initiatives].” To principals, it didn’t matter if their site focus was mathematics, language arts, or any other academic content. If the district provided professional development on a common instructional framework, principals could help their teachers see the connection to each specific content area, focused on improving instruction to benefit all students.

Principals expressed frustrations about being unable to connect some of the information they get in their monthly meetings with the work they were doing with teachers and teams at their site. Principals explained that the professional development they provided at their school sites was based on student achievement data and observation of teachers’ instruction. They used the structures of Professional Learning Communities and Instructional Leadership Teams. They referenced the work done through the past ILT structure, focused on collaborative conversations and literacy instruction. They felt there could be better alignment between some of the professional development they have received this year, and the work they were doing to improve
teaching and learning at their sites. One wished for more consistency across schools by saying, “We need to be collected under an instructional [framework]. No matter the content, that conversation [about instruction] will connect us and strengthen our leadership skills and merge with [our site] focus.”

The Assistant Superintendent and the Executive Directors recognized how hard it was to provide meaningful professional development to a room of 70-80 site leaders who may all be working on different goals. The Assistant Superintendent referenced that when planning a monthly principal meeting, he knew that out of the 80 people in the room, for a given topic, such as VAPA, “there were probably 40 who had no interest and 40 who wanted to start thinking about it.” The principals meetings observed by this researcher were centered on district initiatives, not site-based initiatives.

An Executive Director echoed this concern by summarizing:

The challenges we have with [providing professional development for] principals, is that [there is] a continuum of their knowledge and capacity, in terms of content, so how do we differentiate that professional development? I know we’ve heard that idea from principals- can we differentiate that professional development to their specific needs and where they are? It’s not easy and in a system as large as ours, what does that look and sound like?

Throughout the observations and interviews, it was clear that principals wanted and appreciated professional development. During each of the observed meetings, principals were engaged in professional readings and table discussions regarding the professional learning content. Principals appreciated the time built into these meetings for collaboration. Both principals and district administrators expressed concerns about
the lack of time available during the 2014-15 school year, due to the once a month principal meeting schedule. The length of time in between principal meetings led to more compliance items on each month’s agenda, which took away time for professional learning, collaboration, and reflection. In addition, the 2014-15 structure included district-wide professional development for teachers by grade level cohorts. Principals were encouraged to attend these professional development sessions with their teachers, but it was unrealistic for principals to be away from their school sites to attend all workshops with all of their teachers throughout the year. Principals, Executive Directors, and the Assistant Superintendent desired more time together for professional learning and collaboration, similar to past structures. Prior to 2014-15, principals attended professional development meetings at least twice a month, during which they were provided an abbreviated version of the professional development their teachers would receive. Principals also attended professional development with their Instructional Leadership Teams.

Mentoring via Lead Principal Cohorts

Another structure for principal professional development and support in SSD was principal mentoring via Lead Principal Cohorts. There were eight designated Lead Principals within the 45 site principals. The Superintendent selected Lead Principals, based on experience and peer recommendations. All remaining site principals were divided into cohorts, under a Lead Principal, with each cohort consisting of four to five principals. The Lead Principals met together monthly in a meeting facilitated by the Superintendent, with the Assistant Superintendent and Executive Directors present. The purpose of these meetings was for the Superintendent to hear from the Lead Principals
about their cohort work and to provide direction for future mentoring. Each Lead Principal determined how and when his or her cohort met and how he or she served as a mentor. Some cohorts met weekly and were “highly functional,” according to both the Assistant Superintendent and a Lead Principal. These cohorts visited one another’s schools, conducting instructional rounds and classroom walkthroughs to improve their own knowledge of teaching and learning. Other cohorts rarely met or were still getting to know one another.

According to the Assistant Superintendent, “The idea was that [Lead Principals] should be a peer mentor to support with management, nuts and bolts [compliance items], leadership, things you want a peer relationship to confide in.”

A Lead Principal from Group A shared, “This is our fourth year with cohorts. One of the roles of Lead Principals is to be responsive to the schools in the cohort.” The Executive Directors discussed the Lead Principal structure within their focus group interview. They shared that their primary role within monthly Lead Principal meetings is to sit in as a quiet observer. Having been in place for only four years, one ED observed, “[The Lead Principal monthly meeting] structure is still developing. [It’s] purpose, structure, flow, and role are still being defined.” Another Executive Director stated, when discussing instructional leadership:

I think since we’ve seen the advent of Lead Principals in the last couple of years, they’re providing [instructional leadership] support for each other. When it comes to the actual instruction in the classrooms, I think they do a fine job of [mentoring each other].
Ms. Ramirez, the Lead Principal interviewed individually, stated that she was unsure how she was selected. The Superintendent called her one evening and asked her to step into a role that was vacated when another Lead Principal was promoted. This was the second time she had been asked to take a Lead Principal role; she had declined the first time due to time constraints and wanting to commit 200% to the work. She was given no predetermined structure for her work as a Lead Principal, but rather flexibility to design her cohort activities as she saw fit. Ms. Ramirez chose to organize her cohort in monthly meetings during which principals shared best practices, using a template she designed. “My work is to [help my cohort] share and learn from each other.” Figure 4 is the template Ms. Ramirez designed to share best practices at each site within her cohort.

In the first principal meeting observed, principals were assigned tables by cohorts. During the time provided for tables to discuss items, it was expected that the Lead Principal facilitate the discussion. At the second meeting observed, seating was open, though the researcher noted some people still sat with members of their cohorts. The Assistant Superintendent shared that he preferred to mix up seating so that cohorts did not develop “group think” and were exposed to other ideas during collaboration times within their monthly meetings.

One principal from Group B shared that “the cohort structure creates some accountability. We’ll meet afterwards and commit, hold each other accountable- internal policing instead of external policing.” Others in Group B observed that the structure of cohort activities varied by Lead Principal. Group A principals also reflected on the fact that they each have had different cohort experiences, depending on their Lead Principal.
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>STUDENT PROGRESS (Assessments)</th>
<th>CURRICULUM/INSTRUCTION (Instructional Strategies)</th>
<th>LEARNING ENVIRONMENT (Physical &amp; Social)</th>
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<td>• At Risk list</td>
<td>blurbs</td>
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<td>Mascot puppets</td>
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<td>• Tutoring</td>
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<td>• SST</td>
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<td>Science &amp; Tech Nights</td>
<td>Honorary Service Award</td>
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<td>Weekly Student Progress Reports</td>
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*Figure 4:* Cohort template.
The principal who was observed during a coaching session (described below) with the Assistant Superintendent reflected on professional development structures he had learned about from his cohort colleagues. While he couldn’t remember which school principal gave him a specific idea, he knew he had heard about the idea in his cohort meeting the week prior.

Lead Principals served as mentors for their cohort. Throughout focus group interviews, principals acknowledged the cohort structure for the support it offered. They also noted differences in the level of support provided by various Lead Principals. There were concerns expressed by some principals regarding how staffing changes affected the level of comfort and familiarity within individual cohorts. The cohort structure provided elements of a community of practice that will be discussed in a subsequent section of this chapter.

**Principal Coaching**

Sunset School District provided a third structure for principal professional development, designed to align with and support regular plenary session principal meetings and ongoing small group principal cohort activities. In addition to being a member of a cohort under a Lead Principal, each school principal was assigned a coach from the district level, referred to as an “ED”. The Assistant Superintendent and the five Executive Directors all served as the EDs, assigned to support principals. The Assistant Superintendent supported the majority of school principals, and the five Executive Directors each supported a different, smaller number of principals, based on the role and other job duties required of his or her specific position. The expectation was that each ED visit their assigned schools at least twice each quarter. These visits could include
classroom observations, coaching conversations with the principal based on their site goals, and conversations that follow-up on content presented at the monthly principals’ meeting.

The researcher observed a principal coaching session conducted by Mr. Anderson during a site visit. The site visit began with Mr. Anderson, the principal, Mr. Smith, and the associate principal, Ms. Wilson, meeting in the principal’s office. Mr. Anderson began the conversation by asking Mr. Smith and Ms. Wilson how things were going. Mr. Smith shared concerns about some recent push back from teachers regarding the structure implemented to enhance weekly collaboration time. The principal and associate principal had been working closely with a new Resource Teacher on site to provide more formal structures for the weekly collaboration time for each grade level. The Resource Teacher had taken on a more active role as the developer of the agenda for each team’s collaboration as well as to provide more consistent professional development and support in each meeting. Teachers complained to the principal about this more formal structure. Teachers expressed concerns about the change from a meeting they had been free to plan as they see fit, to a meeting run by the administration now. After listening to the concerns, Mr. Anderson shared some historical context about the collaboration structures under previous principals, since Mr. Smith had been the principal for only the last 11 months. Mr. Anderson commended the site leaders for their continued focus on this important area of concern due to the significant need to raise student achievement at this school.

During the initial 40-minute discussion in Mr. Smith’s office, Mr. Anderson let the site leaders do the majority of the talking. He listened and asked strategic questions
to move the conversation forward. When Ms. Wilson showed a new data collection tool being introduced to teachers during collaboration, Mr. Anderson asked how the leaders were supporting this tool with professional development, modeling, and follow-up support. He knew when to ask a reflective question and when to provide some guidance or a specific suggestion. For example, when the leaders were unable to answer his follow-up questions about their use of new interim assessments, he provided a suggestion he knew other schools were employing.

To set a focus for the classroom walkthroughs, Mr. Anderson asked, “What will be our lens today?” Through prompting and redirection, he helped Mr. Smith and Ms. Wilson list the specific elements they would look for during their classroom visits. The visit was to focus on math implementation, following up from Mr. Anderson’s visit last quarter, where there was limited evidence of math instructional tools to support students. On the previous site visit, Mr. Anderson and Mr. Smith had not seen evidence of manipulatives in classrooms, nor charts or instructional supports on the walls related to math content. Mr. Anderson reminded Mr. Smith and Ms. Wilson that they would be looking for those tools, as well as the teacher’s edition and the student workbooks from the curriculum.

The team visited classrooms for 90 minutes, observing Kindergarten, first, second, fourth and sixth grade classrooms. The team would enter a classroom, observe for a few minutes, and then step out of the room to debrief. After the first classroom, Mr. Anderson asked, “What did you see that supported math instruction?” He allowed Mr. Smith and Ms. Wilson to share their observations. When they began to get into their personal opinions or thoughts about suggested improvements or modifications, Mr.
Anderson redirected them by asking them to consider what question they could pose to the teacher. He had to ask this several times, “What question could you ask this teacher to consider?” When both leaders struggled to come up with a question, Mr. Anderson asked them to keep this in mind as they moved onto other classrooms.

While debriefing the second classroom observation, Mr. Anderson added a new question, “What was the math content objective?” Neither of the site leaders had noticed the objective posted in the room. Mr. Anderson shared the objective and asked the leaders some reflective questions about the content standards. Mr. Anderson used his personal tablet to pull up a link to the Common Core State Standards to reference the specific standard being taught in the classroom. He posed some wondering questions for the leaders to consider. For example, after reading the objective and the standard he asked, “Was what we saw students doing aligned to the standard?” As the debriefs continued, Mr. Anderson would exit a classroom and wait quietly for Mr. Smith or Ms. Wilson to begin sharing what they noticed. After each classroom debrief, the leaders were more prepared to look for specific elements within the next classroom. Whenever Mr. Anderson asked a question about one classroom, the site leaders were prepared to answer it about all future classrooms. If they didn’t name something specific, Mr. Anderson was prepared with a follow up question to push their thinking or prompt how they would coach a teacher. He reminded them, “For you, when you coach this teacher, what thoughtful question can you ask her to enhance her practice?”

When the team began to discuss the essential questions that were posted in most rooms, Mr. Anderson asked, “What is your expectation for these essential questions?” Ms. Wilson shared how the essential questions were created to represent key learning
over a quarter, were crafted by grade level teams during their collaboration, and were to be posted in all rooms. Mr. Anderson followed up with, “At the end of the quarter, what are your system wide expectations about these? What evidence will you have about student learning related to the essential question?” Through a discussion, the team realized they hadn’t established an expectation beyond posting the questions. Mr. Anderson provided suggestions for how to move beyond an essential question as “wall paper on the wall because the principal told us to” to something more relevant for students and teachers. He asked the leaders to put themselves in the shoes of teachers, reviewing an essential question to discuss what student evidence might look and sound like. This conversation led to Mr. Smith and Ms. Wilson deciding to revisit essential questions with a clearer purpose in future collaborations with teams.

During a debrief, Ms. Wilson shared how some teachers were beginning to integrate arts into their content instruction, as the school had just begun a partnership with one of the outside arts agencies who had presented at the observed principal meeting reported earlier in this chapter. Mr. Anderson praised this effort for arts integration and follow through after the principal meeting. Later in the discussion Mr. Anderson was also able to reference professional development that both principals and teachers had received early in the school year around math content, reminding the site leaders of the importance of connecting their coaching and feedback to the work learned in professional development.

The site visit concluded with Mr. Anderson asking the site leaders to reflect on the patterns and trends they had observed throughout the visit and what their next steps would be. After listening to their reflections, Mr. Anderson praised the leaders for the
evidence of their work, as well as the work of the Resource Teacher supporting teacher collaboration. He witnessed significant improvements since his previous site visit and honored the progress.

According to Mr. Anderson, this observed site visit and coaching session was typical of his coaching style. He centered his observations on the district professional development focus for teachers, which was math instruction, as well as the particular needs of the site and the leader. He asked reflective questions, pushed when he needed to move the principal’s thinking forward, and held back when he sensed the principal was too overwhelmed. He tried to visit as many classrooms as possible to support the principal with his coaching of teachers and analysis of instruction. Mr. Anderson expressed pride in this aspect of his work, stating that this direct coaching was the most important work he did to make significant changes to instruction to impact student achievement.

In addition to Mr. Anderson, the five Executive Directors also coached individual principals. During focus group and individual interviews, all Executive Directors recognized that they supported principals in different ways. Some were able to visit sites much more frequently than twice a quarter; others differentiated their support, visiting with newer or needier principals more often. Mr. Anderson shared, “Within the ED team, there are some that are stronger instructionally than others.” He went on to explain that because of the diverse skill levels, all EDs met together to visit classrooms four times a year, to calibrate the instructional lens through which they viewed classrooms.

From the principals’ perspective, ED coaching varied according to the assigned ED’s knowledge and skills, making this targeted coaching important and strategic. A
principal from Group A shared, “Coaching we get from our ED has, over the years, been invaluable. He’s provided a great mentorship”. When reflecting on the diversity of coaching within the ED team, another principal added:

It depends. I was an AP for four years under one ED who I saw maybe once a year. I see the power [of the coaching] with my current ED, who I requested, because I want to grow [as a leader]. Without him, I don’t know that I would be where I am [as a leader].

One Executive Director shared her excitement about the ED coaching role within the district by stating:

I don’t know if there are other districts that have this kind of a model. We’re not sitting behind a desk. We’re really out there at schools, supporting instruction, our principals, and our teachers. Yes, we have all this responsibility here [in the central office], but what makes it so fabulous, I think, is that you’re connected somehow to the school. You’re there. You interact with students, parents, and administrators. So you’re here, but you’re there, as well. You have the best of both worlds.

The Executive Directors felt that their work with individual principals was not necessarily only about developing their instructional leadership skills, but rather also the principals’ overall management skills and ability to problem-solve. The EDs referenced their work as developing the emotional intelligence of principals, helping them build relationships and establish trust with their staff. Their site coaching involved a lot of listening, asking reflective questions, and helping principals navigate new and complex
situations. They also referenced the need to help principals prioritize their work. One ED summarized:

Getting into the classroom is important. [And] what we do outside of the classroom will help support our ability to get into the classrooms [as leaders and coaches]. It’s really identifying that leadership doesn’t just come as a byproduct or by proxy of things [that happen day to day]. It has to be explicitly taught, talked about, and this sometimes leads to difficult conversations. But it’s what we have to do in order to keep the work moving forward.

The principal and associate principal who participated in the observed coaching session were engaged in the learning process and grateful for the specific feedback they received throughout their site visit, around both content and school wide processes. Mr. Anderson supported the instructional leadership skills of the site leaders through focused classroom observations, reflective questions, and dialogue. As a result of this coaching session, the site leaders were prepared to enhance their teachers’ understanding of essential questions, provide more professional development to various grade levels on the use of manipulatives to support math instruction, and to discuss the use of the teachers’ edition of the curriculum as a planning tool with teams. Supportive feedback from a coach was appreciated at all levels of leadership within Sunset School District. Principals, Executive Directors, and the Assistant Superintendent praised the coaching structure that allowed for this level of individual support and feedback for principals.

**District Level Administrators’ Professional Development Structures**

In addition to the principal-focused professional development structures discussed above, the district level leaders participated in their own learning structures. The Cabinet
members (Superintendent, Assistant Superintendents, and Executive Directors) met weekly. The EDs participated in quarterly walkthroughs together. In addition, the EDs frequently collaborated informally, based on the needs of the sites they supported and their areas of expertise.

During each weekly Cabinet meeting, one member was responsible for choosing a research article for consideration by the group. All members were given the article to read ahead of time and the presenting member facilitated a discussion about the reading. These discussions provided the group opportunity to explore key topics in depth, providing for their own professional learning. One Executive Director summarized, “Every time [we discuss an article] it’s a good conversation. The fact that it is built into our structure, gets me focused. It gives us an opportunity to read and talk about [key topics together]”.

The quarterly site visits were a request by the Superintendent. He wanted the Assistant Superintendent to support the Executive Directors in their professional learning around classroom observations. The Assistant Superintendent had many more years of experience observing and supporting leaders than the other Executive Directors. The monthly visits engaged the group in observing “in classrooms to see if we are seeing things with the same lens.”

The Executive Directors appeared to be a cohesive unit during their focus group interview, especially the four EDs who support the instructional programs. In addition to sharing their thoughts on the weekly Cabinet meetings, they frequently used the word “interdependence” to describe how they worked together. They each referenced the informal ways in which they collaborated. For example, when the ED who oversaw
Technology had a principal with concerns about her site’s English Learners, the Technology ED collaborated with the English Learner ED for support. When any ED had questions about special education services, they each went straight to the ED who oversaw special education. In addition, the EDs often attended conferences and workshops together when their curricular or instructional program areas overlapped. One said, “Getting someone else’s perspective really helps. I present a situation and then get feedback from my colleagues. And that helps, because I might not have thought of something [as a way] to approach a certain concern or situation”. Another explained, “I really do think the bulk of our learning is problem-solving together. It’s really nice to say ‘This is what we want to do’ and have everyone [take a] look from their perspective and share [possible outcomes]”.

A third ED said, “One thing that’s unique about this team is the desire to learn from each other”. This ED attributed the district’s success to its high levels of leadership across the system. It was clear that the district leaders were as committed to continuing their own professional learning, individually and collectively, as they were to supporting the principals’ leadership development within the district.

In Sunset School District, the district level leaders who support principals’ instructional leadership continue to model lifelong learning. From Cabinet discussions centered around key topics in educational research to joint site visits to informal collaborations, the Assistant Superintendent and the five Executive Directors support their own and their colleagues’ professional learning. These six district leaders provide ongoing coaching and support for principals through professional development and site visits. They are held accountable for visiting all of their sites twice a quarter. Their role
is to provide learning opportunities and required updates, and to follow-up on mandatory requirements as needed.

**Accountability**

Each participant was asked about how skills for principals’ instructional leadership were developed and supported within SSD structures. Mr. Anderson summarized the goal of the first two hours of the monthly principal meeting as addressing instructional leadership through profession development, as well as addressing the implications that professional development had on principals’ work at their school sites. He also explained that in SSD it is the Superintendent who holds principals accountable for the results of their instructional leadership practice. When asked how principals were held accountable for their instructional leadership, Mr. Anderson said:

>[The] Superintendent holds them accountable. He evaluates them. We give input. Every quarter, each ED and I meet individually with him and discuss our principals, as far as their skill set. He is the one that makes that determination, holding them accountable for their instructional leadership.

All participants were asked about how they were held accountable as an instructional leader. The Assistant Superintendent stated clearly that principals were not required to attend monthly meetings, and, in fact, some Charter School principals elected not to attend. Most other principals attended regularly. He did, however, explain that ultimately principals would be held accountable for improving student achievement in their schools and would be asked to provide evidence of this improvement in their regular evaluation meetings with the Superintendent. If principals didn’t implement various
elements from their own professional learning that could benefit student learning and achievement, there might be consequences through the evaluation process.

When asked how principals were held accountable after each monthly meeting, principals provided common responses. Many referenced site-based management, stating that they applied those aspects of professional development provided that were appropriate for their site’s needs. Other referenced their ED, sharing that coaching visits were a time when they might be asked to elaborate on how or when they might implement concepts from the previous principal meetings. Principals were not mandated to apply specific content to their sites within specific deadlines. One group A principal summarized:

No [direct] accountability about [whether or] how you’ve [addressed content from principals’ meetings]. My ED [provides] coaching. He [facilitates] conversations. He will ask me how I will work with my staff to get this [or that] done. He asks questions about my implementation. It’s not about whether I have to do something, but about how, when, and why.

Another Group A principal shared how the nature of accountability has changed:

When we did ILT work, there was always an action plan at the end of each meeting. You knew you would be held accountable after each meeting. It helped keep you focused on your plan. That’s gone away. I don’t think it even happens in professional development [with teachers] now [that principals are not in the room at the same time].

One Group B principal shared that his accountability comes within his cohort, if his group is given time to collaborate at the end of a principal meeting. The group will
hold themselves accountable, internally. He also went on to say that he thrives on being held accountable and desires more of this. Ms. Ramirez, the Lead Principal, was very clear that principals were all held accountable by the Superintendent for their site test scores and student achievement growth. As a Lead Principal, Ms. Ramirez is not held accountable for the achievement of students at the schools she supports in her cohort. However, her role as a peer mentor was developed to provide principals with additional support to meet their site-based goals related to student achievement. The Executive Directors referenced that their site visits provide a sense of accountability for principals. They do not mandate action, but use active listening and coaching questions to provide support and guidance for principals. One ED observed that knowing someone would come visit their site and ask questions provided a form of accountability for principals. In addition, the EDs are often responsible for the principal meeting agenda items that do require mandatory action, so they followed up directly with individual principals who did not complete required items.

In Mr. Anderson’s view, system-wide accountability rested in the principals’ role as an instructional leader, holding teachers accountable based on the professional development provided by the district, while managing their own site-based goals and priorities. In addition, Mr. Anderson shared that principal cohorts had recently been required to submit a professional development plan as a cohort, outlining how they will use their allotment of Common Core State Standards funds to provide cohort-based professional development. This requirement was built in as a new structure to support cohort collaboration and accountability in delivering content-based professional development. Mr. Anderson shared that he realized within the ED group, each member
holds principals’ accountable in different ways, and to different degrees, which presents a challenge.

When discussing how principals were held accountable following their monthly principal meeting, one Group B principal shared that his ED coaches him on his school site focus, not directly on the content from the principal meeting but how this content might advance his site focus. Others offered further clarification, “It depends on your ED”. One added, “Yes, a lot of [accountability and coaching] depends [on which ED you have]”. With regard to the professional learning from each meeting, principals may be asked about the content during their ED’s site visit, but they are not held accountable to apply the information presented during professional development in a mandated fashion. Accountability came into play with some of the compliance-oriented agenda items that required immediate action.

The tool used to evaluate principals in SSD was structured according to a yearlong cycle focused on seven standards, as follows: The Principal is accountable for: (a) staff performance which impacts student achievement; (b) building leadership capacity; (c) customer satisfaction; (d) acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical and legal manner at all times; (e) managing the school site to be a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment; (f) the integration of technology in the school curriculum and use in school operations; and (g) managing the school site budget.

In addition to meetings to review data, the principals were expected to maintain an individual reflective journal, as well as to discuss their progress in their peer cohorts throughout the year.
The evaluation process used in SSD addressed the support provided to principals through the professional development structures employed. Principal support comes in the form of regular district-led professional development for leaders and for teachers, mentoring via Lead Principal cohorts, and coaching by district leaders. Through these structures, principals were provided learning on new content and instructional leadership skills, as well as individual support for site-based implementation. Principals were then held accountable through individual evaluation meetings with the Superintendent, where principals were responsible for addressing their site’s student achievement progress. The evaluation process states, “Principal standards are a tool to look at honest and reflective feedback”. The entire evaluation process constitutes a cycle representative of a community of practice, that is, a group working together to learn and reflect and improve. A learning community of practice is focused on improving the teaching and learning of the learners within the system, which is a clear goal of Sunset School District.

Community of Practice

A community of practice is founded on the social learning theory that when a group comes together for sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise, they reflect and learn together (Wenger, 1998). All study participants were asked to describe the community of practice that exists for them as a leader within Sunset School District.

One principal in Group A shared that the cohort model was designed to provide a community of practice for each principal. She explained that it is challenging when a cohort is first forming and the individual members are just getting to know each other. Without a comfort level, principals are less willing to be vulnerable with their peers. As she stated, the real value comes, “when we come together to reflect on our own practice
and get feedback from peers”. Another Group A principal, in a different cohort, shared a conflicting perspective about the cohort model observed, “I don’t see many opportunities for principals coming together in a sustained group.” This principal’s cohort rarely met for any collaboration outside of the monthly principal meetings when they were required to sit together.

The Lead Principal from Group A contributed to the discussion by sharing the ways in which the cohort model had changed since its inception. Originally, principals were given the opportunity to select their top choices for cohort colleagues. As principals changed roles, cohort membership shifted. It was up to the Lead Principal to build trust within these changing groups and continue to nurture the community of practice. Assistant Superintendent Anderson agreed with this characterization, suggesting that ongoing reflection and collaboration were best accomplished within cohorts, facilitated by Lead Principals.

Group B’s principals shared that they benefitted more from the informal subcohorts that have formed among people with whom they felt most comfortable sharing concerns. When reflecting on principal meetings and collaboration time for principals, one principal stated, “What’s lacking is that we don’t have [sufficient] opportunities or forums to talk [during monthly principal meetings]”. Another added, “There is a network [for collaboration], but it’s not reaching all members of the [district] team. [It] goes back to [your] ED, [your] Lead Principal and [your cohort], and the work you are doing. Within each cohort, it differs.”

The district level leaders described their community of practice as being comprised of one another. They agreed that their community of practice was
strengthened through communication and collaboration during Cabinet meetings, as well as through their informal support structures, which included collective site visits and site-specific coaching and support based on their unique areas of expertise.

When leaders identify the professional communities of practice to which they belong, they can begin to find support for their own ongoing professional learning through such communities (Wenger, 1998). The leaders in SSD identified their communities of practice as their cohorts, their personal friends within the larger principal group, and their relationships with their ED. Principals found support for their own learning through their regular professional development opportunities and by reaching out to members of their professional learning network. While the ED’s made their twice quarterly visits to provide on-site coaching, the principals did not hesitate to pick up a phone in between scheduled visits to ask their ED a question, to seek out clarification or direction, or to request support with instructional or managerial issues. There were a variety of professional learning communities of practice within SSD. Site and district leaders were members of overlapping communities, all in efforts to support professional learning within the larger district community.

**Principal Collaboration**

Out of the research on communities of practice came social network theory (Daly, 2010), which reminded leaders of the power of informal and formal collaboration structures within school districts. Human beings learn through collaboration and people seek out information through all the channels available to them. Throughout the individual and focus group interviews and the observations in SSD, participants spoke often about the value of principal collaboration.
When asked about structures for reflection and collaboration, the Assistant Superintendent stated that reflection is not built into the principals’ meetings because “[collaboration] should be taking place with the EDs and the Lead Principals”. Every principal interviewed expressed a desire for more time for collaboration and reflection. Group A’s principals offered high praise for one particular principal meeting this year, in November, when they were provided very concrete learning on writing calibration and were given significant time to collaborate with colleagues and reflect on how they would take the information back to their sites. The agenda for this particular meeting had only one item, ELA Performance Task preparation. There were no other updates or compliance items on the agenda. This provided substantially more time for principal collaboration built into the scheduled meeting time.

In response to a question about how they learn best, every principal in both focus groups referenced some form of collaboration with their peers, as did many Executive Directors. Principals said: “I learn best in a collaborative model.” “I’m collaborative. I want to talk about what we’re learning.” “When we are given the opportunity to talk to each other, I think that is obviously very beneficial. Most of us are the only administrator on our site. It’s nice to hear ideas and use people as a sounding board.” “[Collaboration is] valuable to me.” “We are collaborative creatures.”

Sunset School District implemented a structure for creating and sustaining communities of practice across the district through the establishment of small group principal cohorts led by peer Lead Principals, and further supported by district level Executive Directors. These structures did not dictate how or when reflection and collaboration must take place. The amount and nature of collaboration varied across
principal cohorts, depending upon Lead Principal and Executive Director inclination, skills, and mentoring style. Principals were unanimous in their desire for additional collaboration time within and across their various professional development structures.

**Use of Time**

The use of time was a common theme throughout all individual and focus group interviews and observations. Everyone in the system agreed that the 2014-2015 structure of once a month, two to three hour-long principals meetings, were not as sufficient to address the principals’ professional development needs. Suggestions from participants to improve this structure included more frequent meetings with more time for collaboration and reflection, and a blended model of professional development.

Although the principals themselves had requested the reduction in meetings, they were adamant about the need for increased collaboration time. They wanted more time built into principals meetings to collaborate with their colleagues. They wanted time to process new information and discuss how they might take information back to their sites. They wanted to share best practices and hear about the good work happening at their colleagues’ sites. They wanted both structured collaboration time on meeting topics, as well as open-ended time to talk about other relevant topics. One challenge expressed by Group B principals was the fact that monthly principal meetings included people other than site principals. Some principals expressed a desire for specific principal-to-principal conversations, without lead psychologists present.

Both principals and Executive Directors introduced the concept of a blended model for professional development. Multiple participants suggested implementing elements of the “flipped learning model” blended with the current structure of
professional development delivery. In a flipped classroom or flipped professional
development, information is shared electronically before a given meeting and participants
are expected to read or view the content ahead of time and to come prepared to discuss
the content and ask questions. Participants felt that this model would be a better use of
their time, providing more opportunities for their questions to be answered, and less time
being talked to by presenters. The flipped model was linked most often to the updates
and compliance items that fall on the second half of the typical principal meeting agenda.
The Executive Directors shared that they were engaged in conversations about how to
improve the principal meetings and were considering various ideas.

One other thing we’ve talked about is how to extend that learning time, or how
[to] initiate that learning time [for principals]. So three to five days before, we send out
an article, or a video to get them in that mode, a pre-requisite before they show up. Then
the value of [the meeting] is the conversation that happens based on [the materials
provided beforehand]. [We are] really looking at different ways to establish that learning
opportunity.

Incorporating elements of a blended model of professional development into the
structure for principal meetings and Lead Principal cohort collaborations could provide
more opportunities for collaboration and reflection.

**Conclusion**

This chapter presented a summary of the data collected and analyzed through this
case study. The chapter began with a description of Sunset School District and the data
collection methods employed in this qualitative case study. Next the chapter provided a
detailed description of each of the professional development structures employed to
support principals, framed around research on principal professional development and communities of practice. Key themes that emerged from the data analysis included (a) district professional development structures; (b) accountability (c) community of practice; (d) principal collaboration; and (e) use of time. These themes illustrated the importance of district structures for principal professional development that include time for leadership learning, collaboration and reflection, mentoring, and coaching.

Chapter 5 presents a summary of primary findings in accordance with the research questions. Limitations of the study are also discussed, and finally, the chapter presents recommendations for those involved in education reform, along with directions for future research.
CHAPTER 5—DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Chapter 4 presented the data collected and analyzed through the case study of a successful urban district that has implemented district-wide structures to support ongoing, job-embedded professional development for principals. Chapter 5 summarizes the study’s findings, presents recommendations for those involved in education reform, and provides directions for future research. The study investigated the district’s structure for providing instructional leadership professional development. The researcher employed a qualitative case study method, using observations, review of records, interviews and focus groups to triangulate data.

Context

Research confirms the need for districts to be clear and articulate in their model for instructional leadership (Hallinger, 2007). School districts play a critical role in the advancement of principals’ instructional leadership skills (Honig, 2012). Mentoring and coaching programs can support the ongoing development of principals and the district leaders who support them. Leaders can be held accountable for instructional leadership skills through measures such as professional expectations and evaluations.

The development of professional learning communities, or communities of practice among principals within a school district, is vastly unexplored in educational research. Humans are social beings who learn and develop meaning through collaboration and reflection with others (Wenger, 1998). Instructional leaders benefit from a community of practice within which they can collaborate and reflect with colleagues on their work (Barnes et al., 2010). The role of the principal can be isolating. A leadership community of practice provides support, as well as opportunity for professional growth.
Such a community of practice, within which principals have opportunity to connect their learning to their practice and, see its relevance to their work, aligns with adult learning theories (Mirici & Hensley, 2010). Change happens when people change (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). Adults are more likely to change their behavior after critical self-evaluation (Mirici & Hensley, 2010). Adult learning opportunities must represent learner-centered opportunities where the learner has input in the learning objectives and strategies (Rachal, 2002). All adult learners bring their own prior knowledge to every new learning experience (Wells & Keane, 2011). Adult learning opportunities for school leaders must take into account the previous experiences of the leaders within their educational context, as well as finding a balance between theory and practical application.

**Research Focus**

This study explored the structure employed by one successful urban district to provide ongoing professional development of the principals within the district. The study examined the district structures created to support ongoing, job-embedded professional development for principals. The study aimed to understand the various components of the structure implemented to develop and support the instructional leadership skills of principals, further contributing to the research on principal professional development.

**Limitations**

While this study advances understanding of district structures to improve instructional leadership skills, the limitations of this study must be acknowledged. Qualitative educational research limits generalizability because each school setting is unique (Berliner, 2002). A case study, by nature, has a small sample size. Both the
sample size and the location could be considered delimitations in this study. Qualitative research provides deep rich descriptions of social phenomenon, in this case principal professional development (Creswell, 2013). The data collected was limited to the meetings that were scheduled within the time of the study, which determined what was observed, as well as the willingness of the leaders to participate. To mitigate these limitations, data were triangulated across multiple sources, from individual and focus group interviews, to observations, and record review.

Researcher bias is another limitation in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). To avoid personal bias the researcher conducted the study in a district outside any in which she has been employed. In addition, interview question checks and member checks were conducted to ensure that the researcher was not inserting personal agendas into the interview questions or data collection summaries.

Findings of the Study

Chapter four presented data organized according to primary themes that emerged from the data. Key themes that emerged from the data analysis included (a) district professional development structures; (b) accountability (c) community of practice; (d) principal collaboration; and (e) use of time. Chapter five revisits these findings according to the research questions that framed the study. The following research questions were addressed in the study:

- What professional development structures build the capacity of principals to influence improvements in instruction?
- What factors influence the effectiveness of district professional development structures in improving principals’ instructional leadership?
• If there is an instructional leadership community of practice, what characteristics describe it?

• What district policies, programs, and practices motivate/support principal leaders to focus upon improving instruction in their schools?

**Question 1: What professional development structures build the capacity of principals to influence improvements in instruction?**

In Sunset School District, professional development structures for principals occurred through principal meetings, Lead Principal cohorts, and principal coaching. In the 2014-15 school year, principal meetings were held once a month for three hours. In previous years, principal meetings were scheduled more frequently and in conjunction with district wide professional development for Instructional Leadership Teams (ILT). Principals attended professional development with their ILT and were able to create a systematic plan for bringing the content back to the rest of their staff. The professional development structures were revised in response to requests from principals to minimize their time away from the school sites for principal meetings and requests from teachers who wanted the opportunity to attend professional development with their entire grade level team together. The ILT structure provided principals with the opportunity to hear professional development with a team of their site leaders. All professional development provided to principals was designed to support principals in improving their instructional leadership skills and thereby improving student achievement.

Principals were provided peer mentoring and a community of practice through the Lead Principal cohort structure. There were eight Lead Principals, designated by the Superintendent, who each represented a cohort. All remaining site principals were
divided into these cohorts. Lead Principals had flexibility and autonomy to schedule cohort meetings as often as they saw fit, and to design mentoring structures that supported their team of principals. These cohorts provided principals with peer mentoring and collaborative structures for discussing instructional and managerial practices related to their school sites. Principal coaching occurred individually, through site visits from the Assistant Superintendent or one of the five Executive Directors. Each principal in Sunset School District was assigned a principal coach from the district office. The coaches visited their assigned school sites at least twice each quarter, to observe classroom instruction, ask reflective questions, and support the principal’s instructional leadership at the site level. Coaching conversations followed up on previous principal professional development and site-based concerns. Mentoring and coaching are forms of learning from experience, focused on continuous growth through relationships, not on mastery of specific tasks (Boerema, 2011). Growth comes when there is both high support and high challenge for a leader. Many leadership skills are learned through on-the-job experiences. The SSD structures of mentoring via Lead Principal cohorts and principal coaching provided such experiences.

Leithwood’s (2010) research review, summarizing 31 studies of a variety of large, urban districts serving many at-risk students, identified two key characteristics of high-performing districts: district-wide, job-embedded professional development for leaders and substantive investments in instructional leadership. The structures in SSD were designed to provide ongoing, job-embedded professional development for principals as instructional leaders. Principals were provided professional development on both instructional leadership content and districtwide initiatives. They were provided peer
support through their Lead Principal cohort and individual coaching through their district leader (ED) site visits. While the larger principal professional development meetings provided support for district initiatives, principals had the freedom to make site-based decisions that would meet the needs of their students and staff. The cohort structure provided principals with the opportunity to see what and how other principals were implementing district initiatives, as well as to discuss other best practices that were supporting gains in student achievement. The ED coaching supported principals with their site-specific goals, and the ways in which they were implementing district-wide initiatives.

Research suggests the need for leaders to better understand distributive leadership and how to employ the distribution of not only tasks, but accountability and ownership, across a system (Leithwood et al, 2004). In addition, two common factors in districts with significant student achievement gains are an “investment in instructional leadership development at the school and district level,” and “district-wide and school-level emphasis on teamwork and professional community,” (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 43). The incorporation of the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) model into the SSD structure of principal professional development enhanced principals’ ability to build capacity across their school sites. In the ILT model, principals were provided the opportunity to learn alongside a team of teachers from their school. After the learning content, principals had structured time to meet with their school leaders to plan how they would take the learning back to their entire staff. This provided the teacher leaders with more ownership of the professional learning and sharing with their colleagues, and, therefore, distributed leadership across the site.
The SSD Lead Principal cohorts and ED coaching structures provided peer mentoring and district level coaching support for principals. The Lead Principal position was created to be a peer mentor to a small group of site principals. The cohort structure provided peer-mentoring opportunities for principals wherein they gained support from their colleagues about the day-to-day work requirements, as well as time to collaborate on site-based application of their professional development. The ED coaching structure created a personal coaching relationship between each principal and a district level leader. The ED’s ongoing site visits and follow-up supported individual principals with their instructional leadership development through coaching conversations, classroom walkthroughs, and data analysis. These findings confirm earlier findings from a 2010 Wallace Foundation study on central office transformations, concluding that district and site leader partnerships resulted in significant improvements in system-wide reform (Honig et al., 2010).

*Question 2: What factors influence the effectiveness of district professional development structures in improving principals’ instructional leadership?*

The factors that influence the effectiveness of district professional development structures for principals in SSD included the content of professional development, the use of time, principals’ ability to make connections to site-based work, the knowledge and skill of the district leaders, and coherence amongst structures. The content of district professional development offerings affected the degree to which principals would use the learning at their sites. If principals were invested in the content, there was opportunity to see improvements in their instructional leadership skills. When meeting content was linked to elements of student achievement that might be revisited in the form of an
evaluation conversation, principals were also more directly influenced. In SSD principals were together for their own professional development at least once a month, with a focus on district initiatives. In addition, principals were encouraged to attend regular professional development workshops with their teachers throughout the year. They also engaged in professional learning through their Lead Principal cohort activities and through their ED coaching sessions.

Use of time was a theme throughout all individual and focus group interviews, as well as observations. District leaders wanted principals to focus on instructional leadership topics in more depth. When principal meetings were spaced a month apart, a number of compliance-related items filled up the agenda, limiting the time available for the professional development learning and collaboration. Without substantive time to collaborate and reflect on their learning, principals’ ability to make connections between district professional development and their site-based initiatives was restricted. In his research, Drago-Severson (2012) noted the importance each principal placed on reflection, but how little time they spent reflecting on their own. Principals need support to carve out structured time for reflection. The structures were provided to SSD principals for such structured time during the Lead Principal Cohort and the principal ED coaching. This follow-up support between principals’ monthly meetings influenced principals’ instructional leadership through additional collaboration. Individual coaching conversations helped principals reflect on their learning and determine how to implement new knowledge and skills effectively at their sites. Cohort and coaching conversations provided principals with ideas for instructional improvements—among their teachers.
Lead Principals who facilitated instructional walk-throughs with their cohorts also influenced principals’ instructional leadership skills.

The knowledge and skill set of the district leaders influenced the effectiveness of all three SSD’s principal professional development structures: principal meetings, Lead Principal cohorts, and principal coaching. The district leaders were directly responsible for creating the agenda for the monthly principal professional development meeting, as well as facilitating that meeting. When the necessary content knowledge was not available within the district leadership team, they sought out external partnerships for support. SSD’s use of external supports aligned with the research of Finnigan and O’Day (2003), which expressed the importance of district’s ensuring that outside agencies are trained to share a common message. SSD’s leadership developed strategic partnerships with external organizations and agencies they brought into the district. The SSD district leaders were also responsible for determining which principals would serve as Lead Principals and for supporting them through monthly meetings. In addition, the leaders at the district served as the principal coaches, visiting sites and providing follow up instructional leadership support directly to principals. The more knowledgeable the district leaders were, or were perceived to be by principals, the more their advice and direction influenced principals’ instructional leadership. The content of meetings, the use of time, principals’ ability to make connections to site-based work, and the knowledge and skill of the district leaders all influenced the effectiveness of the district’s professional development structures in improving principals’ instructional leadership. These findings support those of Jerald (2013) in a study of eleven school systems’ implementation of principal professional development. Jerald’s research identified three
promising areas for principal professional development and support: clarify the principal’s role as an instructional leader, develop principals’ instructional leadership practices through job-embedded supports that build expertise, and enable principals to succeed as instructional leaders by providing them with time and supports.

In a national study of 43 school districts, across nine states, researchers found effective leadership depended on expectations, efficacy, and engagement (Wahlstrom et al., 2010). SSD provided high level expectations for principals through the evaluation process and the individual coaching conversations related to student achievement. Principals were encouraged to think of themselves as the CEO of their own school, and they were empowered to engage in and support district initiatives through site-based structures.

Principals in SSD shared the need for consistency and accountability in the level of support they receive from Lead Principals and Executive Directors. Without district structures, principal supervisors do not have the instructional leadership skills necessary to be effective in their current role of supporting principals to be the instructional leaders of their schools (Corcoran et al., 2013). The leaders who support site principals require additional coaching and support to ensure consistency within such a large system. Honig’s (2012) study of three large urban school districts confirmed the need for a district level common definition of instructional leadership as well as a structured plan for the coaching of site principals by district leaders. SSD’s Cabinet level’s weekly meetings and the monthly meetings with Lead Principals provided ways in which district leaders developed a common understanding of instructional leadership, as well as ways to provide consistent supports for all principals within the district.
The final factor that influenced the effectiveness of district professional development structures in improving principals’ instructional leadership in SSD was the coherence in which the structures were implemented. Each structure was created to enhance principals’ instructional leadership while supporting the implementation of district wide initiatives in a clear and focused manner. While principals had autonomy to implement site-based initiatives, every leader within the system knew and understood that their role was to serve as the instructional leader, there to improve student achievement for all students. It is critical that district leaders create coherent plans and policies that support the development of instructional leadership skills in principals. Research of district structures supports the importance of a clear district vision with coherence across the system (Leithwood et al., 2004; Rorrer et al., 2008).

**Question 3: If there is an instructional leadership community of practice, what characteristics describe it?**

In SSD, a community of practice existed within the Lead Principal cohort, within the Executive Directors team, and within the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) structure of district professional development. In each of these situations, a community of practice was established through extended time for the group to form, create a shared purpose for learning, learn together, and reflect on the information. Katz and Earl’s (2010) research on networked learning communities explained a focus on learning, which separated them from other networks with other purposes. Key features of successful networked learning communities include: purpose and focus, relationships, collaboration, enquiry, leadership, and capacity building and support. Sunset School District’s principal professional development structures demonstrate evidence of these features. The ILT
structure provided time for principals to learn with a purpose and a focus while building collaborative relationships with their teacher leaders. The ILT built capacity within a team of teachers to support the site’s vision through shared leadership.

Collaboration is a critical element to successful communities of practice (Katz & Earl, 2010). The evaluation of collaboration is important for leaders to understand. Gajda and Koliba (2007) defined six key traits of interpersonal collaboration: shared purpose, cycle of inquiry, dialogue, decision making, action, and evaluation. SSD’s Lead Principal cohort structure created the opportunity for peer collaboration. The recent expectation of cohorts to submit a common professional development plan as a team provided a structure that included all six of the traits identified by Gajda and Koliba (2007). The role of the Lead Principal was a critical component in SSD, as that person facilitated the ongoing collaboration within his or her cohort.

Peer collaboration was also evidence within the interdependence of the Executive Directors. This group of district leaders created their own community of practice for ongoing learning and reflection. They sought out one another for professional advice, as a sounding board, and to avoid potential problems in decision-making within the organization. The ED community of practice demonstrated the characteristics of reflection, shared meaning-making, collaboration, and individual and collective support for the members.

Daly’s (2010) study of a school district’s social network, which expanded on Wenger’s (1998) community of practice research, outlined the benefits of a district building collaborative opportunities for administrators. As more administrators were integrated and connected to the learning, there were fewer isolated members within the
district. Leadership capacity is built through relationships and connections (Daly, 2010). Other research findings confirm that the relationships among participants mattered (Hite et al., 2005). The stronger the ties to other members of the community, the more active the participation of individuals within that community were in the Hite et al. (2005) study. District structures can be created to support greater connections within school communities, enhancing the leadership skills of all the leaders with the system. The leadership structures of Sunset School District supported relationship building and connections between principals and district leaders through peer mentoring and principal coaching. The professional development portion of each principal meeting also provided opportunities for peer collaboration about instructional leadership. In SSD, these structures were created to advance a social learning environment, or a community of practice, within which the principals could take their new learning and make sense of it in order to improve their instructional leadership skills (Barnes, et al., 2010).

**Question 4: What district policies, programs, and practices motivate/support principal leaders to focus upon improving instruction in their schools?**

Principals in SSD engaged in regular professional development as leaders, with teachers, and as facilitators at their sites, all in support of improving instruction in their schools. The principals were highly engaged when they spoke about previous professional development around close reading and collaborative conversations. This entailed a district-wide series of professional development workshops in which principals participated alongside the teachers who made up their Instructional Leadership Teams. Each principal was able to build the capacity of his or her school by teaming with his or her site leaders on the ILT to plan site-based follow-up after each individual workshop.
The ILT at each site was a team principals’ referred to frequently for their site-based, shared leadership. Principals felt that this practice motivated and supported them to focus on improving instruction in their schools. They were able to see clear connections from district initiatives to site goals, with the support of shared professional development.

The annual evaluation meetings with the Superintendent, where principals were held accountable to improve student achievement, were also a motivator, expressed especially by the Lead Principal and an Executive Director. The entire principal evaluation cycle supported principals into focusing upon improving instruction in their schools, through a detailed data analysis and reflective feedback process. SSD principals were clear that their primary role was to support teaching and learning in order to improve student achievement. Catano and Stronge (2006) studied the alignment between professional standards and evaluation instruments for principals. Instructional leadership, management skills, and ethical matters are all called for in the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards, but Catano and Stronge found that evaluation documents across 97 districts didn’t mention expectations for principals’ ethical behavior. The SSD evaluation instrument specifically calls out instructional leadership, building capacity, managerial skills, and integrity, fairness, and acting in an ethical and legal manner. The SSD evaluation tool aligned to the ISLLC Standards and the development of instructional leadership skills for principals.

Sunset School District’s principal professional development practice also motivated and supported principals to focus upon improving instruction in their schools. Each principal meeting provided principals with research-based learning content. Principals were encouraged to determine how the new learning would align to their site-
based goals. Individual principals were highly motivated by different aspects of their learning. Some principals made the Visual and Performing Arts content a high priority, while other principals expressed that instructional technology was a focus at their sites. All focus group interview participants expressed appreciation for the writing calibration professional development provided to principals in one meeting, as this content was especially relevant and easy to replicate at their sites with teachers. Principals were driven by content that was applicable to their site needs.

The SSD structures to support principals aligned with a Wallace Foundation study on structures of principal supervision and evaluation (Corcoran et al., 2013). The study analyzed districts that provided professional development to principals and their supervisors, to enhance principals’ instructional leadership skills through coaching and mentoring. Critical components of successful districts included collaboration and communication between the sites and the district. In SSD, the ED coaching relationship provided a direct and immediate connection from the district to each individual site. Those individual relationships were supported through site coaching visits and the regular principal professional development meetings, where everyone was able to hear the same message at the same time, in a common format.

SSD district leaders created partnerships with local organizations, universities, and even national research groups to enhance the services provided to staff and students. Orr et al.’s (2010) research found that when a partnership exists between universities and school districts, programs could more specifically address the needs school districts identify. SSD proactively identified 21st Century Skills as a district-wide focus and sought out various partnerships that would support principals in aligning their site work
with the district initiative. The autonomy provided to principals to meet district goals through site-based management motivated individual principals to lead their sites through unique endeavors. Principals were also encouraged to find their own community partnerships to enhance their site work. The Lead Principal interviewed shared that her passion was health education and the development of the whole child. While that wasn’t a specific district goal, she found ways to incorporate her passion and belief in child development into her site vision, in conjunction with instructional programs that led to significant gains in student achievement. Principals were proud to share their site-specific initiatives that led to higher student attendance, engagement, and achievement. They were able to do this because of the practice of providing district goals and site autonomy to reach those goals.

**Implications for Practice**

As lead learners, principals must study the elements of effective instructional leadership (Dana et al., 2009), understanding how student success is more likely with system-wide supports, in the form of time, resources, a commitment to the see the work through, and an instructional focus (Honig, 2012). Beyond university-based preparation programs, districts are beginning to create supports and structures for ongoing, job-embedded principal professional development. Structures such as mentoring, principal coaching, ongoing professional development, and external partnerships create job-embedded learning for principals. Research confirms a more focused approach to developing instructional leadership skills in principals benefits school districts (Daresh, 2007; Honig, 2012; Jerald, 2012; Leithwood, 2010; Ward, 2011). The literature review
that informed this study demonstrated a lack of research on district-wide structures that supported the ongoing instructional leadership development of principals.

This study aimed to describe how one successful urban school district provided ongoing job-embedded professional development for principals. High-achieving school districts like Sunset School District serve as a model of the possible structures districts can employ in order to provide job-embedded, ongoing instructional leadership development for principals.

A district seeking to improve the structures of principal professional development might consider the following questions:

1. How often do principals come together for professional learning?
2. How could a blended model of professional development support principals’ productive use of time spent away from their school sites?
3. How and when are principals provided the time to reflect individually and collaboratively?
4. How and when are principals provided the time to collaborate on new learning, district initiatives, or progress of students?
5. Do principals have opportunities to receive support from peer mentors?
6. How are peer mentors selected and supported?
7. Do principals receive individual coaching on instructional leadership skills?
8. How are principal coaches selected and supported?
9. How does the principal professional development plan specifically support principals’ instructional leadership skills?
10. How does the principal professional development plan support improved student achievement?

The implications of this study suggest the need for districts to articulate a clear plan for principal professional development that supports improvements to student achievement. Sunset School District’s structures for principal professional development are not necessarily replicable in all school districts. However, the importance of professional learning, mentoring, coaching, collaboration, and reflection are supported by the review of literature on principal professional development. The structures outlined in chapter four may serve to support other districts in their development of an articulated plan for principal professional development.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

While a comprehensive review of literature on educational leadership demonstrates a clear connection between quality leadership and improved student achievement, it also highlights a lack of information on how current leaders continue their learning or enhance their instructional leadership skills throughout their careers (Leithwood et al., 2004). Systematic professional development for principals as instructional leaders is missing in many school districts (Corcoran et al., 2013). Research suggests that effective leadership training is ongoing and job-embedded, with reflection time built in (Boerema, 2011). Professional development for principals can provide knowledge of leadership, pedagogy, and content to support the improvement of instruction at the classroom level. Districts play a role in supporting such instructional leadership development (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Honig, 2012; Jerald, 2012;
Leithwood, 2010). Districts and their school leaders need a common understanding of instructional leadership (Honig, 2012).

This study sought to describe how one large, successful urban school district created structures for instructional leadership development. Further studies, both qualitative and quantitative in nature, would enhance understanding of the structures districts can employ, as well as the skill set district and site leaders need to be successful. Further studies might examine student achievement data and principal leadership skills more closely. Other studies might explore the ways in which districts set out to create a common understanding of instructional leadership and how that manifests itself in school leaders. There is also a need for more research on the principal’s use of time within his or her day, as Fullan (2014) explored in defining the term of principal as “lead learner”.

A study that seeks to extend the research by Jerald (2012, 2013), in which he explored the partnership between The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, seven school districts and four charter management organizations to redesign their systems to improve teaching and learning, would also contribute to the small body of research on district professional development structures for improvement. Jerald’s study of this partnership suggested three promising areas for principal professional development and support: clarify the principal’s role as an instructional leader, develop principals’ instructional leadership practices through job-embedded supports that build expertise, and enable principals to succeed as instructional leaders by providing them with time and supports. Specific recommendations for systemic improvements included district level leaders who are responsible for helping principals grow as instructional leaders through ongoing, differentiated professional development (Jerald, 2013). The SSD provided differentiated
professional development for principals, particularly through their ED coaching model. An in-depth look at other possible approaches to differentiated professional development for principals would advance understanding of the ways district leaders support their principals in gaining instructional leadership expertise. To that end, further research might explore the balance districts must strike between holding tight to certain districtwide expectations, while at the same time providing a level of flexibility allows for site-based autonomy. This balance invites innovation, but not at the expense of necessary district wide coherence.

Conclusion

This chapter provided a summary and interpretation of key findings, as well as the acknowledgement of study limitations. Practical implications for educators and suggestions for additional research were discussed. The following are final thoughts on the research overall.

By conducting this study, the researcher gained a better understanding of how a high-achieving urban elementary school district facilitated principal professional development. Additionally, it became apparent how complex instructional leadership is and how challenging it is to meet the needs of individual leaders in such a large system. Evidence collected from key participants clarified that principals desired professional development that is ongoing and job-embedded and that various structures can support their learning. Predominant themes emerging from the data included: (a) district professional development structures; (b) accountability (c) community of practice; (d) principal collaboration; and (e) use of time. Policy makers, educational leadership scholars, and school district leaders share responsibility in defining instructional
leadership, identifying effective practices, and supporting principals in their ongoing professional growth through the implementation of consistent district structures.
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Dear Executive Director,

You have been selected to participate in a study being conducted by Ms. Amy Illingworth, an Educational Leadership doctoral student at San Diego State University. The purpose of the Structures for Instructional Leadership Development research is to investigate how school districts create structures to support on-going instructional leadership development in site and district leaders. Such a study advances awareness and understanding leadership development for district leaders.

This study will explore the structure of your district’s leadership professional development. Your school district’s efforts provide a unique opportunity to learn about leadership development from the inside out. The researcher will observe a district leadership professional development meeting and then conduct Focus Groups, interviews, and an Instructional Rounds/ site visit.

If you would like to participate, please contact Ms. Illingworth. You are not required to participate in this study. Your choice to participate will not affect your standing in the district. The researcher will ask you to engage in Focus Group interviews with other Executive Directors. Focus Group interviews will take between 60 -75 minutes. Your participation will be confidential, meaning that your name will not appear on interviews. In addition, the researcher may ask you to engage in Instructional Rounds/ a school site visit along with a Lead Principal and the researcher. The site visit will take between 1-3 hours, based on the district schedule.

There is no incentive or pay for participating, however, you will probably enjoy talking with the researcher and discussing how school principals continue to develop and enhance their instructional leadership skills.

Please contact me via email at, aillingworth22@gmail.com if you have any questions regarding this study or would like to communicate your willingness to participate.
If you have questions regarding your rights as a participant in research you may contact the Institutional Review board at San Diego State University 619-594-6622 irb@mail.sdsu.edu.

Thank you for considering this request.
Sincerely,

Amy Illingworth
Dear Principal,

You have been selected to participate in a study being conducted by Ms. Amy Illingworth, an Educational Leadership doctoral student at San Diego State University. The purpose of the Structures for Instructional Leadership Development research is to investigate how school districts create structures to support on-going instructional leadership development in site and district leaders. Such a study advances awareness and understanding leadership development for district leaders.

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If you would like to participate, please contact Ms. Illingworth. You are not required to participate in this study. Your choice to participate will not affect your standing in the district. The researcher will ask you to engage in Focus Group interviews with principals. Focus Group interviews will take between 60 - 75 minutes. Your participation will be confidential, meaning that your name will not appear on interviews.
There is no incentive or pay for participating, however, you will probably enjoy talking with the researcher and discussing how school principals continue to develop and enhance their instructional leadership skills.

Please contact me via email at, ailingworth22@gmail.com if you have any questions regarding this study or would like to communicate your willingness to participate.

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Thank you for considering this request.

Sincerely,

Amy Illingworth
Dear Lead Principal,

You have been selected to participate in a study being conducted by Ms. Amy Illingworth, an Educational Leadership doctoral student at San Diego State University. The purpose of the Structures for Instructional Leadership Development research is to investigate how school districts create structures to support on-going instructional leadership development in site and district leaders. Such a study advances awareness and understanding leadership development for district leaders.

This study will explore the structure of your district’s leadership professional development. Your school district’s efforts provide a unique opportunity to learn about leadership development from the inside out. The researcher will observe a district leadership professional development meeting and then conduct Focus Groups, interviews, and an Instructional Rounds/site visit.

If you would like to participate, please contact Ms. Illingworth. You are not required to participate in this study. Your choice to participate will not affect your standing in the district. The researcher will ask you to engage in an individual interview. Interviews will take between 45-60 minutes. Your participation will be confidential, meaning that your name will not appear in interviews. In addition, the researcher may ask you to engage in Instructional Rounds/a school site visit along with an
Executive Director and the researcher. The site visit will take between 1-3 hours, based on the district schedule.

There is no incentive or pay for participating, however, you will probably enjoy talking with the researcher and discussing how school principals continue to develop and enhance their instructional leadership skills.

Please contact me via email at, ailingworth22@gmail.com if you have any questions regarding this study or would like to communicate your willingness to participate.

If you have questions regarding your rights as a participant in research you may contact the Institutional Review board at San Diego State University 619-594-6622 irb@mail.sdsu.edu.

Thank you for considering this request.

Sincerely,

Amy Illingworth
APPENDIX D

Protocols

**Interview Protocol Guide**

Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed for accuracy. Include the following information, as available:

- Time and location of interview
- Participants present for interview
- Mood of participant during interview

Interviewer will follow the questions outlined in the Appendix, using probing questions as necessary.

**Focus Group Protocol Guide**

Focus Groups will be audio recorded and transcribed for accuracy. Include the following information, as available:

- Time and location of interview
- Participants present for focus group
- Mood of participants during focus group
- Subtle factors such as nonverbal communication
- Interactions between participants

Interviewer will use the questions outlined in the Appendix for each focus group. A community of practice is founded on the social learning theory that when a group comes
together for a sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise they reflect and learn together.

“Learning that is most transformative turns out to be the learning that involves membership in these communities of practice,” (Wenger, 1998, p. 6). This learning informs our identity.

**Observation Protocol Guide**

Provide a descriptive narrative of the meeting. Include the following information, as available:

- The stated purpose of the meeting
- Number of participants expected, present; number late to meeting; absent
- The actual start and end times of the meeting
- Materials distributed at the meeting
- Activities and interactions between participants
- Subtle factors such as nonverbal communication, symbolic meaning of words used

Describe how facilitators led the meeting.

- Were there attempts to include all participants with maximum collaboration?
- What were the topics on the agenda?
- Did the topics explicitly address instructional leadership?
- Was there evidence of effective communication among group members? If not, what were the obstacles?
- Was reflection time built into the meeting? If so, how?
- Were learning activities designed to be social in nature? If so, how?
A data collection form is included below.

**Observational Protocol**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic information (date, time, place, district)</th>
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<table>
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<th>Topic/Meeting</th>
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<td>Descriptive Notes</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Interview Questions:

1. Please describe a typical leadership development meeting.

   Probing questions:
   1a. What is the structure of these meetings?
   1b. Who facilitates these meetings?
   1c. Who attends? Is attendance required?
   1d. What do you wish you could change about these meetings?
   1e. Is there time built into these meetings for reflection?
   1f. How does social learning, or collaboration, play a role in these meetings?

2. Describe the follow up process you employ with your Executive Directors and principals after leadership development meetings.

   Probing questions:
   2a. How often do you visit school sites with principals?
   2b. How do you hold principals accountable for their instructional leadership?
   2c. How do you gather data about the effectiveness of the leadership development meetings?

3. A community of practice is founded on the social learning theory that when a group comes together for a sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise they reflect and learn together. Describe the community of practice that exists in your leadership team.
3a. How often do you seek out communication with your leadership colleagues?

3b. What benefits you receive from your colleague?

3c. Who do you most often call to discuss leadership concerns?

3d. How often do principals seek you out directly for leadership support?

4. Explain how this district leadership development is used to improve teaching and learning at the site level.

5. Describe any professional learning or development you participate in outside of the district.
   a. How does your personal learning network compare to your district network?
   b. Where do you learn best? Under which circumstances?

6. Is there anything else you would like to add that you believe would benefit this study?
   a. Researcher will thank the participant for their time and remind them that they can request a copy of the findings at any time.
   b. Researcher will remind participants that a follow-up interview may be necessary if the data collected warrants it.
APPENDIX F

Focus Group Questions for Executive Directors

Interview Questions:

1. Please describe a typical leadership development meeting.

   Probing questions:
   1a. What is the structure of these meetings?
   1b. Who facilitates these meetings?
   1c. Who attends the meetings?
   1d. What do you wish you could change about these meetings?
   1e. Is there time built into these meetings for reflection?

2. As a leader in this district, what is your role in strengthening the instructional leadership skills of principals?

   Probing questions:
   2a. How often do you visit school sites?
   2b. How do you hold principals accountable for instructional leadership?
   2c. How do the area lead principals support your work?

3. A community of practice is founded on the social learning theory that when a group comes together for a sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise they reflect and learn together. Describe the community of practice that exists in your leadership team.

   3a. How often do you seek out communication with your leadership colleagues?
   3b. What benefits you receive from your colleague?
   3c. Who do you most often call to discuss leadership concerns?
3d. How are the areas of the district organized?

3e. How do the areas influence principal collaboration?

4. Explain how this district leadership development is used to improve teaching and learning at the site level.

5. Describe any professional learning or development you participate in outside of the district.
   a. How does your personal learning network compare to your district network?
   b. Where do you learn best? Under which circumstances?

6. Is there anything else you would like to add that you believe would benefit this study?
   a. Researcher will thank the participant for their time and remind them that they can request a copy of the findings at any time.
   b. Researcher will remind participants that a follow-up interview may be necessary if the data collected warrants it.
APPENDIX G

Focus Group Questions for Principals

Interview Questions:

1. Please describe a typical leadership development meeting.

   Probing questions:
   1a. What is the structure of these meetings?
   1b. Who facilitates these meetings?
   1c. What benefit(s) do you get out of the meetings?
   1d. What do you wish you could change about these meetings?
   1e. Is there time built into these meetings for reflection?
   1f. How are you held accountable after these meetings?

2. As a leader in this district, what opportunities do you have to strengthen your instructional leadership skills?

   Probing questions:
   2a. Do you have requirements from the district or are they optional?
   2b. How does technology/social media play a role in your development?
   2c. How do you seek out new learning to enhance your skill set?

3. A community of practice is founded on the social learning theory that when a group comes together for a sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise they reflect and learn together. Describe the community of practice that exists in your leadership team.

   3a. How often do you seek out communication with your leadership colleagues?
   3b. What benefits do you receive from your colleague?
3c. Who do you most often call to discuss leadership concerns?
3d. How do your leadership meetings support your community of practice?
3e. How do your “areas” influence your collaboration with peers?

4. Explain how this district leadership development is used to improve teaching and learning at the site level.

5. Describe any professional learning or development you participate in outside of the district.
   a. How does your personal learning network compare to your district network?
   b. Where do you learn best? Under which circumstances?

6. Is there anything else you would like to add that you believe would benefit this study?
   a. Researcher will thank the participant for their time and remind them that they can request a copy of the findings at any time.
   b. Researcher will remind participants that a follow-up interview may be necessary if the data collected warrants it.
APPENDIX H

Possible Follow up Interview Questions for Lead Principals

**Interview Questions:**

1. Please describe the expectations the district has for a lead principal.

   **Probing questions:**
   
   1a. How were you selected as a lead principal?
   
   1b. Who supports you in this role?
   
   1c. What benefit(s) do you get out of being a lead principal?
   
   1d. What do you wish you could change about this structure?
   
   1e. How is the community of lead principals developed?
   
   1f. How are you held accountable as a lead principal?

2. How do you explain the increases in district student achievement data (API, etc.) over the last nine years?

   **Probing questions:**
   
   2a. How is student achievement data addressed in leadership meetings?
   
   2b. How is student achievement data used in principal evaluations?
   
   2c. How do you use student achievement data in your leadership?

3. How you think the district leadership development program has impacted site professional development?

4. Describe the impact of the district leadership development program on your personal growth as a leader.
APPENDIX I

Initial Codes for Data Analysis

**Codes:**

CO- Coaching
CP- Community of Practice
IL- Instructional Leadership
PD- Professional Development
PR- Professional Reading
RF- Reflection
## APPENDIX J

Emerging Themes Data

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<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
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<th>Individual/ group by whom theme was referenced most frequently</th>
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</table>
Hello,

You are being invited to participate in a study of the leadership development structures in your district. The purpose of Structures for Instructional Leadership Development research is to investigate how districts create structures to support on-going instructional leadership development for site and district leaders. This study will also explore the community of practice that is created as part of a district structure for leadership development. Such a study advances awareness and understanding of leadership in support of improving student achievement.

The researcher is Ms. Amy Illingworth, an Educational Leadership doctoral student at San Diego State University. She has been an educator for over 17 years, and currently serves as a Director of Educational Services for South Bay Union School District. The findings of the research will be used to create a case study that other researchers can use for further investigation and that educational leaders and policy makers can use to advance structures for on-going leadership development in school districts. The faculty supervisor for this study is Cynthia L. Uline, Ph.D. Dr. Uline is a professor of educational leadership at San Diego State University. Dr. Uline co-directs San Diego State’s doctoral program in Educational Leadership and serves as Executive Director of the National Center for the 21st Century Schoolhouse.

The research includes observations, focus groups, and interviews. You will be asked to contribute to this study by being present in the district leadership development meetings that are observed by the researcher and by participating in an individual interview, lasting approximately 60 minutes. The interview will take place in a private location in your office. The interview will be digitally recorded to ensure the accuracy of your responses. Handwritten notes will be taken for subjects who choose not to be recorded. Examples of questions include: 1) Please describe a typical leadership development meeting; 2) Explain how this district leadership development is used to improve teaching and learning at the site level. You can choose not to answer the questions you are uncomfortable answering. You will be allowed to skip questions that cause discomfort and continue with participation. Your participation is voluntary and there is no penalty if you choose not to participate or choose to discontinue participation. The research
involves minimal risk to the participants (less than or equal to that encountered in daily life at school).

You may experience the following difficulties, as follows: You may feel uncomfortable talking about your feelings about the district environment or may become tired or frustrated when trying to complete the assigned tasks. If that should occur, you may discontinue participation, either temporarily or permanently. You can also choose not to answer the questions you are uncomfortable with answering.

The researcher does not foresee any other discomforts or risks associated with this data collection. There are no experimental variables and there is no compensation for participation in this study.

You will have contributed to a study that could be of benefit to educational leaders and policy-makers. You may also learn about aspects of on-going instructional leadership and communities of practice during your participation in this study. Your name will be coded to match data collected. All names in work published by the researchers will be pseudonyms. Focus groups will be audiotaped and transcribed. If you choose not to be audio taped, you can still participate in the study and handwritten notes will be taken. Quotes from the observations, focus groups, and interviews may be used for publication of findings but no participant will be identified by name. Your participation will remain confidential (this means that we will conceal your identity and only codes will be used on interview forms and notes we take) except as required by law. The researcher does not believe there are any conflicts of interest, and the participant does not waive any legal right by participating in this study.

You may contact the researcher with questions by email (aillingworth22@gmail.com). It is suggested that you keep a copy of this consent form for your records.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your choice of whether or not to participate will not influence your future relations with San Diego State University. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and to stop your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are allowed.

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the Division of Research Affairs at San Diego State University (telephone: (619) 594-6622; email: irb@mail.sdsu.edu).

The San Diego State University Institutional Review Board has approved this consent form, as signified by the Boards’ stamps. The consent form must be reviewed annually and expires on the date indicated on the stamps.

Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this document and have had a chance to ask any questions you have about the study. Your signature also indicates that you agree to be in the study and have been told that you can change your mind and withdraw your consent to participate at any time. Your signature also indicates
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The research includes observations, focus groups, and interviews. You will be asked to contribute to this study by being present in the district leadership development meetings that are observed by the researcher and by participating in a focus group interview, lasting approximately 60-75 minutes. The focus group will take place in a private location at one of your district locations. Focus groups will be digitally recorded to ensure the accuracy of your responses. Handwritten notes will be taken for subjects who choose not to be recorded. Examples of questions include: 1) Please describe a typical leadership development meeting; 2) Explain how this district leadership development is used to improve teaching and learning at the site level. You can choose not to answer the questions you are uncomfortable answering. You will be allowed to skip questions that cause discomfort and continue with participation. Your participation is voluntary and there is no penalty if you choose not to participate or choose to discontinue participation.
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