AN ANALYSIS OF A HIGH PERFORMING

SCHOOL DISTRICT'S CULTURE

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Abstract

This report describes a problem based learning project focusing on the cultural elements of a high performing school district. Current literature on school district culture provides numerous cultural elements that are present in high performing school districts. With the current climate in education placing pressure on school districts to perform at a high level, the researchers sought to validate or invalidate cultural elements in the literature by comparing them to cultural elements in a district selected for its high performance. Identifying elements that are present in both the literature and the subject high performing school district gives credence to those elements and provides viable criteria with which districts can focus in order to improve their performance.

The researchers identified five main elements in the literature relating to high performing school district cultures. Those elements were: a shared sense of purpose, continuous improvement, responsibility for student learning, collaborative and collegial relationships, and reflective practice and professional development. These elements along with related sub-elements were identified to construct interview and survey questions. The researchers then spent seven days in a selected high performing district interviewing all administrators in central office, building principals, and three school board members. Also, attendance at events such as administrative, community and school board meetings occurred. This qualitative data combined with information gained from surveys of teachers, counselors, directors and other certificated district personnel became the data from which the researchers identified 14 emergent themes. Those themes were: input/voice, high expectations, teamwork, celebrations, communication,

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stakeholder support, best practices, resource allocation, quality staff, unified purpose, chain of command, board, superintendent, and quality leadership.

The researchers found evidence in the data of all five elements as well as related sub-elements in the subject high performing school district. The results suggest the elements and sub-elements are indeed indicative of a high performing culture and any district wishing to improve their performance would do well to consider such criteria. The researchers utilized this data to identify opportunities for improvement and recommendations were provided to the district.

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A Project Presented to the Graduate Faculty of
Saint Louis University in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education

2012

UMI Number: 3494243

UMI

Dissertation Publishing

ProQuest®

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Acknowledgments

We would like to acknowledge our families for their constant support, encouragement and understanding of the time and effort it took to complete this project. We would also like to thank the members of the community of our subject school district for providing an outstanding culture for our case study. Finally, we would like to recognize Dr. Ronald Rebore and Dr. Dennis Lea, who guided our project in such a way that, ultimately, our final product was much better because of their advice.

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Section 1: Introduction

Introduction

The following is a report of a problem-based learning project focusing on school district culture and its relationship with student performance supported by literature. The paper is divided into seven sections. The sections include: the introduction to the project and problem, description of the project phases, foundational knowledge, methodology, analysis of data, findings, and conclusions and recommendations.

Significance of the Project

School districts are faced with the problem of increasing student achievement in order to satisfy the requirements of No Child Left Behind. As school districts move forward with strategies to meet the objectives and outcomes of the law, there is an emerging philosophy among districts that a high correlation exists between a healthy culture with increased student motivation and performance (Smith, 2007).

With the advent of No Child Left Behind, districts nationwide have painstakingly attempted to identify exactly how to increase student achievement in order to meet the ever-increasing criteria of the law, passed in 2001 (Waters & Marzano, 2006). The measure ensures all students are instructed by educators that are highly qualified, and schools that do not make adequate yearly progress towards 100% student proficiency by 2014 will face severe consequences. Part of the law is an emphasis on performance in all demographic subgroups in an attempt to narrow any gaps in education for all students (Waters & Marzano, 2006).

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The law is federal in nature, but education in the United States is largely administered at the state and local levels. Therefore, each state will establish standards independent of other states and allow delegation of the minutia of the law to be handled by individual school districts (United States Department of Education, 2011). Most notably, it is the state that sets up the laws regarding funding of education, so oftentimes districts are handcuffed with shrinking resources, but increasing expectations. These dwindling resources hinder districts from attracting highly qualified educators and prevent opportunities for those instructors from receiving professional development that would enhance the activity occurring in the classroom.

Despite these limitations, the local school district has the ultimate bearing on the assessment results that determine adequate yearly progress and on narrowing the achievement gap. The hunt is constantly on for how individual districts can achieve more with a reduction in resources.

The answer may lie within the components of a district's organizational makeup and atmosphere as much, if not more, than identifying a certain instructional strategy or knowledge of a grade level expectation. The cultural aspects of a school district acknowledged in this project could have a greater impact on student achievement before any decision is made about curriculum or on a textbook series.

Historically, many public school districts nationwide have had elements of great leadership, instruction and vision. This era of increased school district accountability and high-stakes assessment have brought to light which districts already demonstrate these elements consistently and those that are aspiring to attain those levels of performance.

In the search for how to make a school district high performing, Cawelti and Protheroe (2002) suggested many elements of a school district that contribute to a high performing learning community such as using assessment information properly, restructuring accountability systems, having focused and clear standards, and nurturing a philosophy about high expectations and learning.

This learning community can be more commonly known as a culture (Peterson, 2009). Peterson looked at culture as an entity unto itself with a personality of its own. Some of it is documented and catalogued and other parts of it are unspoken and unwritten. All of it is cherished and ingrained within the spirit of community. More simply put, culture is based on "how we do things" (Tableman, 2004, p. 2) in this school district.

Ellis (1998) suggested that school district culture is "easy to perceive," but "difficult to define, measure, or manipulate" (p. 3). There are many subjective factors involved in defining what goes into the inner workings of culture. Among those elements of a district with a positive culture include a dedicated and cooperative staff and students that have enthusiasm and a high work ethic. All stakeholders must have a sense of trust, respect, and support.

Deal and Peterson (1999) defined school culture as the entrenched patterns of values, beliefs, and traditions that have been developed over the course of a school's history. School culture is a reflection of the shared thoughts, assumptions, standards, and attitudes that give an institution its identity and beliefs for expected behaviors. These thoughts are deeply implanted in the institution and, in large part, operate subconsciously. They are so deeply embedded that, many times, they are taken for granted.

What is not clear is a well-defined and objective level of determination between a positive and negative school district culture. The identification of what can specifically be done to bring about lasting change is unclear.

Wagner (2006) stated that looking at culture was not widely accepted at one time, but now is highly thought of in school district improvement plans. Examining school district culture may be the absent piece to define student success, even greater than elaborate curriculum concepts, benchmark examinations, or other efforts of educational reform (Renchler, 1992).

Peterson (1999) said there is no doubt the culture of an institution is a critical factor in being productive and successful. Without a culture that supports and is familiar with the significance of specific kinds of learning goals, change and progress will not occur. Culture impacts where people focus. Culture impacts motivation. Motivation impacts productivity. Lastly, culture impacts the likelihood faculty members, students, parents, and leaders will put effort into continuous improvement.

Guiding Questions

The purpose of the project is to identify school district cultural characteristics that may be conducive to higher student performance. School district culture has been shown to be related to student achievement (Peterson, 1999). From the review of foundational knowledge, the following guiding questions emerged:

1. What are the factors that support a school district's culture leading to student performance at an optimum level?

2. Do each of these factors work together in order to create and sustain a high performing culture?

3. Is a shared sense of purpose evident in the culture?

4. Is there a school district culture of continuous improvement?

5. Do all stakeholders feel a sense of responsibility for the learning of all students?

6. Is there evidence of collaborative and collegial relationships between all stakeholders?

7. Is there evidence that staff reflection and professional development are valued in the district?

8. Is there evidence of open and honest internal communication?

These questions guided the researchers' investigation and directed the learning. Specific questions were created for interviews and surveys based on the guiding questions listed above.

Learning Objectives

The researchers utilized the guiding questions in the development of six project objectives:

1. Identify what is culturally valued in a high performing school district.

2. Isolate what level of collegial support is available in a high performing school district.

3. Determine what level of communication exists among stakeholders in a high performing school district.

4. Identify the process of decision making in a high performing school district.

5. Describe the relationships between individuals in a high performing school district.

6. Discover the links in the relationship between culture and student achievement.

To meet these objectives the researchers used a problem based learning approach. Five elements of an effective school district culture emerged from the review of foundational knowledge. The following five elements were used by the researchers throughout the course of the project:

1. Shared sense of purpose: all district stakeholders share a common vision for learning.

2. Continuous improvement: stakeholders exhibit a commitment to make constant progress.

3. Responsibility for students and their learning: stakeholders meet student needs without exception.

4. Collaborative and collegial relationships: staff support one another and value each other's role in student success.

5. Reflective practice and professional development: emphasis is placed on professional growth and development.

The researchers utilized these five elements and developed a protocol to survey and interview stakeholders regarding cultural characteristics in a high performing school district. The data from the surveys and interviews, along with observational data from district meetings, were analyzed to determine emerging cultural themes. The researchers

proposed recommendations consistent with effective school district cultures in order to improve student performance.

Conclusion

School districts are faced with the problem of improving student performance to meet the requirements of No Child Left Behind. The researchers utilized the literature and found that school district culture is related to student achievement (Peterson, 1999). Improving the culture of a school district provides one avenue to accomplish the task of increasing student performance. With this in mind, the researchers developed guiding questions, learning objectives, and five elements of an effective school district culture to create survey and interview protocol. The data provided from the surveys and interviews, as well as the researchers' observations, was analyzed in an effort to identify cultural themes in a high performing school district.

Section 2: Description of the Project Phases

Introduction

This section describes the phases of the project the team used during the problem based learning activity. After reading a wide range of literature, the team identified characteristics of school district culture that theoretically led to higher student performance recurring throughout the literature. The researchers began to question whether or not an already high performing school district then exhibited these traits. Using the characteristics, the team developed interview and survey questions along with documents to categorize observational data. Following the analysis of the interviews, surveys, and observational data, the researchers proposed recommendations to improve the culture of a school district in order to increase student performance.

Problem Identification

To begin the project, the researchers read a wide range of pertinent literature. The project originated as how superintendents and their leadership styles related to academic achievement. The researchers discovered that there were multiple cultural factors besides superintendent leadership styles that contributed to student achievement.

Although the discussion evolved regarding what constitutes a successful school, Smith (2007) stated that most models cite an appropriate school culture as critical. Stolp (1994) found a high correlation between healthy and solid school culture and increased student performance. Shannon and Blysma (2004) stated districts demonstrating

improvement create a culture of commitment, are collegial in nature, demonstrate mutual respect, and possess a sense of stability.

Peterson (2009) concluded that there is no ideal school district culture that will automatically cause a rise in student achievement. He has discovered key elements of purpose, continuous learning, responsibility for student learning, collaboration, and professional practice that make up a positive culture. Peterson went on to say every institution has a mindful, expected part of the rules and processes, but the school's culture is often subconscious and is really what impacts human interaction, problem solving, and how decisions are made.

Therefore, there is reason to believe school districts that show signs and evidence of being able to consistently carry out those cultural messages are more likely the ones that will be able to increase their student performance.

Development of Foundational Knowledge

The researchers read books and articles to identify characteristics of an effective school district culture. The research began on the topic of culture which is a common concept used in the business world (Deal & Peterson, 2009a). The ideas generated about culture through corporations were defined and supported with literature in Section 3 of this project report. The literature then shifted to what is known about culture in the educational setting. The outcome was an organic evolution of what is being accomplished in business and also in education in order to create a vision of characteristics that make up an effective school district culture.

Assessment of Application in Schools

The researchers chose to employ a problem based learning project in an effort to link theory and practice. Significant evidence was revealed when reviewing relevant literature suggesting that the presence of a productive school district culture was conducive to high student performance (Shannon and Blysma, 2004; Phillips, 1996; Stolp, 1994; Peterson, 1999; Hoy and DiPaola, 2008). Linking theory and practice lends itself to studying the culture of high performing school districts. The researchers wondered when studying a high performing school district, whether or not they would discover elements of a productive school district culture found in the literature.

The task of researchers was to build a bridge between already high performing school districts and the characteristics established that define an effective school district culture. Do high performing school districts naturally exhibit the traits that were shown in the literature that make up an effective culture?

Originally, the researchers considered evaluating the culture of numerous high performing school districts. Ultimately, the team felt that an in-depth cultural analysis of a single high performing school district would provide more information than surface level evaluations of multiple school districts. Dedicating a longer time period of data gathering to one school district seemed more promising when comparing elements found in literature of an effective school district culture and cultural aspects of high performing school districts.

The next task was to select a high performing school district in order to collect data for purposes of linking it back to the qualities of an effective school district culture. The process of identifying a single high performing school district to study started by

identifying high performing districts in a Midwestern state. Five criteria were utilized to accomplish the selection beginning with the 2010 state assessment results. The state required 17 tests in areas ranging from third grade math and reading to high school algebra and biology. The researchers rank-ordered the state's school districts by performance index score on each of the 17 assessments. A performance index score is a statistical means to represent multiple sets of information in a single measure (United States Department of Education, 2011).

After analyzing the 522 districts in that state, 74 ranked in the top 15 (3%) on at least one test. Seven districts separated themselves by the frequency with which their students achieved at this level. The researchers then applied four additional criteria in order to make a selection.

The next criteria employed to identify a single high performing school district where an in-depth cultural evaluation could be employed was again a review of index scores on the 17 required assessments. This time the margin was narrowed to include the number of times the seven districts ranked in the top 10 (2%) on each of the 17 tests. Two of the seven districts, including the selected district, did not perform as highly as the remaining five. This shortfall of the selected district was overshadowed by other criteria and will be addressed in the following paragraphs.

The third criteria instituted to select a high performing school district was that of the district's performance on the state's Annual Performance Report (APR). The APR provides a set of standards with which to judge a school district's performance. Standards include performance on state assessments but go beyond this data to include criteria such as attendance, graduation rate, and performance on the ACT. Points are

awarded for select criteria in order to determine if the district is meeting the state's

expectation regarding each standard. The result of their performance on all standards is

compiled in a format known as the APR.

The APR was first utilized in 2000 and the researchers reviewed the results of the

seven high performing districts for the nine years that state data was available. Of the

seven high performing school districts, four met 100% of the state's standards for all nine

years. The selected district was among the four districts suggesting the district

demonstrates consistently high performance. Although some standards in the APR are

not directly related to student achievement, such as career education opportunities, the

researchers valued the APR results as it measures more academic standards than the state

required assessments, such as ACT results (Missouri Department of Elementary and

Secondary Education, 2009).

Superintendent tenure has been found to positively impact student achievement

(Pascopella, 2011; Waters & Marzano, 2007). Further, leaders have a significant impact

on building, embedding, and evolving the culture of an organization (Schein, 2010).

 "Although not all cultural aspects are easily shaped by leaders, over time, leadership can

have a powerful influence on emerging cultural patterns" (Deal & Peterson, 2009b).

 Stable and consistent leadership became the fourth criteria.

Two superintendents had served their district as superintendent for at least 10

years. One superintendent had 15 years experience and the selected district's

superintendent is represented with ten years.

As the final criteria, the researchers considered the percent of students qualifying

for free and reduced lunch. The rate of poverty has long since been noted as a predictor

of student success (Thomas & Stockton, n.d.) and the researchers wanted to ensure the high student performance of the selected district could not be attributed to an elite clientele. At 35%, the selected district's free and reduced rate was twice as high as five of the districts and significantly higher than the sixth.

These criteria were applied in an effort to identify a high performing school district. Cultural characteristics were evaluated after this selection was completed. Any one of the seven districts would likely have provided relevant data in regard to productive school district cultures. Although still high performing when compared to the rest of the districts in the state, when considering how many times the selected district achieved top ten status, other districts demonstrated superior status. Those districts were ultimately eliminated, beginning with their historical performance on the APR. Of the four districts achieving 100% of the state's standards over nine years, only one superintendent had more tenure than the selected district. That superintendent district's student performance was not as high as the selected district. Furthermore, at 35%, the free and reduced rate was 12% higher and more than double that of the other six districts. The subject district was ultimately selected based on their longevity of high performance, the stability and tenure of their leadership, and the socioeconomic status of the community (Pascopella, 2011; Thomas & Stockton, n.d.).

Once the school district was selected, then a methodology for the problem based learning project needed to be chosen. The researchers were able to bring legitimacy to the problem based learning project by employing Yin's (1994) qualitative methodology. The researchers gathered qualitative data in many different forms such as personal interviews, surveys, observation, data assimilation, and comprehensive document

analyzation. The process the team used will be explained in further detail in Section 4 of the project report.

Analysis of Findings

After collecting the above data, the researchers analyzed facts, statements, and observations in a multiple phase process. The first phase was to create a document using a database spreadsheet to gather all qualitative data. Each piece of data was termed a data point. A data point may consist of a written answer to a survey question, a verbal sentence given during an interview, or a recording of an observation made by one of the researchers. Then, independent of the characteristics of effective school district culture already established, the researchers took all the data points and identified 14 emergent themes and the effect those themes had in the district.

The power of those themes was also determined at this stage. The power was identified by the frequency the emergent theme was mentioned in the data points. After the frequencies were established, the next phase involved reading the data points again and the emergent themes in order to compare them to the characteristics of an effective school district culture mentioned earlier. At this point, the bridge between the theory of an effective school district culture and the practices of an already high performing school district was built. This process is explained further in Section 5.

Recommendations and Implications

The importance of an effective school district culture on student performance has been established in literature and through the gathering of data from the high performing

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subject school district. The researchers used five key elements of an effective school district culture from the literature and then separately discovered 14 themes that emerged organically from over 2,200 qualitative data points. The elements and themes were then compared and contrasted with one another, as shown in Section 6 of the project report.

The researchers made recommendations to the subject school district, as well as all districts, to increase student performance by improving effective school district culture. These recommendations and their implications can be found in Section 7 of the project report.

Conclusion

After reading a wide range of literature, the researchers identified characteristics of an effective school district culture found throughout the literature. The team questioned whether or not an already high performing school district exhibited these traits. The researchers reviewed the literature, identified characteristics, developed survey and interview questions, selected a subject school district, determined a proper problem based learning qualitative methodology to be incorporated with the context of a problem based learning activity, and assimilated data. Following the analysis of all the data, the researchers proposed recommendations to assist the subject school district as well as all school district, in general, in improving student performance through the lens of improved school district culture.

Section 3: Foundational Knowledge

Introduction

The researchers reviewed books and articles related to organizational culture and specifically school district culture as it relates to student achievement. There were five elements consistent with a high performing school district culture that emerged from the literature. They are: a shared sense of purpose, continuous improvement, responsibility for student learning, collaborative and collegial relationships, and reflective practice and professional development. The following subsections include a discussion of various works related to culture.

Defining Culture

Schein (1985) calls culture "a pattern of basic assumptions, invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with problems" (p. 9). Primatologist Jane Goodall refers to culture as "the way people live in accordance to beliefs, language, and history" (Goodall, 1986, p. 13). Musgrove (1982) said "culture has been treated as a thing, separate from individuals but with power, influence and even rights over people. It is outside people and does something to them" (p. 113). Deal (1993) defined school culture as the entrenched patterns of values, beliefs, and traditions that have been developed over the course of a school's history. It refers to the multitude of indicators, both subjective and objective.

Every institution has a mindful, expected part of the rules and processes, but the school's culture is often subconscious and is really what impacts human interaction,

problem solving, and how decisions are made (Peterson, 2009). Phillips (1996) said

school culture consists of the "beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors which characterize a

school" (p. 1). Wagner (2006) described school culture as the collective experiences that

create a sense of community, team, and familial membership.

In 2009, the Small Schools Project published a compilation of work on school

culture (Peterson, 2009). Included in the collection, Apple Learning Exchange provided

an interview by Nancy Sellers with Dr. Kent Peterson. Peterson defined school culture as

the "underlining set of norms, values, beliefs, rituals, and traditions that make up the

unwritten rules of how to think, feel and act in an organization" (p. 108).

Unwritten rules are a piece of the culture, and they dictate interactions and staff

meetings. They mold what teachers talk about in the workroom. Virtually everything in

the school can possess a degree of unwritten rules about how to conduct one's self. They

may include how to make decisions. Are decisions made by administrators or are they

shared? They may also include decisions about professional development and the

importance or lack of importance thereof (Peterson, 2009).

The December 2004 issue of *Best Practice Briefs* defines school culture as "the

shared beliefs and attitudes that characterize the district-wide organization and establish

boundaries for its constituent units" (Tableman, 2004, p. 1). School culture is a reflection

of the shared thoughts, assumptions, standards, and attitudes that give an institution its

identity and beliefs for expected behaviors. These thoughts are deeply implanted in the

institution and, in large part, operate subconsciously. They are so deeply embedded that

they are many times taken for granted. School culture is based on "how we do things in

this organization" (Tableman, 2004, p. 1).

Citations regarding school culture are noted as early as 1932 when Willard Waller wrote:

>Schools have a culture that is definitely their own. There are, in the school, complex rituals and personal relationships, a set of folkways, mores, and irrational sanctions, a moral code based upon them. There are games, which are sublimated wars, teams, and an elaborate set of ceremonies concerning them. There are traditions, and traditionalists, waging their world-old battle against innovators. (p. 109)

Deal and Peterson (1999) found:

>Parents, teachers, principals, and students have always sensed something special, yet undefined about their schools; something extremely powerful but difficult to describe. This ephemeral, taken-for-granted aspect of schools is often overlooked and consequently is usually absent from discussions about school improvement. (p. 2)

Students who have attended multiple schools can identify the culture instantly as they seek ways to blend in. When they enter a new school, they recognize that things are different from their last school in a positive or negative way. New staff members can also identify the culture of their new school straight away. They, either consciously or subconsciously, begin to identify unstated rules, expectations, and stealth customs. New teachers immediately begin filtering through information looking for norms and rituals to glean what is required to become an accepted staff member of the school (Deal & Peterson, 2009b). All schools have cultures.

>They may foster collaboration or isolation, promote self-efficacy or fatalism, be student-centered or teacher-centered, regard teaching as a craft that can be developed or as an innate art, assign primary responsibility for learning to teachers or students, view administrators and teachers as colleagues or adversaries, encourage continuous improvement or defense of the status quo, and so on (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008, p. 90).

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A culture will take shape and remain intact any time a group of people work towards a common goal (Musgrove, 1982).

Climate and Ethos

For years words like climate and ethos, along with culture, have been utilized in an attempt to describe this influential, omnipresent, and notoriously vague force (Deal & Peterson, 2009a). Climate depicts the intangible aura about a school's atmosphere. The feeling you get when you walk in the doors. The tone and morale of a place. District climate is defined as the concerted efforts by all staff members within the organization that promote actions to assist the organization in efficiently reaching its goal. School climate is a widely used metaphor for a complicated phenomenon that is easy to perceive but considerably difficult to define, measure and influence (Ellis, 1998). Consequently, student achievement is enhanced by an appropriate school climate and essential in school reform as it serves as a barometer to measure the success, or lack thereof, regarding school reform (Hoy & DiPaola, 2008).

Hoy and DiPaola (2008) claimed climate has a very significant impact on school achievement because it impacts the motivation of individuals. They added that student achievement is also enhanced by a positive district climate. Brookover (1978) made the point that the difference in school climate can explain the difference in student achievement among schools. He went on to conclude that some components of school social milieu clearly impact the academic achievement of schools.

What was not so evident was to ascertain where the climate of a given school lies on the scale between good and poor, or what can be accomplished to sustain lasting

improvement. A school with a favorable climate was seen as having upbeat and committed students, a dedicated, cooperative instructional staff, and a persistent sense of trust, mutual respect, and collaboration between teachers and administrators. A school with an unfavorable climate was likely to have alienated students, staff who are hostile or indifferent to the student body and to one another, and a principal who is not in touch with teacher needs, dictatorial, as well as resistant to any change (Ellis, 1998).

Regardless, a district's climate is a barometer of the activities required in successful school reform (Hoy & DiPaola, 2008). Of all the variables, those that most consistently align with positive school climate and high student performance were those related to the relationship between administration and teachers. Critical factors were faculty participation in making decisions, effective communication, and the demonstration of strong instructional leadership by administration (Ellis, 1988).

A great deal of research has been assimilated based on the assumption that positive school climates produce higher student performance. Not much research was produced that makes this connection outright. A review of studies on school climate did suggest being attentive to school culture matters a great deal in the school, to the students, and the staff (Yonezawa, Jones, Mehan, & McClure, 2008).

Ethos is largely synonymous with culture. Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, Ouston, and Smith (1979) explained that ethos signifies a set of shared norms, values, and attitudes manifested in practices that become a part of the entire school. Effective district ethos consisted of purposefulness of the district's "shared understandings, norms, and values" (Jelinek, Smircich, & Hirsh, 1983, p. 334). Ethos emphasized shared customs and

traits with culture but misses the critical nature of ritual and ceremony (Deal & Peterson, 2009b).

The word culture depicts a more precise and intuitively appealing way to assist school leaders in better understanding their school's underlying conventions, traditions, norms, and expectations that seem to penetrate everything: the way people behave, how they dress, what they converse about or avoid conversing about, whether they seek peers for help or not, and how teachers perceive their work and students (Deal & Peterson, 1999).

Relevance of Culture

Business has long recognized the importance of a positive culture relative to its bottom line. Lou Gerstner of IBM, is a disciple of the concept that being attentive to the culture of an organization is critical to success. In his book, *Who Says an Elephant Can't Dance*, Gerstner says, "I came to see, in my time at IBM, that culture isn't just one aspect of the game, it is the game" (p. 2). Highly reputable organizations have advanced a shared webbing of traditions that instill work with importance, passion, and purpose (Deal & Peterson, 2009a). "The evidence is pervasive; the word *culture* is a staple in business lexicon. Every business leader we've talked to about success mentions it in the first few minutes" (Deal & Peterson, 2009a, p. 1). Schein (2010) viewed shaping the culture of an organization as one of the most important tasks of a leader.

Why should school district leaders pay attention to culture? In this age of accountability, ushered in by both federal and state mandates, schools are experiencing increased pressure to produce results similar to a business model. The proverbial bottom

line takes the shape of performance on standardized tests (Boyles, 2000; Senge et al., 2000). Be it business, a school district, or non-profit organization, researchers have deduced that organizations shifting from a traditional management style to focusing on culture have demonstrated improvement in various components of their organization. These components include profits, employee satisfaction, and shared knowledge (Bagraim, 2001; Denison & Mishra 1989; Detert, 2000; Heskett & Kotter, 1992).

In its second standard, the Iowa Association of School Boards (2002) advocates the importance of school culture by evaluating the superintendent's ability to sustain a positive school culture. The standard read, "A school administrator superintendent is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional development" (p. 1). The indicators for this standard were as follows:

Provides leadership for annually assessing and setting priorities on student and district needs.

Evaluates and provides direction for improving school district programs.

Examines student achievement data, disaggregates data and creates improvement plans.

Provides leadership for assessing, developing, and improving school environment and culture.

Provides leadership encouragement, opportunities, and structure for all staff to continually design more effective teaching and learning experiences for all students.

Evaluates and provides direction for improving instructional strategies.

Develops and offers opportunities that respond to staffs' needs for professional development.

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Encourages and facilitates the use of technology to improve teaching and learning.

Encourages and supports personal and professional development among staff.

Demonstrates awareness of professional issues and developments in education.

Develops and revises as needed his/her own professional development plan for continued improved performance (pp. 2-3).

Characteristics of Culture

People in any functional organization must agree on how to accomplish tasks and what is worth accomplishing. A stable staff and widespread goals pervade the school. School-wide recognition of stakeholders is a priority. Consistent agreement on curriculum and instructional practices as well as management and student discipline are established through agreement. Open and sincere communication is expected and there is a profusion of humor and trust. Substantial support from administrators at the school and district levels are also prevalent (Wagner, 2006).

Peterson (2009) explains that there is no ideal school culture. He advocates, however, that many researchers have consistently found certain characteristics to be present in school districts with a positive culture. These characteristics are as follows:

First of all, there needs to be a widely shared sense of purpose and values that is consistent and shared across staff members. Without this, you have fragmentation and often times, a conflict.

Secondly, we find that there are group norms of continuous learning and school improvement that the group reinforces the importance of staff learning and a focus on continuous improvement in the school.

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A sense of responsibility for a student's learning. We always assume that the staff really believes and feel responsible for student learning. But, in some schools they blame the students for not being successful. In a positive culture, staff really feel a sense of responsibility for the learning of all students.

Fourth, we find collaborative and collegial relationships between staff members. People share ideas, problems and solutions. They work together to build a better school.

Finally, in more positive cultures, there's a real focus on professional development, and staff reflection, and sharing of professional practice. These are places where people interact around their craft; they improve their teaching; and they do it as a shared collaborative (pp. 109-110).

Tableman (2004) discussed the idea that the personality of a school district's culture can be inferred from multiple layers:

Artifacts and symbols: the way its buildings are decorated and maintained

Values: the manner in which administrators, principals and staff function and interact.

Assumptions: the beliefs that are taken for granted about human nature (p. 2)

Pritchard, Marshall, and Morrow (2003) provide a scale regarding district culture. It revolves around the points that follow:

Personnel doing right things for kids, instead of doing things right.

Personnel are focused on problem-solving within the school/district structure rather than blaming children, parents, society outside of their control.

Leadership pattern should be collaborative, facilitative, consultative instead of authoritarian, directive, manipulative.

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Positive level of trust and relationship exists between central office and schools.

Positive communication and cooperation among teachers and administrators evidenced.

Professional norms include peer support, collaboration, trust, shared responsibility.

Continuous learning. Climate has a significant impact on school achievement because it affects the motivations of individuals (Methods section, para. 3).

In their books, *Shaping School Culture: Pitfalls, Paradoxes, & Promises* and *The Shaping School Culture Fieldbook*, Deal and Peterson provide an in-depth discussion on several cultural concepts mentioned. Namely, the importance of tradition, values, beliefs, norms, rituals, and ceremonies in shaping school culture (Deal & Peterson, 2009a; Deal & Peterson, 2009b).

Deal and Peterson's (2009a) discussion regarding tradition is rooted in the history of an organization.

Traditions are significant events that have a special history and meaning that occur year in and year out. Traditions are like bookmarks in the passage of time; they reinvigorate the culture and symbolize it to insiders and outsiders alike. They take on the mantle of history, anchored in an ancient past. (pp. 107-108)

Deal and Peterson (2009a) went on to state that history plays an important role in the evolution of culture. They expressed that all schools have histories. It began before the walls are erected and the doors opened for the first time. The inaugural core of beliefs and values remains constant and the accrual of key experiences around the nucleus story is collective. Otherwise, the ethos of the school becomes fractioned into subgroups and the school is susceptible to the latest educational fad. All people and

organizations have histories. Whether they realize it or not, they utilize history when

they make decisions. It is not an issue of whether people look to the past to chart their

course but how accurate is their account of the past (Tyack & Cuban, 1996).

Yesterday's events exist in the hearts and minds of those who experienced them.

This history is then shared with new staff through stories and legends. The past provides

the basis for the organization's culture, which manipulates what happens. When stories

are shared, new staff members glean what is important and valued by the organization

(Deal & Peterson, 2009b). Cultural histories provide a profound symbolic and communal

purpose so the future may be rooted in core values and filled with optimism (Deal &

Peterson, 2009a).

Other concepts ascertained to depict the profound mythical underpinning of

organizational culture include values, beliefs, and norms. All are connected and have

similar characteristics used to describe the "sacred calling of an educational enterprise"

(Deal & Peterson, 2009a, p. 66). Values are the mindful idiom for what's important to an

organization. Values are not only goals and outcomes; values encapsulate a profound

sense of a school's priorities (Deal & Peterson, 2009a). Values are the mindful

expressions of what an organization cares about (Ott, 1989).

Beliefs are how we understand the environment around us. Beliefs are rooted in

faith as opposed to evidence. They provide a connection between cause and effect.

Beliefs are dominant in schools because they symbolize nuclear understandings about

what responsibility teachers have for student learning, collaboration, and how teaching is

connected with learning (Deal & Peterson, 2009a). Beliefs are how we understand and

deal with the world around us (Ott, 1989).

Norms are an assimilation of assumptions, values, and beliefs. They are unspoken symbols and taboos directing behavior, how one dresses, and speaks. These unceremonious rules become blueprints for behavior that people are obligated to follow (Deal & Peterson, 2009a). Norms are "organizational sea anchors providing predictability and stability" (Ott, 1989, p. 37).

In the complex environment of public education, with numerous challenges and significance to communities, ritual is likely more critical than in business where results can easily be measured in a product or service. When people pay homage to traditional rituals, it provides a cultural foundation to endure challenges, difficult times, and change. "Rituals are the comings and goings that create the mortar that binds people and activities; rituals provide behavioral glue that holds a school together" (Deal & Peterson, 2009a, p. 93). Schools perform many rituals such as preparing report cards because it is the historical expectation of the organization. Schools sometime continue practices and procedures when even when their value is no longer realized (Griswold, 1994).

Ritual provides the opportunity to act out in a communal setting what is otherwise difficult to touch, comprehend, or understand. Doing so expresses the organization's core values and brings participants closer together. "Ritual is to culture what a movie is to script, a concert is to the score, or a dance is to values that are difficult to express in any other way" (Deal & Kennedy, 1982, p. 63). The repetition highlights, renews and revives our sense of purpose and direction (Deal & Peterson, 2009a). People "express in ritual what moves them most, and since the form of expression is so conventionalized and obligatory, it is the values of the group that are revealed" (Moore & Meyerhoff, 1977, p. 32).

Ceremonies are intricate, culturally sanctioned proceedings in which organizations commemorate successes, express values, and celebrate the significant contributions of staff members. Schools with positive cultures conduct ceremonies to unite people, bonding them to important values and reemphasizing core purposes. These impressive events occur periodically or in response to significant success or tragedies. Each ceremony is successful if it expresses profound values and purposes, is organized, run well, and is grand and special. Examples include opening day ceremonies, seasonal ceremonies, recognition ceremonies, and transitional ceremonies (Deal & Peterson, 2009a).

The architecture and physical environment of schools speaks loudly regarding what a school values and believes (Cutler, 1989). Students and teachers spend a great deal of time within the confines of their school. Students spend 14,000 hours through twelve years of school (Deal & Peterson, 2009a). The physical environment of a school has an impact on our emotional state. If it lacks light and is unclean, its occupants will likely feel drained, unhappy, and depressed. On the other hand, in environments that are clean, well-decorated with light and color, and have students' work on display, occupants are more likely to feel positive, upbeat, and pleased to be associated as part of the school (Deal & Peterson, 2009b).

Toxic Cultures

In contrast, Peterson (2009) references toxic cultures. He says in toxic cultures, staff place blame on the victim. They perceive that fault lies with the student for not learning. "Some people believe the parents are not sending their best kids to school, but

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they are" (p. 110). He added that in toxic cultures success is not celebrated (Deal &

Peterson, 2009b). When people do not bond and work together successfully, a toxic

culture can flourish (Lincoln & Kalleberg, 1990). Critical to successful school

performance is that heart and character are present in interpersonal relationships among

individuals, their work to serve all pupils, and a mutual sense of responsibility for student

learning. Without heart and character being nourished by culture, schools become

factories of learning with no soul and fervor, merely deceased cultures without spirit

(Deal & Peterson, 2009b).

Culture and Student Performance

Although the discussion evolves regarding what constitutes a successful school,

most models cite an appropriate school culture as critical (Smith, 2007). Once

considered a supple approach to school improvement, school culture has, at last, collected

the depth of research needed to qualify as a mainstay in a school leader's improvement

plans (Wagner, 2006).

From 1981 to 2006, Phillips conducted in excess of 3,100 school culture

evaluations and revealed undeniable anecdotal confirmation that the connection between

school culture and student performance is authentic, and that culture influences

everything that goes on in a school. Phillips found a correlation between school culture

and staff fulfillment, parent commitment, and community support (Phillips, 1996).

In a later study, Melton-Shutt (2004) studied 66 elementary schools in Kentucky

to ascertain whether a correlation existed between results on the School Culture Triage

Survey and the state test scores. In every scenario, the higher the result on the survey, the

higher the state test score, and the lower the survey score, the lower the state test score.

The School Culture Triage Survey determines the extent with which three characteristics of culture were evident in a school or school district. These behaviors are:

> Professional Collaboration: Do teachers and staff members meet and work together to solve professional issues, that is, instructional, organizational, and curricular issues?

> Collegial relationships: Do people enjoy working together, support one another, and feel valued and included?

> Efficacy or self-determination: Are people in the school because they want to be? Do they work to improve their skills as true professionals or do they simply see themselves as helpless victims of a large uncaring bureaucracy? (p. 2)

In the latter part of the 1970s and early 1980s, the studies on effective schools time and again demonstrated that high performing schools had a culture that was purposeful and conducive to learning (Levine & Lezotte, 1990). In a milestone study in the United Kingdom, Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, Ouston, and Smith (1979) demonstrated school culture as a primary contributor to the academic performance of students. More recently, research on school change has pointed to the organizational culture as vital to the successful advancement of teaching and learning (Deal & Peterson, 1999). An elaborate study of school restructuring demonstrated convincingly that altering the structure of schools is not enough (Newmann & Associates, 1996). To be successful, both new structures and an appropriate culture are necessary (Deal & Peterson, 1999).

Stolp (1994) found a high correlation between healthy and solid school culture and increased student performance. Districts demonstrating improvement create a culture

of commitment, are collegial in nature, demonstrate mutual respect, and a sense of stability (Shannon & Blysma, 2004). Peterson (2009) says there is no doubt that the culture of an institution is a critical factor in being productive and successful. Without a culture that supports and is familiar with the significance of specific kinds of learning goals, change and progress will not occur. Culture impacts where people focus. Culture impacts motivation. Motivation impacts productivity. Lastly, culture impacts the likelihood that faculty members, students, parents, and leaders put effort into continuous improvement and getting better at their craft. "If you don't have a positive, professional culture, you are not going to have a productive school" (Peterson, p. 109).

In 2004, Shannon and Blysma published an analysis of eighty research reports and articles on characteristics of improved school districts. They identified characteristics of school districts that are demonstrating significant improvement in student learning. The result was thirteen common themes which were clustered into four broad categories: "Effective Leadership, Quality Teaching and Learning, Support for Systemwide Improvement, and Clear Collaborative Relationships" (p. 1).

With regard to the first category of effective leadership, Shannon and Blysma (2004) revealed that districts experiencing significant improvement have shared beliefs and values, clear goals, and a vision for progress. Cawelti and Protheroe (2002) also found that in high performing districts superintendents and central office administrators promote widely shared beliefs about student learning, have high expectations and are results oriented. Leaders in high performing districts are noted as being dynamic, united in purpose, hands on, visible in schools, and interested in what is happening in the classroom. They support the improvement of student learning, are encouraging, and

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provide appropriate recognition. Furthermore, instructional leadership is said to be the responsibility of all district administrators, including the superintendent (Shannon & Blysma, 2004). Shared beliefs and values, goals, support from administration, are all expressions that are prevalent in the literature on culture.

In light of quality teaching and learning, category two, Shannon and Blysma (2004) refer to all adults in improved school districts being held accountable for student success. This begins with the superintendent, senior staff and principals. It is clear to staff what is expected and pressure is applied to schools to produce improved student outcomes. The superintendent has an expectation of excellence by all and monitors progress to that end. Staff members are expected to do whatever it takes to make sure that each student is achieving (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2002).

Support for systemwide improvement, category three, involves using data effectively and allocating resources to ensure quality instructional programs. Finally, clear and collaborative relationships are noted as Shannon and Blysma's fourth broad category (2004). They found that school districts demonstrating significant improvement have educators that "develop and nurture a professional culture and collaborative relationships" (p. 5). Category four, clear and collaborative relationships, references culture, and Deal (1993) describes human interaction as it is impacted by culture.

The Superintendent's Role

When referencing high performing or significantly improved districts, both Shannon and Blysma (2004) as well as Cawelti and Protheroe (2002) gave significant attention to superintendent and district leadership. Since the means to obtain high

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achievement and district wide improvement are culture related and since superintendent

leadership is so frequently referenced, one must explore the role of superintendent

leadership in student performance.

Recent studies regarding superintendents have attached their role to instructional

leadership through curriculum and instruction (Kultgen, 2010). Bjork (1993) claimed

that beginning in the early 1980s, the need to re-evaluate the superintendent's role in

instruction had become increasingly obvious. Elmore (2000) added to the discussion by

stating "administration in education...has come to mean not the management of

instruction but the management of the structures and processes around instruction" (p. 6).

The role of the superintendent has historically been a moving target, changing

from a focus on instruction to management and back to instruction (Kultgen, 2010).

Unfortunately, superintendents are forced to be less attentive to instruction so attention

can be directed to managing a political climate that includes fostering confidence in

schools. This can be difficult to accomplish when one considers that respect for district

leaders has been categorically eroded as the job has assumed added challenges (Hanks,

2010).

Effective superintendents are said to be vital to the success of any improvement

effort (Byrd, Drews, & Johnson, 2006). In fact, the superintendent's role has grown over

the years to include an undeniable expectation by stakeholders that they be at the

forefront of efforts related to student achievement (Hanks, 2010).

To make gains in curriculum and instruction a district will not see success without

the active involvement of the district superintendent (Castagnola, 2005; Cuban,

1984; Peterson & Finn, 1985; Sergiovanni, 1990). Districts with superior student

performance have superintendents who are intimately involved with the district's curriculum and instruction efforts (Bjork, 1993). Byrd et al. (2006) explained that superintendents that experience success employ a hands-on approach with regard to instruction, capitalizing on their managerial influence to motivate principals and teachers, careful staff recruitment and selection, clearly defined mission and goals regarding curricular matters and fiscal planning that supports instruction. Regardless, the stage appears to have been set for redefining the superintendent's role in school reform (Bjork, 2001).

Much work has been devoted to establish what instructional practices best influence student performance. (Jones, 2008; Edvantia, 2005; Miller, 2003; Varlas, 2002) Likewise, numerous studies have been conducted to determine what principal leadership characteristics positively impact the performance of students (Waters & Marzano, 2007; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003; Maryland School Performance, n.d.). Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003) claimed there is a significant relationship between leadership and student performance. In the 1980s, critical questions were asked about the superintendent's role in reform, especially regarding student achievement (Bjork, 2001). These questions are important because not only can leaders have a favorable effect on student performance, they can have an unfavorable one (Waters et al,, 2003). The fact is, the superintendent's role in school reform has been neglected in the literature (Castagnola, 2005). Boone (2001) concurred, when he stated that the superintendent's role is clearly absent from the discussion on educational reform.

Not only has the superintendent's impact on student achievement been ignored in the literature, but the overall success or failure of superintendents is a topic that is vague and not thoroughly explored (Byrd et al., 2006). Castagnola (2005) explained that

> research continues to lack a clear definition and agreed upon measures of what constitutes effective school system leadership and offers little information on how superintendents should play their role in improving student achievement. Information is needed regarding the practices of superintendents in high performing districts (p. 6).

Hanks (2010) added that more research needs to be accomplished in regard to the importance of the superintendent's ability to impact student achievement. He goes on to say that the lack of information regarding the ways in which superintendents influence student performance by daily decisions and actions begs for further investigation.

Wooderson-Perzan and Lunenberg (2001) claimed that it was challenging to credit an increase in student performance to any one variable as many factors influence student performance, including factors schools can't control. Superintendents who successfully emphasize specific leadership responsibilities can provide needed pressure and support to keep all schools in their district on target with academic goals (Hall & Hord, 1987).

Spanneut and Ford (2008) stated, "Whether by design or chance, superintendents communicate their beliefs about what is important educationally and the roles they expect their principals to fulfill" (p. 28). Cudeiro (2005) studied several successful superintendents. She found they used various strategies to develop principals: the superintendents placed a focus on student learning by establishing a district wide vision centered on meeting student learning needs. They clearly defined what it means for

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principals to be instructional leaders. Superintendents held principals accountable for

being instructional leaders. Next, they aligned principal supervision and evaluation with

the instructional leadership focus. Principals acknowledged a need for a district wide

focus in the areas of literacy and mathematics. Principals were supported by reorganizing

central services. Lastly, they hired assistant superintendents or deputy superintendents

who had been effective principals themselves and saw their role as both supportive and

supervisory.

With the increasingly high stakes climate schools are facing, the superintendent's

concern is shifting toward instruction. Research indicated district leaders are in the best

position to guide instructional improvement (Hord, 1990). "The current climate and

emphasis on the reform and restructuring of the United States' educational system has

placed an enormous amount of political pressure on schools to demonstrate effective

leadership at the district level" (Morgan & Peterson, 2002, p. 159).

Relatively recent research (Fullan, 2005; Beldon, Russonello, & Stewart, 2005)

suggested the surgence of a new or maybe revived paradigm in regard to responsibility

for student performance. This paradigm shift puts a greater degree of responsibility for

student achievement at the district level. Classrooms are the way they are in large part

because of what happens at the district level (Education Writers Association, 2003). "If

schools are expected to rise to a new standard of providing high levels of learning for all

students, then all persons, including the superintendent, must become active team

members in achieving this goal" (DuFour, 2004, p. 15).

Waters and Marzano (2006) referred to the myth of the blob. The term was

coined by former United States Secretary of Education William Bennett and is used to

describe superintendents, central office staff and school boards who soak up resources without contributing to student achievement.

Waters and Marzano (2006) established that defined autonomy, as opposed to site based management, has a positive correlation in regard to student achievement. Their research identified five activities that, when implemented, are said to produce high student achievement: "ensuring collaborative goal setting, establishing non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction, creating board alignment with and support of district goals, monitoring achievement and instruction goals, and allocating resources to support the goals for achievement and instruction" (Waters & Marzano, 2006, p. 6).

While Waters and Marzano (2006) identified activities in which the superintendent engaged to produce positive student achievement, Byrd et al. (2006) claimed there is no correlation between superintendent leadership style and student achievement. The managerial role of superintendents had a significant effect. They go on to say superintendents must increase lines of communication among stakeholders and allow for autonomy at the campus level in order to have a positive impact on student academic achievement. They both pointed to autonomy at the building level and Waters and Marzano (2006) do not reference leadership style, only activities. Waters and Marzano (2006) explained that defined autonomy as the superintendent provides clear, non-negotiable goals for learning and instruction, but give those responsible for building leadership the authority for deciding how to meet those goals. Kultgen (2010) added to the definition when he suggested that through defined autonomy, the superintendent enlists stakeholders who are driven to meet specific goals.

Effective district leaders provide and communicate focus, parameters, priorities, and expectations (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004). Superintendents in successful districts work closely with their boards to set clear goals centered on expectations for students and student performance (Hill, Wise, & Shapiro, 1989). Leaders in school districts demonstrating improvement are said to be "dynamic, united in purpose, involved, visible in schools, and interested in instruction. Leaders provide encouragement, recognition, and support for improving student learning" (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004, p. 2).

Morgan and Peterson (2002) also explored superintendents in successful school districts and found many practices in common regarding the management of instruction:

> (a) establishing student goals, (b) staffing of principals, (c) supervising and evaluating staff, (d) establishing a district focus on curriculum and instruction, (e) reinforcing technical core operations, (f) monitoring curriculum and instruction. (p. 180)

Their conclusion revealed that superintendents that are more involved with curriculum and instruction are more likely to lead highly effective school districts (Morgan & Peterson, 2002).

Watts (1992) found twelve instructional leadership tasks that were associated with high student achievement:

> (a) collaboratively developing goals, (b) evaluating instructional effectiveness, (c) facilitating instruction through budget, (d) planning for instruction, (e) supervising instruction, (f) monitoring instructional programs, (g) developing principals as instructional leaders, (h) developing instructional policies, (i) reviewing research, (j) selecting personnel, (k) facilitating staff development, and (l) communicating system expectations. (p. 29)

MacIver and Farley (2003) identified common trends from multiple studies, including the need for a focused message from the central office about the critical nature of student performance and its relationship to good instruction. Superintendents must clearly communicate a vision for change, articulate it effectively to all concerned, provide leadership for instruction, evaluate progress, and create a process for professional development through professional learning communities, all while keeping standards and expectations high (Vasquez, 2009).

Peterson (1999) identified five themes consistent among superintendents focused on instruction. They include the superintendent's capacity to "(a) create and communicate an instruction oriented vision, (b) be highly visible, (c) illustrate the importance of instruction through professional development, (d) receive school board support, (e) use assessment and evaluation to determine if instructional expectations and goals are met" (p. 1).

Peterson, Murphy, and Hallinger (1987) examined twelve districts focused on academics, the superintendent's role was key in establishing district effectiveness. Within these districts, superintendents "(a) set goals, (b) provided expectations and standards, (c) participated in staff selection, (d) provided direction in staff evaluation, (e) established and ensured consistency toward instructional and curriculum focus" (p. 88).

In a case study, Kultgen (2010) identified a five step process where the superintendent impacted student success. The steps are "(a) develop a shared vision, (b) implement district goals, (c) consistently communicate expectations, (d) allow principals to implement, (e) and hold principals accountable through monitoring" (p. 139).

Conrad (1994) shared that cultures are naturally communicative. They rise and are maintained by the acts of communication of their employees, not just the deliberate persuasive strategies of executive management. Axley (1996) denoted that "communication gives rise to culture, which gives rise to communication, which perpetuates culture" (p. 153). Culture impacts communicative activities in the organization and that is vital to building, sustaining, and changing culture (Kowalski, 1998). In regard to superintendents, the role of proficient communicator is a relatively new expectation, as it surfaced in the early 1980s. Superintendents that engage in political discourse, promote positive public relations, understand and share the concept of change, provide the skeleton for marketing, as well as demonstrate skill in informing the public will contribute to such a culture (Kowalski, 2004).

Conclusion

As school districts seek ways to improve their performance, they would do well to consider the works of Phillips (1996), Melton-Shutt (2004), Levine and Lezotte (1990), Deal and Peterson (2009b), and Stolp (1994) who all suggest that a healthy and productive culture result in high student performance. "All organizations, including schools, improve performance by fostering a shared system of norms, folkways, values, and traditions" (Deal and Peterson, 2009b, p. 7). These characteristics instill a sense of passion, purpose, and spirit. Without a strong, productive culture, schools struggle and die. The culture of a school district is critical in its role of producing exemplary performance (Deal and Peterson, 2009b). This is the same in any setting, whether a Starbucks coffee shop, a Southwest airline flight, or a Nordstrom department store,

people operate best when they vehemently adhere to a shared set of critical values, identified norms, and meaningful traditions (Deal and Peterson, 2009b).

The researchers reviewed books and articles related to organizational culture and specifically school district culture as it relates to student achievement. There were five elements consistent with a high performing school district culture that emerged from the literature. They are: a shared sense of purpose, continuous improvement, responsibility for student learning, collaborative and collegial relationships, and reflective practice and professional development.

Section 4: Methodology

Introduction

This section describes how the researchers identified characteristics of an effective

school district culture and created survey and interview questions were developed as a

result of those characteristics. A description of how the qualitative data was collected

was also included in this section. Lastly, a description of how the data was triangulated

was detailed in order to establish validity.

Research Design

The research design of this project was based on Robert Yin's (1994) qualitative

model. Multiple sources of evidence and focus on a single issue are keys to drive this

type of design. The task of the researchers was to build a bridge between an already high

performing school district and the established characteristics that define an effective

school district culture.

As Yin suggests (1994), when conducting the research, a number of different

methods of data collection were utilized. Personal interviews with the superintendent,

school board members, the superintendent's cabinet, and building principals were central

to the project. Electronic surveys were deployed for the director of food service, director

of maintenance, central office support staff, teachers, counselors, process coordinators,

teachers on special assignment, and all other non-administrative certificated staff.

 Observation occurred at board meetings, parent group meetings, administrative

meetings, and cabinet meetings. In addition, data was utilized to paint the picture of

school district culture involving the obtaining of artifacts such as comprehensive district improvement program documents. The idea of qualitative research design refers to the concept that the researchers were attempting to work towards examining all parts of a phenomenon and uncovering how they work together.

Development of Elements

Five elements of an effective school district culture emerged from the review of foundational knowledge. The supporting information was provided in Section 3 of this project. The following five elements were used by the researchers throughout the course of the project.

The first element utilized by the researchers was a shared sense of purpose where all stakeholders in the school district shared a common vision for learning. Research indicated the concept of strong student-centered leadership permeated throughout high performing school districts and their school improvement plans indicate as such (Shannon and Blysma, 2004).

The second element identified as effective was the idea that improvement was occurring continuously among all stakeholders in the district. A commitment to improvement among students, faculty, administration, parents, and the community provided consistency in expectations across the district (Cawelti and Protheroe, 2002).

Third, research showed that effective school district culture involved all stakeholders taking responsibility for all students and their learning by meeting their needs without exception. Every member of the school community from the school board and superintendent on down to the custodial staff does have a part in the education of

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every child in the district. More responsibility for student achievement was placed on those not directly in the classroom, but in supportive roles of that classroom teacher, including central office personnel (Kultgen, 2010).

The fourth element that emerged from the review of foundational knowledge concerned relationships between individuals in the school district. The level of respect and support between individuals in a school district and the community are a large indicator of the value they place on one another in the role of student achievement (Wagner, 2006).

Finally, the fifth element identified was reflective practice and professional development. The districts that provided instructional growth opportunities for their staff were the ones that had a positive influence on their student achievement (Bredeson, 1996).

The development of the five elements of effective school district culture resulted from the review of foundational knowledge. These five elements were the basis of survey and interview questions as well as the lens by which observational data was scrutinized.

Development of an Analysis Instrument

After identifying elements of an effective school district culture, the researchers developed an analysis instrument. The analysis instrument was created and included sub-elements for indicators of the identified elements to indicate their presence or absence.

The researchers organized the analysis instrument to reflect the qualitative nature of the project. Based upon the review of foundational knowledge, the instrument reflects

the five elements of an effective school district culture. Sub-elements were also noted on the instrument that emerged from foundational knowledge as indicators of the elements. Columns were created representing each of the 21 administrative and school board member interviews conducted and five district events attended. The analysis instrument was used to determine the presence or absence of the elements in each interview and event.

The researchers also conducted large-scale surveys with district and building faculty. It was determined that there would be too much qualitative information for this instrument to be used effectively in the determination of the presence or absence of elements among those stakeholders. That qualitative data was analyzed via the use of five spreadsheets that represented the five elements of an effective school district culture that resulted from the review of foundational knowledge. This process will be described later in this section.

Upon completion of the analysis instrument and the subsequent interviews and events, the researchers utilized the instrument to summarize information from those interviews and events.   The researchers analyzed notes and transcripts from each interview and event for evidence of each element and sub-element and indicated its presence or absence on the instrument.

Development of the Interview and Survey Questions

After the elements of an effective school district culture emerged from the review of foundational knowledge and the analysis instrument, interview and survey questions were developed. The questions were designed to be open-ended and reflected the ability

for the interviewee to speak freely where the researchers would then determine the presence or absence of each element and sub-element of an effective school district culture previously mentioned. Open-ended questions are important because they provide the respondent an opportunity to give opinions as well as facts about an issue (Yin, 1994). The researchers developed questions for various employees of the school district in the form of a survey for teachers and a personal interview for administrators.

The researchers created an anonymous eight question open-ended survey to be taken online by teachers, counselors, process coordinators, teachers on special assignment and all other non-administrative certificated staff (See Appendix A). A somewhat more intensive 11 question open-ended online survey was deployed for the director of food services, director of maintenance and central office support staff (See Appendix B).

On the home page of the survey, a statement of recruitment was developed with a letter of introduction from the researchers, outlining the purpose of the study and reinforcing the confidentiality of responses. Respondents were given three weeks to complete the survey and the online survey program compiled the responses initially. Personal individual interviews were conducted by both researchers present with the superintendent, three selected members of the school board, the superintendent's cabinet and building principals. The researchers asked between 15-18 questions in each interview (See Appendix C and D). Interviews with the aforementioned individuals lasted between 30-60 minutes. Interviews were recorded as well as documented via note-taking procedures.

Gathering of Information from the Field

After deciding that surveys, personal interviews, and observations would be used to gather information, the researchers became aware that this type of project generated a large amount of data from multiple sources. Therefore, it was critical that the researchers had a systematic organizational method in order to not become overwhelmed by the data. In addition to the analysis instrument, a database spreadsheet was created to assist with the categorizing, sorting, and retrieving of data with respect to the five elements of an effective school district culture.

In February 2011, prior to the collection of data and after the Saint Louis University Institutional Review Board (I.R.B.) approved the researchers' protocol, the school district's superintendent was contacted. The researchers sent a proposal to the superintendent and exchanged ideas via email for further protocol and ground rules. The researchers conducted their interviews and observations during multiple visits in March through May 2011.

This qualitative approach allowed the researchers to investigate in such a way as to hold onto the meaningful traits of events that shape the district and community. For example, organizational and managerial processes, change, relationships, and the organic evolution of processes (Yin, 1994).

Triangulation of the Data

In order to establish validity within the results of the information gathered in the field, it was important to triangulate the data (Guion, 2002). For the purposes of this

project, methodological triangulation was employed. Multiple data collection methods were utilized, including online surveys, face-to-face interviews, observational data, and artifact analysis. According to the tenets of methodological triangulation, the goal was to have each of these varied methods of data collection arrive at the same conclusion. If that occurred, then validity within the data was established, and the findings of this project will be better supported with legitimate evidence.

Overview of the School District

The task of researchers was to build a bridge between an already high performing school district and the established characteristics that define an effective school district culture. Does the selected high performing school district naturally exhibit the traits that were shown in the literature that make up an effective culture?

The process of selecting a high performing school district for the project was documented in Section 2. The initial aspect of the project concerned establishing the elements of an effective school district culture. What hasn't been established was the background information of the selected school district. The forthcoming information about the district was provided as information for comparison regarding further analysis of school district culture.

The selected school district is located in the Midwest. The school buildings in the district were comprised of one high school, one alternative high school, one junior high school (grades 7-8), two intermediate schools (grades 5-6), six elementary schools (grades K-4) and one early learning center.

The community the school district serves had a population of around 20,000 residents and the district served over 5,000 students. In addition, there were larger urban communities located nearby. Originally an agricultural community, the area encountered new service and retail-oriented business in recent years. It was estimated that the area will still continue to grow at a high rate (City, n.d.).

The district student populations in 2009-10 consisted of 93.4% White, 2.7% Hispanic, 2.2% Black, 1.1% Asian and 0.7% Indian. The district was cited by the state with not only accreditation, but with distinction for the last nine years. Data indicated that students in this district in all grade levels and subjects have consistently scored above the state average (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2010).

The hierarchy of the district was as follows: there was a seven-member school board, one superintendent and six others that make up the superintendent's cabinet (one assistant superintendent and five executive directors), 11 building principals (including assistant principals), 432 certified employees and 152 support staff. The superintendent was with the school district since 2000. Many of the members of cabinet and school board had a long relationship with the district as well.

Conclusion

The researchers identified characteristics of an effective school district culture and created survey and interview questions as a result of those characteristics. A description of how the qualitative data was collected was included. The outline for the design and

procedure including protocol for the problem based learning project with a qualitative approach for a high-performing school district was presented. Topics of discussion included the rationale for the protocol approach, the types of collection methods and process, the procedure for collection of data, and the process to establish validity in the data through the use of methodological triangulation.

Section 5: Findings

Introduction

      After interviewing the administrators, surveying the faculty, gathering

observational data from meetings, and collecting artifacts, the researchers analyzed the

data. This occurred in a multiple phase process. The first phase consisted of taking

collected data and organizing them to establish emergent themes. This process began by

transcribing verbal interview responses into a written format and taking observational

data notes along with written survey responses and creating pieces of data. Next, the data

was organized into the previously mentioned analysis instrument and database

spreadsheets that categorized the data into one of the five elements of an effective school

district culture. Each of the pieces of data was then tagged as either a positive or negative

response and was analyzed for an emergent theme. Once all of the emergent themes were

established, the power of themes was identified. The power of the themes was indicated

by the frequency with which the emergent theme was mentioned during the data

collection process. The next phase was to match the emergent themes with the elements

of an effective school district culture that came from the review of foundational

knowledge.

Data Analysis Process

      The project team used a qualitative analysis process to analyze all collected pieces

of data. Each piece of data was termed a data point. A data point may consist of a

written answer to a survey question, a verbal sentence given during an interview, or a

recording of an observation made by one of the researchers. In total, there were over 2,200 data points gathered.

Surveys

All surveys were deployed electronically online through the selected school district's director of communications. Employees were given a website link to the survey through the district's weekly employee communication. The electronic survey provisions were established so that the protocol of the I.R.B. were followed and the responses were not individually identifiable. Only one response was allowed per computer in order to cut down on multiple responses per individual.

Teachers, counselors, process coordinators, teachers on special assignment, and all other non-administrative certificated staff were distributed an eight question, open-ended survey (known as the "teacher" survey). The director of food service, director of maintenance and all support staff in central office were given an 11 question, open-ended survey (known as the "administrative" survey).

Per the I.R.B., a 25% response rate for the teacher survey and a 75% response rate for the administrative survey was desired. The minimum value was achieved for the administrative survey (16 surveys received out of 21 deployed), but not for the teacher survey (78 received out of 432 for an 18% response rate). After consultation with the researchers' advisor, it was determined that this level of response was acceptable and no further attempts at accumulating additional survey data was necessary. All responses were converted into the form of a spreadsheet where they were categorized by the researchers to identify patterns and themes that organically emerged.

Interviews

Personal interviews were conducted with both researchers present with all members of the superintendent's cabinet, all building principals and three members of the Board of Education. A total of 21 interviews were conducted. All interviews were recorded and notes of each interview were taken as well to create data points to be converted into spreadsheet format. Responses were then categorized by the researchers to identify patterns and themes that organically emerged.

Observations

Observations were conducted in the following venues: an administrative meeting where all building administration and central office administration were present, a cabinet meeting featuring the superintendent and his cabinet, an Academic Huddle where teacher-leaders and administrators gathered to discuss academic and student issues, a community meeting where the superintendent and a building principal presented on a featured category to a community audience for feedback, and a school board meeting where the researchers were introduced to the community and the purpose of the study was disseminated.

These meetings were audio recorded. Also, notes of these observations were taken on forms designed with the five elements of an effective school district culture in mind (See Appendix E). Personal observations as well as recording of quotations during meetings assisted in exploring topics in another context than in personal discussion or interviews. All notes were converted into the aforementioned spreadsheet format.

Responses were then categorized by the researchers to identify patterns and themes that emerged.

Document Analysis

The researchers also utilized the district's Comprehensive School Improvement Plan (CSIP) in order to gain a sense of culture utilizing the five elements of an effective school district culture. Other documentation such as fliers, emails, meeting agendas, memorandums, and letters were collected, but many of these artifacts did not contain enough evidence of the elements to warrant the creation of data points. Again, written notes taken from the CSIP were converted into spreadsheet format.

Data Assimilation

All data was converted into written data points. Each data point was placed in one of five spreadsheets, each one based on the five elements of an effective school district culture that emerged from the review of foundational knowledge. Two additional spreadsheets were used.   One for general cultural statements made or observed by a participant. The other for any other statements that were made in a general sense and not necessarily applicable to one of the five initial spreadsheets.

Yin (1994) suggests that finding patterns is at the heart of qualitative analysis. Therefore, the researchers established the spreadsheets to reflect a method in which to find those patterns and themes (See Appendix F).

Over 2,200 data points were compiled and each one was tagged first as a positive or negative response towards the school district culture and then with one or more of 14

themes that emerged, independent of the five elements of an effective school district culture. In the end, the elements provided the framework necessary for the questions. The data took on a life of its own, and will be reported in this section under the following themes of categories that represent reasons why the school district is high performing: school board, unified purpose, superintendent, high expectations, stakeholder support, quality staff, communication, teamwork, celebrations, input and voice, resource allocation, quality leadership, best practices, and chain of command.

Once each data point was tagged, the spreadsheets were then sorted by the above themes to begin our analysis. Through this method of data display (Yin, 1994), the researchers established a visual format to present information in an organized fashion in order to draw conclusions (See Appendix G). All data was kept confidential throughout via password-encoded computer files electronically.

Emergent Themes

The first step in the qualitative analysis consisted of categorizing all data points in each of five spreadsheets that represented the five elements of an effective school district culture that resulted from the review of foundational knowledge. The connection between a particular response and its placement in one of the five spreadsheets stemmed from the origin of the question asked. Each of the survey and interview questions had its roots in one of the original five elements of an effective school district culture. The response to each specific question was then automatically categorized in the spreadsheet representing the origin of the question. Also, the observational data was placed in the spreadsheets. This data was the subjective recordings made by the researchers at the time

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the event was observed. The placement of data into one of the five elements was determined by the researchers at the time of the event.

Once all five spreadsheets were populated, the researchers read each of the 2,200 data points and recorded and grouped like responses. The larger the like responses, the more likely that group of responses would form an emergent theme. Originally, there were more than 14 themes that the project team created after analyzing all of the data points. The researchers were able to consolidate several similar categories together to end up with the resulting 14 themes. Once the 14 themes were established, then the power of each theme was identified by the frequency with which the emergent theme was mentioned in the data points (See Figure 1).
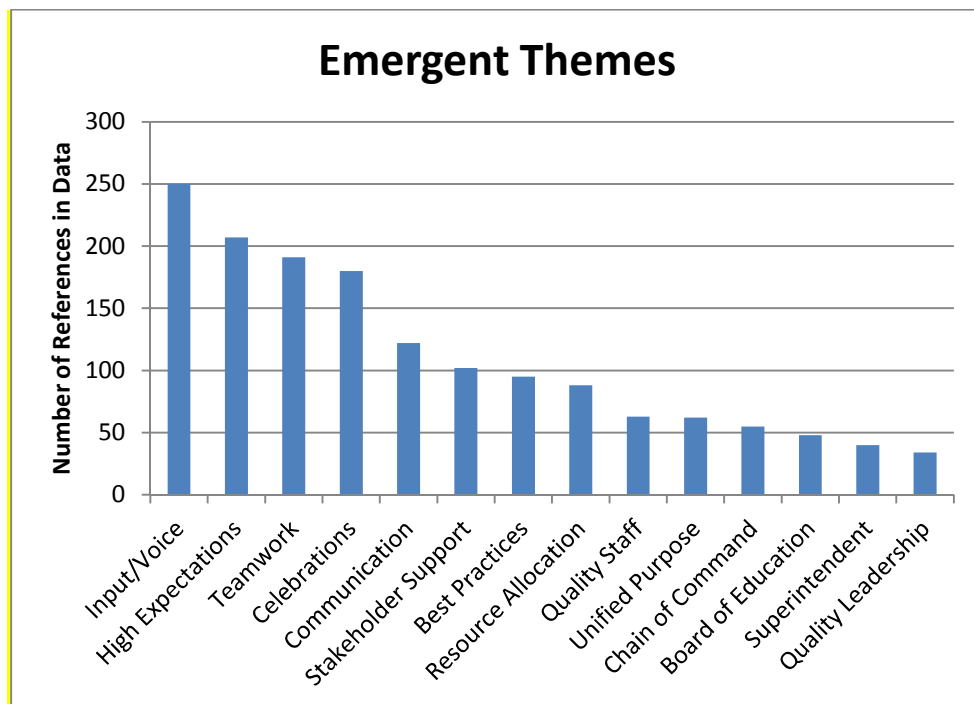
Figure 1. Emergent themes as related to the number of references in the data.

Input or Voice

The power of a theme was identified by the frequency the emergent theme was mentioned or observed in the data points. The most powerful theme was that of input or voice. To provide a numerical perspective, of the 2,200 data points, there are 250 references regarding input or voice. Of these references, the prevailing sentiment in regard to input or voice is the administration's willingness to listen. Staff members made mention numerous times that they feel building and central office administrators are visible, accessible, and ready to listen to problems or concerns presented by the staff.

Along these lines, the data suggests the staff have many opportunities to express themselves through various surveys. A recent over-extension survey was referenced numerous times in the data. The district had received significant feedback that teachers had too much on their plates. In response, the district utilized a survey to identify what responsibilities were weighing teachers down. It was very clear in the data that this activity was very much appreciated.

Another opportunity for teachers to voice their opinions was through their local teacher organization. Many staff members explained that they found the organization to be effective as a liaison between the faculty and administration. Many others reported that the administration has a positive, working relationship with the local teacher organization.

There are various examples of collaborative activities in the district. Both generally and specifically, the staff feels as though the district is collaborative in nature. Specifically, various committees and teams meet throughout the district and were noted as being appreciated by the staff. Professional Committee (ProCom) is comprised of

representatives from around the district and central office administration, not principals. The purpose of the committee is solely for the administration to hear the concerns of the staff.

The Academic Huddle meets quarterly and consists of building and central office administration as well as teacher representatives from around the district. A different teacher attends each meeting and reports back to their respective buildings. The format of the meeting consists of the administration posing five or six topics in the form of a question. An example that researchers encountered on an Academic Huddle agenda is should we eliminate teaching cursive handwriting? The agenda also allows for open comments and questions from the staff. Finally, the data repeatedly reveals that the staff see their building leadership teams as a viable means to voice their opinions and concerns. A collaborative and collegial atmosphere is one of the five elements revealed in the literature regarding a productive school district culture.

The opportunity for stakeholders to provide input was evident in the data. The staff feels like the district does an excellent job of considering patron input. One activity witnessed by the researchers was the superintendent's monthly meeting with patrons. This activity is historically well attended and has been a practice since the superintendent's early years in the district. The format of the meetings typically consists of the district highlighting two programs followed by questions, input, and discussion. The programs presented during the researchers observation was that of student health and wellness and the food service program.

The researchers found the presentations to reveal practical, progressive, and relevant practices in regard to the topics, however, that did not stop the patrons from their

inquisitions. The superintendent responded to their comments and concerns, designating

various school personnel on the spot to investigate issues under discussion. Additionally,

the Comprehensive School Improvement Plan (CSIP), which serves as the district's

strategic plan, was noted as a productive opportunity for staff and patrons to provide

input into the direction of the district. This relates directly to a shared sense of purpose

which is an element in the literature regarding a school district with a productive culture.

 Throughout the 2,200 data points, there is frequent reference to the CSIP putting

stakeholders on the same page.

When referencing input or voice, three of the five elements of a school district

with a effective culture emerged. A shared sense of purpose and a collaborative and

collegial atmosphere have already been referenced in this section. Professional

development, however, was also mentioned in the data. Teachers feel as though the

means with which the district conducts its professional development provided them with

an opportunity to offer input. Some data suggests this is accomplished through teacher

collaboration meetings.

High Expectations

The second most powerful theme is that of high expectations. A total of 207 data

points are referenced as indicating the district has a norm of high expectations. Subjects

frequently articulated the notion that student performance is high and is expected to

continue to improve. Phrases such as continuous improvement, tradition of excellence,

and the desire to go from good to great were prevalent in the data.

Although a specific question was asked related to the expectation of meeting the needs of students, extensive and elaborate answers were provided indicating this is a clear and important expectation in the district. Strong language was frequently used to explain that it is the number one job of all staff members to meet all of the needs of all students. This notion is consistent with the element found in the literature that suggests in school districts with a productive culture, the staff takes responsibility for student learning.

The subject district goes beyond academic needs. Board members and principals referred to various programs that not only measure and provide intervention for the academic success of students but meeting other needs as well. The nutritional, behavioral, and overall well being of the student is not forgotten in this district. Staff and student wellness surfaced on numerous occasions. One school even cared for a garden with a grant to support the development of gardens at additional schools. Meeting the needs of students is a sub-element of responsibility for student learning.

Likewise, meeting the needs of staff members surfaced frequently in the data. Again, a specific interview and survey question prompted many responses related to this topic. The extent to which explanation was provided produced sufficient evidence that the district excels in this area. It is clear to the researchers that most staff feel the administration works diligently to meet their needs. One staff member effectively summarized the comments in this regard by stating that meeting the needs of staff is second only to meeting the needs of students. Among those needs includes compensation and professional development. It was noted several times that although the staff has not had a raise in three years, they know the board and administration are doing everything they can to support staff. When the resources are available, the district will reward the

staff for their patience. Meeting the needs of staff is a sub-element of collaborative and collegial relationships.

There were many references to the community when subjects discussed high expectations. Staff members of the district feel the community is very supportive and expects their schools to be successful. It was reported by subjects that the community has never failed a bond issue or tax levy increase (City, n.d.) and that families move to the community so their children may attend the district's schools. It was also noted that the community recognizes the value the school district provides in regard to growth and commerce.

A reverberating theme among the administrative staff was a lack of tolerance for ineffective employees. The superintendent's expectation is that the administration will give a teacher two years to achieve success. Should the teacher not demonstrate they can meet the administration's standards by that time, they are dismissed. This same sentiment was articulated by central office administrators regarding building leadership.

Noteworthy to the researchers, is the fact that the staff frequently commented on how hard they work. References were made by teachers that have worked in several districts that more is expected of them in this school district. Administrators and board members commented that this is their reputation, and it is understood that you will work hard when you join the district.

Several of the five elements consistent with a successful school district culture were evident when members of the district referenced high expectations. Professional development, continuous improvement, and taking responsibility for student learning has already been mentioned. In addition, a shared sense of purpose was among the most

common references in the data relating to high expectations. It was expressed numerous times throughout the 2,200 data points that the staff is on the same page. The theme of high expectations provided no exception. Credence for this characteristic was commonly given to the Comprehensive School Improvement Plan (CSIP) which acts as the district's strategic plan.

Teamwork

The next most powerfully referenced theme was that of teamwork. A total of 191 references were made in this regard. One of the five elements of a school district with a effective culture was that of a collaborative and collegial atmosphere. The word collaboration was ubiquitous when teamwork was noted in the observations. Staff members frequently renowned the fact that their staff operated as a family. They frequently articulated the numerous opportunities available in the district to work together. Similar to the data regarding input and voice, staff members mentioned on multiple occasions the numerous opportunities to work closely with their colleagues and superiors.

Many layers of collaborative structures have been established in the district to foster this collegial atmosphere. Professional Learning Communities was cited more than any other formal practice where staff believe they have the opportunity to work collaboratively. From Professional Learning Communities, building leadership teams, cabinet meetings, to the Academic Huddle, the data suggests the staff appreciated that there are many opportunities to lean on, grow professionally, and learn from their

coworkers.   Addressing the professional development needs of staff is a sub-element of reflective practice and professional development.

The data also suggested this rich presence of collaboration in the district is lending itself to professional growth. When staff members expressed the presence of teamwork in the district, it was not uncommon for them to elaborate on the fact that professional development is facilitated and supported in their district. For many, teamwork and professional development go hand in hand. Professional development was also one of the five elements of a school district with an effective culture.

Similar to the theme of input and voice, the data revealed that a teamwork approach is utilized in problem solving and decision making. Staff felt their administrators will listen and work closely with faculty in reaching decisions and solving problems. Also noteworthy, several responses noted these activities included research to ensure the best practice or solution will be employed. Collaborative decision making is a sub-element of collaborative and collegial relationships and working to overcome challenges is a sub-element of reflective practice and professional development.

Reference to communication was not uncommon in the observations related to teamwork. The data uncovered the fact many staff members feel that effective communication contributes to their ability to work as a team.   Subjects felt the administration is transparent and works diligently to utilize effective communication as a means to work together to solve problems. On numerous occasions, the superintendent of schools used the expression, "listening our way to solutions." This is consistent with Wagner's work (2006) where he suggested open an honest communication pervades in a

school district with a productive school culture. Communication is a sub-element of the theme collaborative and collegial relationships.

Last, it was commonly noted teamwork is utilized in an effort to put kids first. The comment of one respondent successfully summarizes staff reflections when they said, "it takes everybody to put kids first." Putting kids first lends itself to taking responsibility for student learning, which is one of the five elements of a successful school district culture.

Celebrations

Following teamwork in the most powerful themes emerging in our data was celebrations. A total of 180 comments and observations were referenced in this regard. Although there is a survey question that inquired about the presence of celebrations in the district, this is clearly a source of pride for employees. A few mildly negative comments were provided which will be discussed later, respondents invariably provided a consistent list of activities with which the district utilizes to pat their students and staff on the back. Those responding to the survey often used strong language to emphasize the importance of these activities. Likewise, interviewees exuded confidence in affirming that celebrations are very much the way they do business.

Deal and Peterson (2009a) indicated ceremonies and rituals help define a school district's culture. Ceremonies are intricate, culturally sanctioned proceedings in which organizations commemorate successes, express values, and celebrate the significant contributions of staff members. "Rituals are the comings and goings that create the mortar that binds people and activities; rituals provide behavioral glue that holds a school

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together" (Deal and Peterson, 2009a, p. 93). The all-district staff meeting (commonly referred to as the "kickoff") to commence the school year, recognition assemblies, and the way faculty and board meetings are conducted would be considered a ceremony by Deal and Peterson's definition.

The annual kickoff meeting is treasured by staff members. Many respondents referenced this activity as something to which people look forward. Accomplishments of each building from the previous year are celebrated and the district theme is highlighted by the superintendent as goals are set for the upcoming school year. Humor is a notorious ingredient of the kickoff as administrators typically perform skits, comedy routines, and otherwise entertain the staff. Wagner (2006) referenced the importance of humor in positive school district cultures. Humor is a sub-element of collaborative and collegial relationships.

Other ceremonies in the data that are consistent district wide are recognition events. Such events include assemblies for character awards, pre-state assessment assemblies, post-state assessment assemblies, attendance and citizenship recognition, and to celebrate national Blue Ribbon and state Gold Star school recognition distinction.

While the researchers were gathering data, the district was preparing for the second annual Gala sponsored by their local education foundation. During this formal ceremony, attendees from the district and community enjoy a banquet and honor many award recipients. Specifically, alumni are inducted into the Academic Hall of Fame, service awards are provided to support staff members and volunteers, teacher of the year honors are awarded under the title of a memorial dedication to a deceased teacher, retirees are given their due respect, and grant recipients from the education foundation are

awarded. A recognition entitled Educational Achievement is also designated to credit an individual who has made a significant contribution to the school district. This award is described as a high honor and the superintendent happened to be the recipient the year data was gathered. While this ceremony is in its infancy, it was highly regarded by many subjects.

Several survey respondents made note of faculty meetings and board meetings being the format for celebrations. One subject expressed that their principal begins every meeting inviting staff to share personal and professional celebrations. Likewise, by researcher observation as well as survey results, it is evident that board meetings devote a significant portion of their agenda to celebrate the accomplishments of staff and students. Deal and Peterson (2009a) would describe this as a ritual as it happens frequently throughout the course of the school year and rituals is a sub-element of shared sense of purpose.

Another celebration those interviewed and surveyed commonly referred to was the Academic Pep Rally. After five consecutive years of receiving the Accreditation with Distinction Award, the highest accreditation status possible in their state, the administration organized district-wide pep rallies. Students, staff, board members, and local and state dignitaries gathered to celebrate the occasion at five of the district's campuses. Cheerleaders, the drum line, and the mascot from a local minor league baseball team were all part of the hype. This activity affirms what various data points suggest. The district does not just celebrate the accomplishments of athletic teams. It also celebrates academic achievement.

Communication was also prominent in the theme of celebrations. It is evident that a very concerted effort is devoted to making the district's accomplishments known to the staff and community. Subjects referenced staff email, an electronic patron newsletter, the district website, radio, newspaper, television news reports, Facebook, and Twitter as mediums commonly used to communicate the success of the district. A handful of respondents described the district as being good at "tooting their own horn."

A tour of the district by the researchers, as well as responses on the surveys, provided numerous examples of plaques, banners, and other artifacts celebrating various accomplishments and awards. While donning entryways and hallways may not be considered traditionally celebratory by some, it is implicit of success and is cultural, as every facility proudly displays evidence of achievement.

Even though celebrations is not listed as one of the five elements of a successful school district culture, Deal and Peterson (2009a) do reference the importance of rituals, ceremonies, and traditions. They also said that little celebration is indicative of a toxic culture. In addition, Wagner (2006) references the recognition of students and staff as a significant activity in a productive school district culture. Celebrations, rituals, and ceremonies are sub-elements of a shared sense of purpose. In addition, traditions, values, and beliefs, which are sub-elements of a shared sense of purpose, are expressed through these activities.

Communication

Communication is specifically noted in the themes of teamwork and celebrations. There are a total of 122 data points directly relevant to communication beyond the staff

electronic newsletter, Facebook, Twitter, and other mediums mentioned previously.

 Those additional communicative efforts are a district cable channel, community forums, and an automated calling system. The cable channel is provided free to the school district by the local cable company and provides a delayed broadcast of school board meetings as well as a PowerPoint that illustrates various district announcements and happenings.

Community forums are utilized when the district is in need of public input regarding a specific topic. The automated calling system, Alert Now, is employed in a variety of uses. It calls the community and staff when school is cancelled due to inclement weather, administration uses it to remind parents of upcoming events, and it is utilized to notify the public of emergency situations.

Communication is the first strategy of the district's CSIP, as has been the case since the plan's inception. Many respondents referenced this fact in order to emphasize the importance of communication in their district. Administrators and school board members alike suggested that it is their number one goal, both literally and figuratively.

A couple mantras emerged and are repeated in the data. Many expressed the sentiment that their district communicates early and often, and they communicate the good as well as the bad. Evidence would suggest this is a practice that is highly emphasized in the district. The second mantra is one that has been mentioned previously, and that is the art of listening. "We listen as much as we speak," are words used by the superintendent. Both mantras are referenced by the faculty as practices employed by the administration.

There are several references in the data to the director of communications. The job duty most frequently cited by the subjects was that he was the liaison to the media.

Several administrators and school board members articulated the fact that the board has an expectation that their district is in the media as much as reasonably possible. The director of communications is seen as providing assistance in getting this accomplished. Other duties include providing the staff with a weekly newsletter, and coordinating the patron newsletter, both electronic and hard copy.

Several references surfaced regarding the superintendent's visibility in the district. Faculty members expressed that he frequently attends faculty meetings and is otherwise seen in their buildings regularly. In addition, his presence in and ability to work with the media is impressive to many. While many respondents expressed this sentiment, one staff member summed it up when they said, "he is a master of public relations."

Communication is not designated as one of the five elements of a school district with an effective culture but it is a sub-element of collegial and collaborative relationships. Wagner (2006) cited open and honest communication to this effect. In addition, when referencing a positive school climate, Ellis (1988) adds that good communication is among the characteristics said to promote a positive school climate. In their list of characteristics of a productive culture, Pritchard, Marshall, and Morrow (2003) attest to positive communication between faculty and administration being one key ingredient.

While the majority of comments were positive and the data suggests this is a strength for the district, the theme of communication had among the highest percentages of negative comments. Still, only eight out of 122 comments, or 7%, were tagged as negative. The sentiment of these eight comments were that the district over communicates. Some staff find it difficult to sort through communication that is

important and not important so they are reluctant to open email from the district office. What makes this sentiment even more significant as it came from not only teachers but administrators as well.

Stakeholder Support

Stakeholder support is the next most powerful theme with 102 associated comments. There were numerous generic comments giving community and parental involvement credit for their success. Parents are provided an opportunity and are encouraged to be involved in the schools. CSIP planning, volunteering, and PTA (Parent Teacher Association) opportunities are mentioned as ways parents support their community's schools. The community historically supports the district as evidenced by the fact that they have never failed a bond issue or levy increase (City, n.d.). This fact was referenced frequently as the data suggests the staff is proud of the support they enjoy.

Frequently found in the data is the idea that families move to the community because of the quality school system. This idea was presented by respondents of multiple capacities. Board members, administrators, and teachers alike agree on this point. The business community is said to recognize and appreciate this trend, and it fuels support for the school system and has a positive impact on the community's commerce. This is supported by Weiss (2004) when he said that, "research indicates that quality public schools can help make states and localities more economically competitive" (p. 2).

Other significant comments sprinkled in the data suggest the faculty appreciates the fact their community has high expectations for its schools. They like community

involvement in problem solving and that the community takes advantage of providing input in the district's operations.

Stakeholder support is not directly referenced by Peterson (2009), Wagner (2006), Ellis (1988), or Pritchard, Marshall, and Morrow (2003) as an element or sub-element of a successful school district culture. Regardless, it does emerge as a theme in the data the researchers compiled.

Best Practices

Following stakeholder support, the next most powerfully referenced theme with 95 data points are those that relate to best practices. The data is saturated with indications that professional development is a high priority for the district. Roughly a third of the comments in this theme relate directly to the importance of professional development and its availability to the staff. Several references were provided indicating that professional development is guided, focused, and data driven.

There were no negative comments as it relates to the district's professional development program as the data indicates the staff is very pleased with the program. Professional development is also one of the five elements of a district with a productive culture.

Numerous data points express the pivotal role research and data play in the district's operation. It is clear that research and the implementation of best practices is an expectation in the district. Several subjects commented to the effect that a focus on best practices is modeled by the superintendent. This is affirmed by the researchers' observations as the superintendent frequently referenced research and best practice.

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During our interviews with him, he went so far as to display pages of a book on his desk to illustrate a point.

When expressing comments related to best practices, many staff members cited the importance of collaboration. Again, Professional Learning Communities surfaces in the data. It was commonly noted that data, assessment or otherwise, is reviewed in collaboration and is used to drive curricular and instructional decisions. The use of data is a sub-element of continuous improvement.

Instructional practices specifically noted as best practices include response to intervention and differentiated instruction. Combined, these references make up a little less than a fourth of the comments in the theme of best practices. The data suggests faculty members are excited about these best practices and insist they are effective and relevant to their student's success.

When asked what makes their district successful, along with effective instruction and quality teachers, a focus on curriculum was cited on numerous occasions. Many teachers find their curriculum and its development to be important, appropriate, and effective. In addition, the role that assessment plays in the instructional process was not ignored. Many respondents made mention to the fact that assessing what is taught and providing interventions as a result of the data is critical to their success.

The district utilizes instructional specialists to support teachers in instruction and the implementation of curriculum. These staff members are relieved from the classroom for an average of two years to support instructional staff. Each instructional specialist has their area of expertise, whether it be math, communication arts, or technology. They provide professional development, gather data, and collaborate with teachers to ensure

best practices are utilized. Several instructional spaces specifically devoted to professional development are at their disposal at the administrative center.

Finally, it was not uncommon for subjects to reference putting learning and students first in the same breath of referencing the district's philosophy of utilizing best practices. One subject summarized his/her priorities by articulating the district's theme for a given year: Learning First.

Resource Allocation

Resource allocation emerged as another noteworthy theme. It must be mentioned here that when the data was gathered for this project, schools in the district's state experienced a budget crisis where the state cut funding. Many districts in the state were laying off employees and cutting programs. It is evident in the data that, while no staff have been eliminated, programs and staff members were feeling the pinch of reducing fiscal resources. It is evident that this has impacted the morale of the staff with 15 out of 88 comments being negative.

The majority of the staff still feel supported by the administration and school board. It was commonly noted that although they have not received a raise in three years, they know the administration and board will do what they are able when resources are available. This sentiment was affirmed during the superintendent and board interviews.

Career Ladder, a state program designed to financially reward teachers for going above and beyond, was cut by the state, and teachers were experiencing their first year without the program during the time of data gathering. This surfaced in the data as relevant, however, many staff members also articulated that other programs, while not as

profitable, were implemented to replace the loss of income. This affirms that the district

is doing what it is financially able in order to support teachers.

The most reverberating concept in the theme of resource allocation was that

teachers are provided with the resources necessary to be successful in their classroom.

While a select few felt this effort was inadequate due to the budget shortfall, the vast

majority commenting to this effect feel that there is a concerted effort to support teachers

in this regard.

The last two frequently noted items in the theme of resource allocation were

related to professional development and the CSIP. These two characteristics are

frequently referenced throughout the data on all of the themes. They also are two of the

five elements of a district with a productive culture. The CSIP lends itself directly to a

shared sense of purpose. Respondents indicated that in their district, the document guides

their allocation of resources. A school board member commented that if a program is

introduced to the board that does not directly support the CSIP, no matter how worthy of

consideration, they don't even talk about it. Finally, all comments relating to

professional development evidenced that teachers felt that their professional development

needs are met in spite of shrinking resources.

Quality Staff

Approximately five years prior to the gathering of data, a human resources

department was added to the central office structure. Respondents gave much credence

to this department in regard to the presence and retention of quality staff in their district.

 Out of 62 data points, there are no critical statements in regard to this practice. Staff feel

recruiting is more effective due to the district's reputation of success and the induction

program is effective at preparing teachers for their tenure in the district. The

administration has bought in to the CSIP's charge of not tolerating ineffective staff. The

superintendent's one liner of "if in doubt, get them out," has trickled down to the building

administration. Building leaders understand that their task is to work with teachers for

two years. If they question whether the teacher can meet the high expectations of the

administration, it is their job to remove the teacher.

When talking about quality staff, respondents frequently point to the high caliber

of leadership in the district. The data indicates the leadership is supportive, meets the

needs of staff, and fosters professional growth among their staff.

Finally, the board of education made scattered appearances in the theme of quality

staff. The school board is clearly proud of their staff. One board member stated they

would put their staff up against any in the state. Another one reaffirmed that they hire the

best and expect the best. With high expectations and pride, the data reveals that they care

about their staff and seek to support them in any way possible.

Unified Purpose

Unified purpose is virtually synonymous with a shared sense of purpose, which is

one of the five elements present in a school district with a productive culture. When

Peterson references the phrase "a shared sense of purpose," he uses the word "values" (p.

18). While additional review of literature may lead one to believe value is implicit with

all staff being on the same page, the researchers felt it is necessary to make a distinction

between Peterson's shared sense of purpose and the researchers' theme of unified purpose.

Many references in the data point directly to the fact that the staff is answering to the same marching orders, which is the charge that was provided by the CSIP and the district mission and vision. Thus, the researchers chose to report this data as a theme separate from Peterson's shared sense of purpose.

The CSIP has been discussed numerous times in this section. It is appropriate to address it again as over half of the comments in the data relating to unified purpose pointed directly to the district's CSIP, mission, and vision. The strategic planning process used for the CSIP provides specific guidelines and is adherent to training offered by the Cambridge Group out of Montgomery, Alabama. The superintendent says that their CSIP is their blueprint. Other respondents explained it provides a concerted effort toward goals identified in a collaborative process. To restate a school board member's comment, if it isn't in the CSIP, "we don't even talk about it." The data is clear that the staff and community demonstrated a great deal of buy in and commitment to the district's CSIP and the process utilized in its development.

Chain of Command

When the researchers began analyzing the data, references to chain of command kept surfacing. Originally not identified as a theme, the researchers could not ignore the fact this notion prevailed in the district. The data indicates a total of 55 references indicative of the fact following the chain of command is the way this district does business. A specific question was asked in the survey and interviews regarding how

problems were solved in the district. Responses affirmed that problems are to be solved at the lowest level possible, where the problem originated. Only when it is escalated will a higher authority get involved. In the staff survey, teachers referenced students being empowered to solve their problems before the teacher gets involved. Staff are to work collaboratively on problems before bringing them to their principal. One central office administrator refers to this not as a practice, but as a widely communicated policy.

There is also a question on the survey and interviews about how decisions are made in the district. Similar rhetoric was produced with this prompt in that, when possible, decisions are made at the lowest possible level. Chain of command is not directly mentioned in the literature on school district culture. It has emerged in the data as a relevant theme.

Board of Education

The district's superintendent has repeatedly stated that the school board is very integral to any district's success. He has gone so far as to say that a great school board plus a mediocre superintendent can still equal success for the district, however, a mediocre board and a great superintendent will lead to wasted talent, energy, and a second-rate school district.

In this district and community, the school board is very highly regarded as 45 of the 48 data points made about the board were considered positive by the researchers. In recent years, this district has received outstanding statewide recognition from the state school board association multiple times.

The makeup of the board is quite diverse in terms of service. There are two

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members that have served for 24 and 25 years, respectively, whereas the remainder of the board (including the board president) have no more than four years of experience. Despite that marked difference, the vast majority of comments reference board members and their willingness to work together to focus on student achievement.

Three main themes emerge from the commentary. First, there is a true sense of teamwork between the school board and administration. This cooperation is then modeled for other groups and individuals within the school district and has proven successful over the years.

Secondly, many comments centered around recognition. The average school board meeting will feature celebrations of students, faculty, and others associated with the district. In addition, it is not uncommon to find school board members in the schools on a continual basis, not only to see what is occurring, but to praise staff members and students as well.

Finally, communication is perceived to be strong with this board of education. The ability of members to listen to concerns of all stakeholders was frequently mentioned. This occurs in two distinct ways. Formally, at board meetings ideas can be brought forth and the board has seemingly been positively engaged to receive information for consideration. Also, comments were made that board members are easy to approach and not intimidating. They let their constituents know through their actions that they are listening.

Superintendent

The superintendent has a great deal of credibility in the subject district. Of the 40 comments in the data relating to the superintendent's leadership, there were zero criticisms. Among his greatest attributes, as cited by the respondents, is his ability to involve stakeholders in strategic planning, decision making, and problem solving. Equal comments were received regarding his visibility, communication, and the support he provides.

The superintendent is seen frequently in the buildings, attends faculty meetings, and is said to be skilled at remembering names. As stated previously in this chapter, communication is a focal point for the district. Respondents suggest this starts with the superintendent.   Some even call him a master communicator. Many also commented that he is quick to support them through difficult decisions. Finally, many referred to him as visionary, an outside the box thinker, and a steward of the district's vision.

The superintendent's role in school district culture is indirectly related to the literature but not directly referenced. Pritchard, Marshall, and Morrow (2003) do suggest that one necessary characteristic in order for a school district to enjoy a positive school culture is of a leadership style that allows for collaboration, facilitation, and problem solving. As evidenced by the data and researchers' observations, this was clear in the superintendent's approach to leadership. Collaboration is one element of a school district with a successful culture and problem solving is a sub-element of continuous improvement.

Quality Leadership

The last theme to surface in the data is of quality leadership. A total of 34 comments were available, all praising the quality of leadership in their district. Again, there were zero critical statements in this regard. Teachers feel supported and cared for by their administration and they appreciate the expectation of excellence. Wagner (2006) cites a good working relationship between the administration and teachers as conducive to a successful school culture which is a sub-element of collaborative and collegial relationships. In addition, leadership among administration is a sub-element of responsibility for students and their learning.

Negative Comments

Of the 2,200 data points, 155 comments were tagged as negative. This is low by all considerations as it represents approximately 7% of the comments. Many were random, but there were some responses worth revealing. The most common response was related to the pressure felt by staff to raise test scores. In the context of high expectations, a handful of respondents communicated that only focusing on end product assessment results, and not on daily process standards and expectations, is enabling students and not preparing them for the workplace.

Second to the pressure to produce high test scores, there were some responses indicating the respondents did not feel they had the opportunity to provide input. They stated that patron input is more important than teachers, and they appear to have a voice but in the end the administration makes the decision on their own. One respondent said

committees are just for show. Finally, a couple of responses indicated the central office administration does not listen to their input and needs.

A handful of replies also shared that they are not comfortable with the central office administration, they feared the administration, and some teachers seem to have a good rapport with central office while others do not feel they are approachable.

The lack of funding received relatively significant attention among the negative comments. Many responses were not necessarily critical of the district's allocation of resources, however, the district and state's budget woes is impacting the teachers' morale.

Physical Environment

Deal and Peterson (2009a) cite the importance of the physical environment of schools and it is a sub-element for responsibility for student learning.. The architecture and physicality of schools spoke loudly regarding what a school values and believes. Students and teachers spent a great deal of time within the confines of their school. While touring the facilities, the researchers found them to be clean, brightly lit, with aesthetically pleasing and age appropriate color.

Triangulation of the Data

In order to establish validity within the results of the information gathered in the field, it was important to triangulate the data (Guion, 2002). For the purposes of this project, methodological triangulation was employed. Multiple data collection methods were utilized, including online surveys, face-to-face interviews, observational data, and

document analysis. According to the tenets of methodological triangulation, the goal was to have each of these varied methods of data collection arrive at the same conclusion. If that occurred, then validity within the data was established, and the findings of this project will be better supported with legitimate evidence.

The tools that were used were the analysis instrument described in Section 4 used to categorize data from interviews and event observational data along with the five spreadsheets mentioned in this section used to categorize data points from surveys. The researchers organized the analysis instrument to reflect the qualitative nature of the project. Based upon the review of foundational knowledge, the instrument reflects the five elements of an effective school district culture. Sub-elements were also noted on the instrument that emerged from foundational knowledge as indicators of the elements. Columns were created representing each of the 21 administrative and school board member interviews conducted and five district events attended. The analysis instrument was used to determine the presence or absence of the elements in each interview and event.

Upon completion of the analysis instrument and the subsequent interviews and events, the researchers utilized the instrument to summarize information from those interviews and events. The researchers analyzed notes and transcripts from each interview and event for evidence of each element and sub-element and indicated its presence or absence on the instrument.

The instrument analyzed all five elements as well as 14 sub-elements of 21 administrative interviews and five district events. The results were definitive. According to the judgment of the researchers in evaluating the interview responses, every

interviewee was able to articulate and provide evidence in their responses of all five elements of an effective school district culture. In addition, every interviewee demonstrated competence in either 13 or 14 of the sub-elements as well. Those results of the interviews showed a definite commitment of the administrators of the subject school district towards the ideals of an effective school district culture (See Appendix H).

The second use of the analysis instrument was to measure the presence of the elements and sub-elements in six district events: a school board meeting, a superintendent's cabinet meeting, a building administrator meeting, a community meeting, and an academic huddle where educators and administrators discussed student academic issues.

Again, in the judgment of the project team, all five elements were evident in all events, and between 12-14 sub-elements were shown to exist during the proceedings of each event. Specific worksheets were used to record the evidence shown in each meeting (See Appendix E).

To complete the third piece of the methodological triangulation was through the use of the spreadsheet data and the emergent themes and their connection to the elements and sub-elements. As previously stated, the 14 emergent themes were organically created and was borne of the qualitative data points collected primarily from written surveys. These themes emerged independent from the five elements and sub-elements of an effective school district culture that came from the review of foundational knowledge.

When these two entities are compared and contrasted with one another, there is a great deal of correlation that can be found. The sub-elements for a shared sense of purpose are celebrations, rituals, and ceremonies, and they correlate strongly in

description with the themes of unified purpose and celebrations. The sub-elements of continuous improvement are working to solve problems and the use of data. Criteria for the themes of high expectations, teamwork, and quality staff fit well with that element.

The sub-elements for responsibility for student learning are expectations for meeting student needs, physical environment that promotes learning, and leadership among administrators which identify well with the descriptors for the themes of stakeholder support, high expectations, physical environment, superintendent and board of education.

Next, the sub-elements for collaborative and collegial relationships are communication, expectation for meeting staff needs, and collaborative decision making that fit with the themes of quality leadership, quality staff, celebrations, communication, chain of command, high expectations and input/voice. Finally, the sub-elements for reflective practice and professional development are working to overcome challenges and professional development that meets the needs of staff are in tune with resource allocation, unified purpose, and stakeholder support.

The discovery of the correlation of the elements from the review of foundational knowledge and the emergent themes from the qualitative data was the bridge between an already high performing school district and the characteristics established that define an effective school district culture.

Conclusion

After reviewing the literature on school districts with a high performing school district culture, the researchers selected a high performing school district and gathered

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cultural related data from interviews, surveys, and observations. The data gathered was then compared to elements and sub-elements found in the literature regarding the cultures of high performing school districts.

Fourteen themes emerged in the data and all of the five elements of a productive school district culture were present: a shared sense of purpose, continuous improvement, a shared sense of responsibility for student learning, a collaborative and collegial relationship among staff members, and a focus on professional development.

In addition to the five elements, sub-elements were derived from the work of Wagner (2006), Ellis (1988), and Pritchard, Marshall, and Morrow (2003) were also and discussed in this section. With all of the elements and sub-elements of a successful school district culture present in the qualitative data and the emergent themes, it is clear the subject school district possesses what the literature calls a successful school district culture.

Section 6: Analysis

Introduction

The project team analyzed data collected through surveys, interviews, observation at district events, and from artifact analysis. The researchers analyzed the emergent themes that arose from the data and compared and contrasted those themes to the elements and sub-elements of an effective school district culture that were borne of the review of foundational knowledge. Being able to create the link between a high performing school district and the elements of an effective school district culture led the team to be able to answer the project's guiding questions.

Analysis of Elements and Emergent Themes

The researchers began this problem based learning project with the discovery of five elements of an effective school district culture that were evident in the review of foundational literature. In addition, 14 sub-elements were also identified as having a specific relationship with the superior element. The team also collected qualitative data from a high performing school district and created data points where 14 different themes emerged as part of the data analysis. The two ideas of elements and themes were designed to be independent of one another.

As stated in Section 2, the task of researchers was to build a bridge between already high performing school districts and the characteristics established that define an effective school district culture. Do high performing school districts naturally exhibit the traits that were shown in the literature that make up an effective culture? To show that

bridge, the team linked descriptors of the elements and sub-elements that demonstrate an effective school district culture with the descriptors of the themes that emerged from the analysis of the qualitative data.

The first element utilized by the researchers was a shared sense of purpose where all stakeholders in the school district shared a common vision for learning. Research indicated the concept of strong student centered leadership permeated throughout high performing school districts and their school improvement plans indicate as such (Shannon and Blysma, 2004). Sub-elements included the evidence of traditions, beliefs, and values along with celebrations, ceremonies and rituals (Deal & Peterson, 2009a).

In the qualitative data, the theme of unified purpose was evident. Many references in the data point directly to the fact that the staff is answering to the same marching orders that are provided by the CSIP and the district mission and vision. Also, the theme of ceremonies was consistently evidenced in the data. Such events include assemblies for character awards, pre-state assessment assemblies, post-state assessment assemblies, attendance and citizenship recognition, and to celebrate national Blue Ribbon and state Gold Star school recognition distinction. While donning entryways and hallways with recognition may not be considered traditionally celebratory by some, it is implicit of success and is cultural, as every facility in the subject school district proudly displays evidence of achievement. The data is clear that the staff and community demonstrated a great deal of buy in and commitment to the district's CSIP and the process utilized in its development.

The second element identified as effective was the idea that improvement was occurring continuously among all stakeholders in the district. A commitment to

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improvement among students, faculty, administration, parents, and the community provided consistency in expectations across the district (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2002). As sub-elements, the research showed that working together to collaboratively solve problems and utilization of data are considered important as indicators of continuous improvement (Shannon & Blysma, 2004).

In the qualitative data, under the theme of high expectations, subjects frequently articulated the notion that student performance is high and is expected to continue to improve. Phrases such as continuous improvement, tradition of excellence, and the desire to go from good to great were prevalent in the data. Also, when it comes to the theme of teamwork, staff frequently articulated the numerous opportunities available in the district to work together. Lastly, with regard to the theme of best practices, the data indicated that professional development is a high priority for the district. Several references were provided indicating that professional development is guided, focused, and data driven.

Third, the review of foundational knowledge showed that effective school district culture involved all stakeholders taking responsibility for all students and their learning by meeting their needs without exception. Every member of the school community from the school board and superintendent on down to the custodial staff does have a part in the education of every child in the district. More responsibility for student achievement was placed on those not directly in the classroom, but in supportive roles of that classroom teacher, including central office personnel (Kultgen, 2010). Sub-elements include high expectations for staff and students, making sure the physical environment promotes

learning, and that leadership among administration is evident (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2002).

In the qualitative data, the high expectations theme was also prevalent, as it was in the element of continuous improvement. The theme of stakeholder support also was able to be linked because there were data points giving community and parental involvement credit for the district's success. Parents and community members are provided an opportunity and are encouraged to be involved in the schools. The community historically supports the district as evidenced by the fact that they have never failed a bond issue or levy increase (City, n.d.).

With regard to the sub-element of leadership, there is a great deal of correlation with the themes of quality leadership, superintendent, and board of education. In specific, the ability of the board of education to listen to concerns of all stakeholders was frequently mentioned. The superintendent has a great deal of credibility in the subject district. Among his greatest attributes, as cited by the respondents, is his ability to involve stakeholders in strategic planning, decision making, and problem solving. Equal comments were received regarding his visibility, communication, and the support he provides. Lastly, teachers feel supported and cared for by their administration and they appreciate the expectation of excellence.

The fourth element that emerged from the review of foundational knowledge concerned relationships between individuals in the school district. The level of respect and support between individuals in a school district and the community are a large indicator of the value they place on one another in the role of student achievement (Wagner, 2006). Sub-elements of this element are humor, communication, a good

working relationship between administrators and staff, an expectation for meeting staff needs, and evidence of a collaborative decision making process (Kultgen, 2010).

As part of the qualitative data collected, the theme of communication was evident. In addition to the staff electronic newsletter, Facebook, and Twitter accounts, there was a district cable channel, community forums, and an automated calling system. Communication is the first strategy of the district's CSIP, as has been the case since the plan's inception. Many respondents referenced this fact in order to emphasize the importance of communication in their district.

In addition to communication, the theme of input/voice figured prominently as a connection to this element. The prevailing sentiment in regard to input or voice is the administration's willingness to listen. Staff members made mention numerous times that they feel building and central office administrators are visible, accessible, and ready to listen to problems or concerns presented by the staff. Teachers also believed the means with which the district conducts its professional development provided them with an opportunity to provide input.

Finally, the fifth element identified was reflective practice and professional development. The districts that provided instructional growth opportunities for their staff were the ones that had a positive influence on their student achievement (Bredeson, 1996). Sub-elements include working to overcome challenges and that professional development addresses staff needs (Wagner, 2006).

When it came to the emergent themes and their correlation to the element, a constant challenge in the subject school district was resources. The theme of resource allocation was addressed in the qualitative data. The majority of the staff still feel

supported by the administration and school board. An example of this theme was

although staff have not received a raise in three years, they knew the administration and

board would do what they are able to when resources were available.   The

aforementioned theme of stakeholder support is evident when it comes to professional

development addressing staff needs. All members of the school district and community

showed they were willing to accomplish whatever necessary to ensure student success.

The development of the five elements of effective school district culture resulted

from the review of foundational knowledge. These five elements were the basis of

survey and interview questions as well as the lens by which observational data was

scrutinized (See Appendix I).

Answers to Guiding Questions

During the process of the review of pertinent literature and the analysis of all the

qualitative data, the researchers developed answers to the original eight guiding

questions.

The first guiding question asked whether or not the factors that support a school

district's culture leads to student performance at an optimum level.   In reviewing the data

points, the following fourteen themes emerged in varying degrees: high expectations,

teamwork, celebrations, communication, stakeholder support, best practice, resource

allocation, quality staff, unified purpose, chain of command, board of education,

superintendent, quality leadership, and input or voice.

In the literature, five elements of an effective school district culture emerged. In

summary, those characteristics were a shared sense of purpose, continuous improvement,

a shared sense of responsibility for student learning, a collaborative and collegial

relationship among staff members, and a focus on professional development (Peterson,

2004). All five of these characteristics are present in the data gathered on the subject

district. In addition, the work of Wagner (2006) and Ellis (1988) were represented in the

themes by way of communication, and Wagner referenced recognition and humor.

Finally, Pritchard, Marshall, and Morrow (2003) are cited in the themes in regard to

leadership style lending itself to the facilitation of collaboration.

The factors of Peterson, Wagner, Ellis, as well as Pritchard, Marshall, and

Morrow are clearly represented in the data along with subsequent themes identified by

the researchers. When it came to correlating the elements, sub-elements, and themes as

executed in the previous portion of this section, there is a high amount of association

between the elements of an effective school district culture from the review of

foundational knowledge and the emergent themes from the qualitative data collected

from a high performing school district. Therefore, these cultural themes and factors are

believed to lead to increased student achievement.

The second guiding question asked whether or not factors that support a school

district's culture work together in order to create and sustain that high performing culture.

Many of the aforementioned themes are interrelated. It is an expectation to solve

problems in a collaborative fashion, leading to teamwork. Hiring and keeping the best

staff is an expectation communicated by the board of education. This expectation

contributes to the availability of quality staff and quality leadership. Quality leadership

can take some credit for quality staff. The support that leaders provide staff in resources

and professional development is clear in the data and conducive to the effectiveness of

staff. A line could be drawn between quality leadership and celebrations. Administration and faculty value the celebratory activities in their district and recognize the contributions celebrations make to their continued success.

Communication lends itself to stakeholder support. Teachers made many references to the multiple communication practices in the subject district. Likewise, teachers were quick to note they have a voice in the district and that the administration will listen. Communication, stakeholder support, and input and voice all are conducive to a culture of teamwork. The staff is willing to work with administration and support district initiatives as they feel heard and well informed.

Finally, the board of education's resource allocations have the opportunity to impact all other themes (Black, 2008). If funds are available to support professional development, mediums for communication, and processes for recruiting and retaining staff, then the presence of these themes in the district is enhanced.

Similarly, with the role of setting policy and direction for the district, the school board casts a very wide net in influencing the other 13 themes. The board of education was praised repeatedly in the qualitative data. Administration was more likely to acknowledge the quality leadership the school board provided. The data indicates teachers recognize the school board's contribution to the district's success.

The third guiding question asks whether or not a shared sense of purpose is evident in the culture. The data demonstrated high expectations provide the foundation for the district's purpose. The district's Comprehensive School Improvement Plan (CSIP) was touted throughout the data for providing clear direction and putting all stakeholders on the same page. The CSIP was paramount in decision making processes

and evident in creating operational strategies in the district in the emergent theme areas of unified purpose and high expectations. In essence, the ultimate accountability for what occurs in the district rests with the CSIP.

Peterson's characteristic of a shared sense of purpose was discussed in Section 5 along with the researchers' theme of a unified purpose. Although closely related, the researchers elected to utilize unified purpose as a theme because it provides for a more broad interpretation. Whether using Peterson's (2009) language to describe a shared sense of purpose or the researchers' language that emerged from the data, a unified purpose is present in the district. Over half of the comments in the data relating to unified purpose pointed directly to the district's CSIP, mission, and vision. To restate a school board member's comment, if it is not in the CSIP, "we don't even talk about it." The data is clear that the staff and community demonstrated a great deal of buy in and commitment to the district's CSIP and the process utilized in its development.

Guiding question number four asks whether or not there is a school district culture of continuous improvement. In order to answer this question, the researchers referred to the qualitative data and the emergent themes. Direct reference to the phrase continuous improvement is noted in the theme of high expectations. The idea itself, however, is laced throughout the 14 themes. The data suggests staff feel a need to raise the bar on a consistent basis. Sometimes the pressure to improve was internal due to statements indicating that staff knew the reputation of the district with regards to student achievement. Other times, the pressure for teachers to improve was external due to administration's philosophy of not tolerating ineffective educators. Overall, there is a school district culture of continuous improvement in this district.

Whether all stakeholders feel a sense of responsibility for the learning of all students is the fifth guiding question. This notion is directly referenced in the themes of high expectations and teamwork. The data reveals that it is the expectation of all staff to meet the needs of all students. The theme of teamwork also represents the fact that working together was in the best interest of students. It was commonly noted teamwork is utilized in an effort to put students first. Putting students first lends itself to taking responsibility for student learning, which is one of the five elements of a successful school district culture.

The sixth guiding question asks if there is evidence of a collaborative and collegial relationship between all stakeholders. Input and voice, superintendent, teamwork, and best practice are all themes that reference collaboration directly. Teachers feel opportunities to collaborate provide them with a voice, the superintendent is viewed in the data to have a collaborative style, and teachers feel the collaborative structures they utilize are conducive to professional growth. Staff members made mention they felt building and central office administrators are visible, accessible, and ready to listen to problems or concerns presented by the staff.

Along these lines, the qualitative data suggests the staff have many opportunities to express themselves through various surveys. A recent over-extension survey was referenced numerous times in the data. It was clear this activity was very much appreciated.

Another opportunity for teachers to voice their opinions was through their local teacher organization. Many staff members explained that they found the organization to be effective as a liaison between the faculty and administration. Many others reported

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that the administration has a positive, working relationship with the local teacher organization.

There are various examples of collaborative activities in the district. Both generally and specifically, the staff felt as though the district is collaborative in nature. Specifically, various committees and teams meet throughout the district and were noted as being appreciated by the staff. Professional Committee is comprised of representatives from around the district and central office administration, not principals. The purpose of the committee is solely for the administration to hear the concerns of the staff. The agenda also allows for open comments and questions from the staff. Finally, the data repeatedly reveals that the staff see their building leadership teams as a viable means to voice their opinions and concerns. A collaborative and collegial atmosphere is one of the five elements revealed in the literature regarding a productive school district culture.

The seventh guiding question asks whether there is evidence that staff reflection and professional development are valued in the district. The themes of teamwork, high expectations, best practice, and resource allocation all have references to professional development. The data suggested that engaging in professional development is an expectation of the district, the art of implementing best practices is evident, and the allocation of resources is conducive to an effective professional development program. Finally, staff view their opportunities to collaborate and work as a team as opportunities for growth.

The data is saturated with indications that professional development is a high priority for the district. Roughly a third of the comments in this theme relate directly to the importance of professional development and its availability to the staff. Several

references were provided indicating that professional development is guided, focused, and data driven.

There were no negative comments as it relates to the district's professional development program as the data indicates the staff is very pleased with the program. Professional development is also one of the five elements of a district with a productive culture.

Data points express the pivotal role research and data play in the district's operation. It is clear that research and the implementation of best practices is an expectation in the district. Several subjects commented to the effect that this is modeled by the superintendent.

The eighth and final guiding question asks if there is evidence of open and honest internal communication in the district. Although some criticisms from the staff surfaced in this regard, communication emerged in the data as a strong area for the district. So much so, that it was established as its own theme. Additionally, it was noted in the themes of teamwork, celebrations, school board, and superintendent.

Along with collaboration, communication is seen as one of the superintendent's greatest attributes. The data uncovered the fact many staff members feel effective communication contributes to their ability to work as a team. Subjects felt the administration is transparent and works diligently to utilize effective communication as a means to work together to solve problems. Communication was also used as a means of celebrating accomplishments.

Conclusion

The project team analyzed data collected in comparison with foundational knowledge for emergent themes and elements of an effective school district culture. The project team analyzed data collected through surveys, interviews, observation at district events, and from artifact analysis. The researchers analyzed the emergent themes that arose from the data and compared and contrasted those themes to the elements and sub-elements of an effective school district culture that were created from the review of foundational knowledge. There was found to be a high correlation between the elements and the themes. Being able to create the link between a high performing school district and the elements of an effective school district culture led the team to be able to answer the project's guiding questions.

Section 7: Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

The researchers identified five elements and related sub-elements in the literature said to be conducive to a high performing school district's culture. The five elements were a shared sense of purpose, continuous improvement, responsibility for student learning, collaborative and collegial relationships, and reflective practice and professional development. Based on interviews, surveys, observation of district activities, and an analysis of the district's CSIP, the team analyzed the presence of these elements in a high performing school district. The subject district performed very well on every element. Relatively speaking, few comments were generated indicating the district should seek improvement in any one element. In light of Peterson's (2009) element of continuous improvement, the researchers have the following recommendations for the subject school district.

Recommendation One: Internal Communication

While it has been noted communication is among the greatest strengths of the district, this theme was represented with more negative comments than any other theme. Common criticisms contained statements indicating the communicative efforts of the district was resulting in an oversaturation of information. Staff members commented that they receive so much information they cannot delineate between what is important and what is not, opting to ignore communication altogether. One administrator providing such a critical statement explained they have to provide games such as bingo in their staff

communications in hopes their faculty will view the administrator's emails as novel and worthy of their attention. Recognizing the district's approach to communication as strategic, well-researched, and purposeful, the researchers still recommend the district seek additional information regarding their internal communication methodologies. The bulk of information the district provides its staff is considered counterproductive to some.

The subject school district has gathered anecdotal data on its internal communication practices, however, no formal activity has been conducted to ascertain what internal communication practices are currently effective and what practices are not achieving the desired result. The researchers recommend the subject school district post an RFP (Request for Proposals) for the services of a formal internal communications audit. Various businesses and organizations provide this service for a fee. The National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) is one organization that provides such a service. The NSPRA's mission is to support education through the public relations of school districts (National School Public Relations Association, 2010).

NSPRA utilizes a team of analysts to evaluate a school district's current communication program. This includes reviewing district publications, district and school web sites, campaigns and special projects, communication policies, communication and marketing plans, news clippings, district strategic plans and objectives, communication personnel job descriptions, and additional relevant information. They also conduct an electronic communication survey and focus groups in an effort to recommend improvements to a school district's communication program. Such an audit would involve the majority of the district in regard to completing surveys

as well as additional involvement for those staff members participating in a 50 to 60

minute focus group activity (National School Public Relations Association, 2009).

This comprehensive audit takes approximately 10 weeks and in a 2009 publicly

posted proposal to the Blaine County School District in Maryland, NSPRA quotes a base

fee of $13,500 plus expenses. For an additional charge of $1,000 the auditors would

conduct additional focus groups and for $2,500 they would present the findings to the

Board of Education (National School Public Relations Association, 2009).

The communications department should consider negotiating an audit pertaining

only to internal communication at a reduced rate, as no data suggested external

communication is lacking in the district. In addition, the subject school district should

consider other cost effective and creative means to accomplish an in-depth analysis. One

such idea is to trade services with a neighboring district that may also be interested in its

performance regarding their internal communication practices. The communication

directors of both districts could facilitate an audit for the neighboring district.

Recommendation Two: Pressure on Staff

The subject district is to be commended in their response to concerns from staff

feeling overextended. The overextension survey, referenced in previous chapters,

provided information to the district to determine what can be taken off the plates of

faculty was well received and appreciated. The data affirms the staff feels overwhelmed,

overworked, and a great deal of pressure to produce high test scores. Some would

attribute these sentiments to a trickle down effect from the expectations set forth by No

Child Left Behind. Neither federal nor state legislation is referenced as the culprit in the

data. In the eyes of those expressing these concerns, the district and its expectations is solely to blame for the pressure they experience.

The researchers recommend the district seek additional opportunities, such as the overextension survey, to explore staff concerns and workload. In a document titled *Management of Stress at Work*, the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) provided specified procedures to assist organizations with "reducing, managing and helping people cope with stress at work" (Natural Environment Research Council, 2007, p. 1). NERC provided a three step approach to helping organizations manage work related stress: "organize work so as to minimize stress, manage stress routinely, and support those affected by stress" (Natural Environment Research Council, 2007, p. 1). NERC went on to provide specific procedures and activities to support the three steps. Some examples include surveys, training, awareness campaigns, and focus groups (Natural Environment Research Council, 2007).

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) produced a guide titled *Management Standards for Tracking Work Related Stress* (n.d.). The document outlined a step by step approach to conducting focus groups in an effort to control risks associated with work related stress. Both documents produced by NERC and HSE would provide the subject district with a road map to managing the stress among its staff members.

Additional cultural feedback can be obtained through use of an indicator scale survey (Appendix J) with staff. This would also be a way to rapidly indentify swings in cultural movement in the district.

No fiscal impact can be identified with this recommendation. Significant effort from the administration would be required. The efforts evaluate, manage, and facilitating

a program to control work related stress should be conducted by the Human Resources

Department and Communications Department.

Recommendation Three: Relationship between

Central Office Administration and Teachers

The final recommendation is related to the relationship between the central office

administration and teachers. There is a representation of staff in the data that describes

their relationship with the central office administration as cautious. They claim there is a

disconnect between central office and teachers and that the central office administration

does not individually know them. This data is not overwhelming, but the comments are

not rogue. The researchers recommend the district explore these concerns by conducting

a district wide survey soliciting input on the performance of each central office

administrator.

Currently the subject school district provides a survey from central office

administration to their direct reports. A direct report is the immediate subordinate of the

central office administrator. The director of elementary education, for example, submits

an anonymous survey to the elementary principals. The researchers recommend the

district extend this survey beyond the direct reports by including the teaching staff. The

Alabama State Department of Education published and implemented an evaluation

manual for central office administrators in 2002. This model includes a survey regarding

the central office administrators' performance and it is submitted to administrators,

principals and staff (Alabama State Department of Education, 2002). The surveys

consider the central office administrators' performance in the following areas:

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"communication, collaboration, assessment/measurement/evaluation, organization, laws

and policies, problem solving, innovation, technology management, program

operations/management, fiscal leadership and management, professional responsibilities,

leadership in human resources" (Alabama State Department of Education, 2002, p. 27).

The data gathered from the subject school district demonstrates that the district is

reflective regarding their performance and seeks continuous improvement. Surveying

those the central office administration intends to serve in an effort to identify strengths

and weaknesses bolsters their existing efforts in this regard. No fiscal impact is noted in

this recommendation. It will require the efforts of a central contact person to gather and

present the data in a usable format.

Conclusion

The 2014 deadline under No Child Left Behind for all students to achieve

proficiency in reading and mathematics has many districts scrambling for ways to

improve their performance. Additionally, public rhetoric continues to escalate in regard

to the performance of students in the United States versus other developed countries.

 Eliminating teacher tenure and instituting performance pay for teachers are initiatives

tied to federal funding. The current climate of public education is one of uncertainty and

scrutiny. As school districts seek ways to meet these high expectations, considering the

cultural elements outlined in this problem based learning project can provide ammunition

and direction.

This project addressed the issue of what school districts can do in order to

improve their performance. The researchers identified five cultural elements and

supporting sub-elements in the literature related to high performing school districts. By

conducting interviews, surveys, and observing district activities, these elements were

compared to the culture of a high performing school district. All cultural elements and

sub-elements found in the literature were present in the high performing school district.

These findings give credence to those cultural elements identified in the literature and

provide a framework with which districts can use to bolster their performance. While the

subject district did fare very well when comparing their culture to that of what the

literature says is high performing, the researchers were able to identify three areas where

an opportunity for improvement exists. Recommendations were provided to the district

in this regard.

Appendix A

SURVEY QUESTIONS FOR TEACHERS, COUNSELORS, PROCESS COORDINATORS, INSTRUCTIONAL SPECIALISTS AND ALL OTHER NON-ADMINISTRATIVE CERTIFICATED STAFF

1. How are problems solved in this district?

2. What is the expectation in this school district in addressing the needs of all students?

3. What is the expectation in this school district in addressing the needs of staff?

4. Are there celebrations of success in this district? If so, please provide examples? If not, why?

5. In general, describe the relationship between central office administration and teachers.

6. In general, describe the relationship between building administration and teachers.

7. Describe the culture of this school district.

8. Please provide any other information you feel might be helpful in explaining the success of your school district.

Appendix B

SURVEY QUESTIONS FOR THE DIRECTOR OF FOOD SERVICES,

DIRECTOR OF MAINTENANCE, AND CENTRAL OFFICE SUPPORT STAFF

1. Why is this school district successful?

2. Are there traditions in your district that impact the culture of the district? If so, what

    are they?

3. What are your specific challenges in your job?

4. How do you overcome the challenges of your job?

5. What type of support do you receive in overcoming those challenges?

6. Describe what communication looks like in this school district.

7. How are problems solved in this district?

8. Are there celebrations of success in this district? If so, please provide examples? If

    not, why?

9. How are decisions made in this school district?

10. Describe the culture of this school district.

11. Please provide any other information you feel might be helpful in explaining the

    success of your school district.

Appendix C

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR SUPERINTENDENT, SUPERINTENDENT'S

CABINET, AND BUILDING PRINCIPALS

1. Why is this school district successful?

2. Are there traditions in your district that impact the culture of the district? If so, what
   are they?

3. What are your specific challenges in your job?

4. How do you overcome the challenges of your job?

5. What type of support do you receive in overcoming those challenges?

6. Describe what communication looks like in this school district.

7. How are problems solved in this district?

8. What is the expectation in this school district in addressing the needs of all students?

9. What is the expectation in this school district in addressing the needs of staff?

10. Are there celebrations of success in this district? If so, please provide examples? If
    not, why?

11. Why are students achieving?

12. How are decisions made in this school district?

13. Describe your relationship with the Board of Education.

14. Describe the relationship between central office administration and building
    administrators.

15. In general, describe the relationship between central office administration and teachers.

16. In general, describe the relationship between building administration and teachers.

17. Describe the culture of this school district.

18. Please provide any other information you feel might be helpful in explaining the success of your school district.

Appendix D

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR BOARD OF EDUCATION MEMBERS

1. Why is this school district successful?

2. Are there traditions in your district that impact the culture of the district? If so, what are they?

3. What challenges is this district facing?

4. How is this district working to overcome those challenges?

5. Describe what communication looks like in this school district.

6. How are problems solved in this district?

7. What is the expectation in this school district in addressing the needs of all students?

8. What is the expectation in this school district in addressing the needs of staff?

9. Are there celebrations of success in this district? If so, please provide examples? If not, why?

10. Why are students achieving?

11. How are decisions made in this school district?

12. Describe the relationship between the Board of Education and the Superintendent.

13. Describe the relationship between the Board of Education and teachers.

14. Describe the culture of this school district.

15. Please provide any other information you feel might be helpful in explaining the success of your school district.

APPENDIX E

TODD B. SCHUETZ AND KENNETH D. CORUM
AN ANALYSIS OF A HIGH ACHIEVING SCHOOL DISTRICT'S CULTURE
NOTETAKING FORM

DATE _____ TIME _____ LOCATION _____

EVENT OBSERVED _____

SHARED SENSE OF PURPOSE: Purpose and values are consistent and shared across staff members
GROUP NORMS OF CONTINUOUS LEARNING: Group reinforces importance of staff learning and a focus on continuous improvement
RESPONSIBLE FOR STUDENT LEARNING: Staff feels a sense of responsibility for the learning of all students
COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STAFF MEMBERS: Staff works together to share ideas, problems and solutions to build a better school
FOCUS ON PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE: People interact through professional development, staff reflection and share to improve teaching as a shared collaborative

TODD B. SCHUETZ AND KENNETH D. CORUM
AN ANALYSIS OF A HIGH ACHIEVING SCHOOL DISTRICT'S CULTURE

GROUP NORMS OF CONTINUOUS LEARNING: Group reinforces importance of staff learning and a focus on continuous improvement

TEACHER SURVEY DATA:

Statement	Pos	HE	UP	TM	CEL	I	RA
(addressing needs of staff) Concerns are submitted to Nixa Teacher's Assoc./Pro Com/Strategic Planning/admin and concerns are usually discussed	Pos						
(addressing needs of staff) Even though we have had two years without raises, our district has made several attempts at meeting our needs: survey, special communications, gift certificates, spirit wear AND an extra day off!	Pos					I	RA
(addressing needs of staff) I am given plenty of opportunities to learn and grow professionally. Any knowledge that I feel is lacking, I have the ability to complete my professional development in that area. I am given time to collaborate with my peers- by doing this I am able to share the work load and therefore, I am less burdened individually.	Pos			TM			
(addressing needs of staff) I feel that our building is a community, and our teachers are not just co-workers, but friends. We have open communication between all parties to solve problems.	Pos			TM		I	
(addressing needs of staff) I feel that the school district wants to help staff and if a teacher if having an issue, the administration will listen and help resolve the issue.	Pos					I	
(addressing needs of staff) If a staff member has a need and the district agrees they will find the resources to provide the material. The district is also looking to see that the material is some thing that would be aligned with our district mission and vision. If the district does not have the resources available at that time they will try to find an alternative that they feel will still support the need of the teacher.	Pos		UP				RA
(addressing needs of staff) Most staff needs are met.	Pos						
(addressing needs of staff) Needs defined as personal needs- building principal is supportive	Pos						
(addressing needs of staff) Needs of the staff are addressed at all levels and administration recognizes the importance and contributions of the staff.	Pos				CEL		
(addressing needs of staff) Nixa has very high expectations and asks for all staff to address and reach these expectations using individual strengths and collaborative team building.	Pos	HE		TM			
(addressing needs of staff) Our district strives to provide staff all the resources we NEED and many of the resources we WANT. I have personally observed this in my position as a secondary teacher. Additionally, the district has aided me greatly in my pursuit of advanced degrees by providing me opportunities to complete course work and gain experience.	Pos						RA
(addressing needs of staff) Our school board and top administration highly value the staff and want to know our needs. With current budget cuts, they are doing a lot of listening and compromising to keep the staff happy.	Pos					I	RA
(addressing needs of staff) Staff are given the opportunity to speak through the Nixa Teachers Association. Good principals in our district speak up for their teachers regarding the needs of their staff.	Pos					I	
(addressing needs of staff) Staff professional development needs are met as budget & time allows.	Pos						RA
(addressing needs of staff) The district will do what they can to provide resources and necessary items for staff to do their job well.	Pos						RA
(addressing needs of staff) The expectation in this school district in addressing the needs of staff depends on the building principal. There are high expectations for staff performance, but staff needs are not necessarily as high.	Pos	HE				I	
(addressing needs of staff) The expectation is that the district will do all that it can with in its means to provide the staff with the necessary resources to do their jobs.	Pos						RA
(addressing needs of staff) The school district addresses the staff through professional development opportunities, book studies, and collaborative planning.	Pos			TM			
(addressing needs of staff) There are efforts to address staff needs through open communication even though funds are not plentiful.	Pos					I	RA
(addressing needs of staff) Usually surveys are given to get a feel for what the needs are in the district or building. For the most part, needs are met that are realistic, will impact student learning and funding is available.	Pos					I	RA
(addressing needs of staff) We are reminded by PTSA and administrators a few times a year as to how appreciated we are. There are committees that are formed on certain issues (for example, the calendar) but the final decisions are made by the administrators and the board.	Pos				CEL	I	
(addressing needs of staff)All staff should contuct themselves in a professional manner.	Pos						
(addressing needs of staff)Appropriate funds are provided for material classroom needs.	Pos						
(addressing needs of staff)Differentiate with the use of professional development needs/resources.	Pos						RA
(addressing needs of staff)Expectations are high. Our principals really care about the staff and their needs.	Pos	HE					

RESPONSIBILITY — INPUT/VOICE

TODD B. SCHUETZ AND KENNETH D. CORUM
A CASE STUDY ANALYSIS OF A HIGH ACHIEVING SCHOOL DISTRICT'S CULTURE

RESPONSIBLE FOR STUDENT LEARNING: Staff feels a sense of responsibility for the learning of all students

Text		Pos						
(how decisions are made) Dr. Kleinsmith, Supt. and his Cabinet discuss and consider opinions from staff if warranted. Depending on the situation, the school board makes policy decisions with recommendations from the superintendent to consider.	Pos	Admin survey				TM		
(how decisions are made) Always a collaborative effort	Pos	Principal				TM		
(how decisions are made) Decisions are made that have to be made on the spot, but decisions that directly impact kids are made collaboratively	Pos	Principal				TM		
(how decisions are made) Collaboratively	Pos	Principal				TM		
(how decisions are made) Everything comes through CSIP committee...representative of all members of our community	Pos	Principal	UP	SS				
(how decisions are made) Participatory and collaborative through CSIP, cost benefit analysis, research, invest the time to figure out what's best for our students	Pos	Principal	UP				RA	BP
(overcoming challenges of your job) Just by patiently listening and offering to direct them to the most appropriate person to help them. Being empathetic and assuring them their concern is heard and we will do our best to resolve in a win/win manner.	Pos	Admin survey						
(how decisions are made) The cabinet meets weekly which includes the directors and superintendent. There is a monthly meeting of all principals with the directors and superintendent. In addition, of course, the school board meets once a month. Parents may always meet with teachers, counselors, principals, directors or the superintendent. They are encouraged to start with teachers first. I personally find that the superintendent is very approachable.	Pos	Admin survey						
(how decisions are made) By appropriate personnel/administrators after considering all information involved and conversing with affected/involved personnel.	Pos	Admin survey						
(how decisions are made) Generally at the top. Study groups are sometimes commissioned.	Pos	Admin survey						
(how decisions are made) At cabinet, discussion happens, then Dr. K makes the decision unless the board needs to decide	Pos	CO						COC
(how decisions are made) Recommendations come to principals after talking with their staffs...then discussed at admin meetings	Pos	CO						
(how decisions are made) The cabinet discusses issues with the superintendent...give him opinions	Pos	CO						
(how decisions are made) Years ago, we needed to get admins to talk more at meetings...now there's much less fear to speak your mind at mtgs	Pos	CO						
(how decisions are made) Advisory councils (principals) are involved in decision making	Pos	Principal						
(how decisions are made) Back to school mtgs, retreat	Pos	Principal						
(how decisions are made) For the most part, Dr. K relies on his cabinet, or admins at the admin mtg	Pos	Principal						
(how decisions are made) If the superintendent talks with the board, then goes to the cabinet, admin, teachers...everyone knows and is ready to move forward	Pos	Principal						
(how decisions are made) Open round table...talk about what's important	Pos	Principal						
(how decisions are made) We try not to make decisions based on one opinion	Pos	Principal						
(how decisions are made) Academic Huddle....	Pos	Principal						
(how decisions are made) Comm with board, Dr. K...what's the impact? Is it good for kids?	Pos	Principal						
(how decisions are made) Groups like Pro Com...meets with CO...teacher direction	Pos	Principal						
(how decisions are made) Shared decision making model in the district	Pos	Principal						
(how decisions are made) When they can gather input, they do	Pos	Principal						
(how decisions are made) Dr. K will involve his cabinet and will weigh all the options to come to the board	Pos	Board member						
(how decisions are made) The people who are in the problem need to be involved in the decision	Pos	Board member						
Each person on cabinet had opportunities to share about their own areas of responsibility, but several times it was brought up that students were at the center of decision making	Pos	Cab mtg						

APPENDIX G
Example of sorted spreadsheet

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APPENDIX H
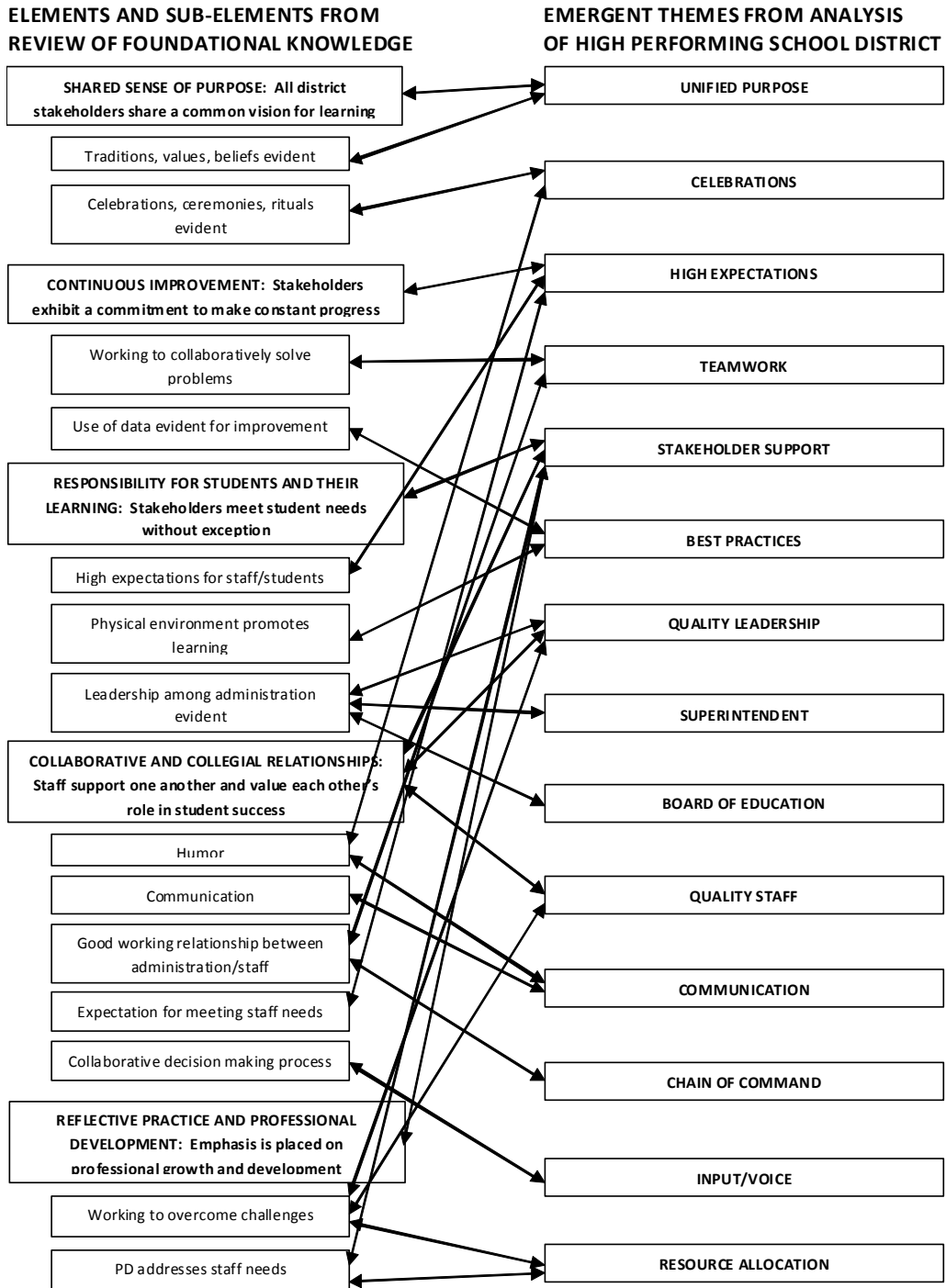## Analysis instrument

TODD B. SCHUETZ AND KENNETH D. CORUM

AN ANALYSIS OF A HIGH ACHIEVING SCHOOL DISTRICT'S CULTURE

Analysis instrument

WAS THE ELEMENT BELOW EVIDENT IN THE INTERVIEW OR EVENT?	Board meeting (3/10/2011)	Elementary principal #1 (4/25/2011)	Secondary principal #1	Elementary principal #2 (4/26/2011)	Secondary principal #2	Elementary principal #3	Secondary principal #3	Elementary principal #4	Secondary principal #4	Elementary principal #5	Cabinet meeting (4/27/2011)	School board member #1	School board member #2	School board member #3	Academic huddle (5/4/2011)	Central office administrator #1	Central office administrator #2	Central office administrator #3	Administrative meeting (5/5/2011)	Central office administrator #4	Central office administrator #5	Central office administrator #6	Community meeting (5/10/2011)	Central office administrator #7	Elementary principal #6	Secondary principal #5
SHARED SENSE OF PURPOSE: All district stakeholders share a common vision for learning	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Traditions, values, beliefs evident	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Celebrations, rituals evident, ceremonies	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT: Stakeholders exhibit a commitment to make constant progress	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Working to collaboratively solve problems	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Use of data evident for improvement	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
RESPONSIBLITY FOR STUDENTS AND THEIR LEARNING: Stakeholders meet student needs without exception	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
High expectations for staff/students	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Physical environment promotes learning	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x		x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Leadership among administration evident	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
COLLABORATIVE AND COLLEGIAL RELATIONSHIPS: Staff support one another and value each other's role in student success	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Humor	x		x	x	x		x		x					x			x	x		x		x	x		x	
Communication	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Good working relationship b/w admin/staff	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Expectation for meeting staff needs	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Collaborative decision making process	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: Emphasis is placed on professional growth and development	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Working to overcome challenges	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Prof. dev. addresses staff needs	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

x - dentoes element is present in interview or event

APPENDIX I
Correlation of elements and themes

TODD B. SCHUETZ AND KENNETH D. CORUM
AN ANALYSIS OF A HIGH ACHIEVING SCHOOL DISTRICT'S CULTURE
Correlation of elements and themes

ELEMENTS AND SUB-ELEMENTS FROM
REVIEW OF FOUNDATIONAL KNOWLEDGE

EMERGENT THEMES FROM ANALYSIS
OF HIGH PERFORMING SCHOOL DISTRICT

ELEMENTS AND SUB-ELEMENTS	EMERGENT THEMES
SHARED SENSE OF PURPOSE: All district stakeholders share a common vision for learning	UNIFIED PURPOSE
Traditions, values, beliefs evident	CELEBRATIONS
Celebrations, ceremonies, rituals evident	HIGH EXPECTATIONS
CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT: Stakeholders exhibit a commitment to make constant progress	TEAMWORK
Working to collaboratively solve problems	STAKEHOLDER SUPPORT
Use of data evident for improvement	BEST PRACTICES
RESPONSIBILITY FOR STUDENTS AND THEIR LEARNING: Stakeholders meet student needs without exception	QUALITY LEADERSHIP
High expectations for staff/students	SUPERINTENDENT
Physical environment promotes learning	BOARD OF EDUCATION
Leadership among administration evident	
COLLABORATIVE AND COLLEGIAL RELATIONSHIPS: Staff support one another and value each other's role in student success	
Humor	QUALITY STAFF
Communication	
Good working relationship between administration/staff	COMMUNICATION
Expectation for meeting staff needs	
Collaborative decision making process	CHAIN OF COMMAND
REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: Emphasis is placed on professional growth and development	INPUT/VOICE
Working to overcome challenges	
PD addresses staff needs	RESOURCE ALLOCATION

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	Cultural Indicator	Very Present	Somewhat Present	Not Really Present	Definitely Not Present	
TODD B. SCHUETZ AND KENNETH D. CORUM						
AN ANALYSIS OF A HIGH ACHIEVING SCHOOL DISTRICT'S CULTURE						
Cultural indicator scale						
Place an X in the appropriate column to indicate to what degree each element is or is not present in your school district.						
1	In our school district, staff share a common vision for student learning.					
2	Our school district has established traditions.					
3	Our school district has a sense of shared values and beliefs.					
4	Our school district celebrates success.					
5	Rituals and ceremonies are present in our school district.					
6	In our school district, staff exhibit a commitment to continuous improvement.					
7	Staff work collaboratively to solve problems in our school district.					
8	We refer to data in our school district.					
9	We strive to meet student needs without exception in our school district.					
10	There are high expectations for staff and students in our school district.					
11	The facilities in our school district promote student learning.					
12	Effective administrative leadership is present in our school district.					
13	Staff in this school district support one another in the interest of student learning.					
14	Humor is a cultural element in our school district.					
15	Effective communication is utilized in this school district.					
16	There is a good working relationship between administration and staff in this school district.					
17	There is an expectation in this school district to meet the professional development needs of staff.					
18	This district utilizes a collaborative approach when making decisions.					
19	We reflect on our professional practices in an effort to improve and overcome challenges in this school district.					
20	Professional development meets the needs of staff in this school district.					

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Vita Auctoris

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Vita Auctoris

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Mr. Corum has served students in the North Kansas City Schools in Missouri for 13 years by teaching at both the middle school and high school levels in core and encore subject areas. In addition, he has served as a head and an assistant coach in interscholastic volleyball and basketball for 15 years.

His career goals involve serving as a building and a central office administrator to coincide with personal goals of being a loving husband and father.