THE NEW NORMAL AFTER THE GREAT RECESSION OF 2009: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY OF A RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICT IN OHIO

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Shawn Michael Braman, B.A., M.Ed.

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Doctor of Education in Leadership Studies

Dr. Harold E. Wilson, Committee Chair

Date

Dr. Judy Alston, Committee Co-Chair

Date

Dr. Constance Savage, Committee Member

Date

Mr. Daniel Wilson, Committee Member

Date

Dr. Judy Alston, Chair, Department of Leadership Studies, Date

Dr. Donna Breault, Dean, Dwight Schar College of Education, Date

Dr. John Moser, Director of the Graduate School

Date

Ashland University
November, 2016
THE NEW NORMAL AFTER THE GREAT RECESSION OF 2009: A QUALITATIVE
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Shawn Michael Braman

ASHLAND UNIVERSITY, 2016

Dr. Harold E. Wilson

This study explored four school leaders in a small, rural school district in a case study
during the Great Recession of 2007-09. The exploratory study was based on their
experiences and actions throughout the financial crisis. Many of the changes they created
restructured their individual situations. The result of the recession provided a wide range
of institutional changes for all of the school leaders. The study was based on semi-
structured interviews, detailed observations, and carefully reviewed documents. The data
were analyzed in response to two research questions: “What was the financial and
leadership role for the school leaders of the small, rural school district during the Great
Recession?”, and “What financial and operational changes made within the small, rural
school district would be retained as the New Normal after the Great Recession waned?”
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CHAPTER I

Introduction

The Great Recession, which officially lasted from December 2007 to June 2009, began with an 8 trillion dollar housing cost collapse (Economic Policy Institute, 2012). The resulting loss of wealth led to cutbacks in consumer spending (Economic Policy Institute, 2012, para. 1). This loss of consumption, combined with the financial market chaos triggered by the bursting of the housing bubble, also led to a collapse in business investments (Economic Policy Institute, 2012, para. 1). As consumer spending and business investment diminished, job loss followed. In 2008 and 2009, the U.S. labor market lost 8.4 million jobs, or 6.1% of all payroll employment (Economic Policy Institute, 2012, para. 1). This was the most dramatic employment contraction of any recession since the Great Depression. By comparison, in the deep recession that began in 1981, job loss was 3.1% (Economic Policy Institute, 2012, para. 1).

Even after the economy stopped shrinking in the summer of 2009, its growth had not been nearly strong enough to create the jobs needed to keep pace with normal population growth (Economic Policy Institute, 2012, para. 2). The remaining workers lost their jobs during the collapse. In the post-World War II recessions before the early 1990s, it took an average of 10 months for the economy to regain the jobs it had lost during the recession (Economic Policy Institute, 2012, para. 2). However, after the early 1990s recession, it took nearly two years for the economy to recover. After the early 2000s recession, recovery of the jobs lost took more than three years. The recovery from the Great Recession was following the slow pattern of the last two recoveries, but with an even longer timeline. In October 2010, 16 months after the official end of the recession,
the economy still had 5.4% fewer jobs than it did before the recession started (Economic Policy Institute, 2012, para. 2). The Great Recession brought extraordinarily severe job loss combined with a slow recovery.

The job loss during the Great Recession meant that family incomes decreased, poverty increased, and people lost health insurance. Because of the bursting of the housing bubble and the drop in the stock market, family wealth dropped dramatically as well (Economic Policy Institute, 2012, para. 2). Many of the effects of the housing bubble’s burst are still felt throughout the economy (Economic Policy Institute, 2012, para. 2). During the recession and its aftermath, state and local governments across the nation faced fiscal crises as their revenues from income, sales, and property taxes plummeted (Economic Policy Institute, 2012, para. 2). To help amend some detrimental effects of the recession and kick start the economy, the federal government passed a large stimulus bill named the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) in 2009 (Economic Policy Institute, 2012, para. 2). The ARRA was short-lived and phased out when state and local government revenues were still under stress. Understanding the effects of these circumstances on school finances is essential to enhance policy, social, and scholarly perspectives.

**Background of the Problem**

Ohio’s working families and communities struggled as a result of the Great Recession of 2009 (Economic Policy Institute, 2012). After decades of deindustrialization, deregulation of Ohio’s economy, and diminished influence of labor unions, the recent mortgage crisis led to local economies being impacted and Ohio workers suffering job losses (Perkins, July 7, 2014). Because of the recession, local
school districts also endured stressful circumstances (Policy Matters Ohio, 2011). Unemployment was the biggest issue the Ohio economy faced. Official annual unemployment in 2009 was the highest since 1983 with 10.3% unemployment (Policy Matters Ohio, 2011). Of those who were unemployed in Ohio in 2009, 29.7% had been unemployed for more than 26 weeks or longer—a rate higher than any percentage in the last 30 years (National School Boards Association, 2009). Local support for schools was vulnerable to failure. On local ballots for school districts in 2008, 61% of the tax issues were approved according to Scott Elbright, the deputy director of communication services for the Ohio School Boards Association (National School Boards Association, 2009). A large number of those levies that passed were renewals. Among the 138 ballots seeking new money for capital projects, emergency levies, or other purposes, 83 failed (Ohio Department of Education, 2010). With the state losing its workforce during this time, school support diminished. The Great Recession began in December 2007 and ended in June 2009 (Perkins, July 11, 2012). In recovering the lost jobs during the recession, Ohio ranked 40th in the United States (Perkins, July 11, 2012).

The Great Recession from 2007 to 2009 was a financial recession that impacted all aspects of the economy, public and private (Guina, 2011). The United States, with each recession, has suffered slower economic recovery. The recession had diminished state and local tax revenues (Odden & Picus, 2011). The result for education was that education budgets were cut in more than 30 states and per pupil education dollars declined in more than half of the school districts across the country (Odden & Picus, 2011). Despite the grim financial situation, pressure to improve student performance continued to grow in many states, including Ohio (Brown & Cornwall, 2000). Glass and
Franceschini (2007) reported that since 1920, nearly all of the 10-year studies conducted by the American Association of School Administrators revealed that school leaders considered school finance to be the source of their most serious challenges. Superintendents countered the tight fiscal situation with positive student accomplishment (Glass & Franceschini, 2007).

The superintendents worked to cut expenditures in a way that would minimize the effects on student learning (Hull, 2010). Many superintendents, however, did not have a strong background in money management or budgeting (Hull, 2010). At the same time, school leaders were forced to become knowledgeable in the art of saving money through cost containment, cutting back, or reallocating resources (Abshier, Harris, & Hopson, 2011). Creative methods of cutting expenditures enabled superintendents, particularly in small school districts, to save money with little influence on student learning. For example, (a) leaders were adjusting thermostats to save money; (b) superintendents were deferring maintenance or construction projects; (c) central office workers were being laid off; (d) aides and tutors were being hired at half the cost to replace librarians and guidance counselors; and (e) smaller school districts had eliminated nonessential travel, which limited students attending outside of school activities (Hull, 2010). School districts required even more creative methods to maintain optimal educational experiences for students (Abshier, Harris, & Hopson, 2011). Some districts minimized loss in revenue during the Great Recession through instituting furlough days for staff, freezing salaries, and reducing health and retirement costs (Hull, 2010). Superintendents were asked to do more with less, with dwindling resources and rising expectations through student testing and more exacting teacher evaluations (Guthrie, McRae, & Klauda, 2007). The poor
economy had created an unrealistic climate of high expectations for student achievement while schools also faced larger class sizes, eliminated jobs, and the continued absorption of teacher vacancies.

Statement of the Problem

Creative budgeting during the Great Recession and the New Normal budgeting within public school districts became a common practice throughout the United States (Hull, 2010). The available literature in this understudied area pertains to the continued cuts schools must endure while maintaining high academic standards. Researchers also suggested that school officials enforced constant cuts, but few researchers have distinguished which effective changes have remained as the New Normal for school districts in Ohio (Hull, 2010). Given the recent modifications in school budgets during the Great Recession, school leaders were evaluating organizations at a nonstop rate (Hull, 2010). Conducting a study is necessary to explore creative budgeting within school districts regarding transportation, food services, utilities, and what might be retained after adequate funding restoration. Most of the existing studies of the effects of the Great Recession on school functioning tended to focus on reducing educational expenditures such as condensing or eliminating programs or not replacing teachers leaving the school system. Few studies have focused on the operational aspects of school districts (Leachman, Albares, Masterson & Wallace, 2015).

Since teaching personnel, administrative personnel, and other staff serving students tend to be the bulk of expenditures for school districts, these reductions tend to be a quick fix to a fiscal downturn. However, these types of reduction of expenditures
often reduce program opportunities for students as these positions constitute the heart of educational programming.

The school district which was the focus of this study focused on the support staff and its programs in searching for ways of lowering operating costs. In many cases, the resulting redesign of the support services, in addition to reducing costs, resulted in improved support services. The business world was also forced to streamline programs and services, which review operations to reduce costs often found more effective and efficient ways of doing business. The term New Normal was at this time adopted to identify successful practices that became the chosen method of behavior or practice. This practice was eventually termed the New Normal. This term has been adopted to describe programs and services in education which will continue beyond the need to do them to reduce operating costs (Hull, 2010).

Most of the existing studies of the effects of the Great Recession on school functioning have tended to focus on reducing educational program expenditures such as condensing or eliminating programs or not replacing teachers leaving the school system. Few studies have focused on the operational aspects of the school districts.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore four school leaders in a small, rural school district through a case study regarding the Great Recession of 2007–2009. The exploratory study was based on their experiences and actions throughout the financial crisis. The result of the recession included a wide range of institutional changes by the school leaders within the study, as indicated via semi-structured interviews, detailed observations, and carefully reviewed documents. I analyzed the data in response to two
research questions, (a) What were the financial and leadership roles for the school leaders of the small, rural school district during the Great Recession? and (b) What financial and operational changes made within the small, rural school district were retained as the New Normal after the Great Recession waned? Of the four leaders analyzed for the case study, the findings included the financial situation as an opportunity for changes within the organization. The study results may help other school leaders who have similar experiences when searching for additional methods to improve their organization. In addition, as part of the New Normal, school leaders should understand that all effective changes, financial and operational, within the rural district would be retained.

The purpose of a qualitative research study is to understand and explain participant meaning (Morrow & Smith, 2000). Creswell (1998) defined qualitative research as

an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting. (p. 15)

Through the study, I worked to collect, observe, and analyze the lives of the four school leaders to create the complete qualitative picture of their lives throughout the Great Recession and the New Normal process. Thus, using a qualitative methodology allowed for study of the phenomenon of public school districts adapting to the loss of revenue during the Great Recession of 2007–2009. I observed more than just an adaptation. The New Normal mentality presents school leaders with an opportunity during a deep financial strain. The leaders developed and implemented changes that were
sustained. The study involved examination regarding if the changes were successful for the small, rural school district.

**Research Questions**

The research question of this study was “What was the financial leadership role of the school superintendent and other school leaders in a small, rural school in Ohio during and after the Great Recession with consideration to the New Normal?” This study included the following research subquestions:

1. What was the financial and operational leadership role for the school leaders of the small, rural public school district during the Great Recession?

2. What financial and operational changes made within the small, rural school district were retained as the New Normal after the Great Recession waned?

**Significance of the Study**

This qualitative multiple case study was important for several reasons. Little literature exists pertaining to superintendents creating effective changes regarding personnel, transportation, or food services during the Great Recession, while the community expected adjustments without limiting educational opportunities. Most of the available literature concerns the specific changes schools endured in relation to the Common Core standards set by the federal government. In 2010, the Ohio State Board of Education adopted the Common Core State Standards in English language arts and mathematics as well as the revisions to Ohio’s academic content standards in science and social studies (Academic content standards, 2013). During the summer and fall of 2010, teachers across Ohio worked collaboratively in teams to suggest instructional strategies and resources that align with the revised standards (Academic content standards, 2013).
Creative budgeting for school leaders became a common phenomenon in many public school districts throughout Ohio during the Great Recession (Duncan, 2010). The budgetary studies conducted have used samples of large school districts (Duncan, 2010). This study was conducted in a small, rural school district where leaders were forced to make difficult decisions in times of recession in the United States. The term New Normal grew from the need for all businesses to develop a productivity priority that could be applied to a number of discretionary programs (Gulati, R., Nohria, N., & Wohlgezogen, F., 2010). Federal, state, and local educators learned about measuring, evaluating, and improving productivity with doing more for educating students with less funding available (Duncan, 2010). Specifically, I examined what changes remained as the New Normal and what reshaped the process of funding school districts. This study provided information for future researchers in the field and school leaders negotiating effective lasting changes when local money decreases during a recession.

A dearth of literature exists regarding superintendents producing effective changes pertaining to personnel, transportation, or food services during the Great Recession, while, at the same time, the rural community expected adjustments without limiting the educational opportunities. Previous researchers mostly focused on the specific changes schools endure in relationship to the Common Core standards (Liou, 2016). Many of the studies pertaining to education between 2007 and 2009 were quantitative in nature. The second goal of this qualitative study was to understand how the changes were conducted within a small school district and the changes that still remain, even after the state begins to fund all school districts. Even with funding available, districts would not return to past practices. Third, creative budgeting for school leaders had become a common
phenomenon in many public school districts throughout Ohio during the Great Recession, forcing superintendents to scrutinize the district from an organizational position. Fourth, the study added knowledge to a neglected area and provide information to school superintendents, treasurers, educators, and policy makers to better understand the needs of school leaders who are searching for methods to budget within a district without restricting student learning. In previous budgetary studies, researchers used samples of large school districts. This study was conducted in a small, rural school district where leaders are forced to make difficult decisions in times of recession in the United States. I examined what changes remained as the New Normal reshapes the process of operating school districts. Finally, this study provided information for researchers who wish to study school leaders as school leaders negotiate changes when local money decreases during a recession.

Qualitative research methods are useful in discovering the meaning that people give to events they experience (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The purpose of this study was to discover the effects of the Great Recession and the New Normal on school leaders regarding their collection, analysis, and use of data to improve student success in school. In recent years, because of the Great Recession, public school districts learned to adjust and live within the boundaries of the New Normal (Duncan, 2010).

**Researcher’s Lens**

The researcher’s lens is how I established validity as part of a qualitative study (Creswell & Miller, 2000). My lens was established by the participants of my research inquiry through a variety of methods. The researcher determines the credibility of any
particular qualitative study (Creswell & Miller, 2000). I determined how and when my research was completely saturated with extended time observing the school leaders. I also determined if the data collected from the school leaders provided enough information to create a compelling narrative to the case study (Creswell & Miller, 2000). This reflexive accounting is a process of going over the notes collected through my observations and interviews until themes of the case study were revealed.

The participants of the study also provided the background in developing my researcher’s lens (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The data I collected from each leader were constructed as a mirror to what the participants of the study had experienced. The superintendent and treasurer were the two primary leaders of the small, rural school district. The maintenance and transportation supervisor, along with the foods supervisor, were involved enough within the research topic and this study accurately represented their voices and actions.

**Definition of Terms**

This section provides the definitions frequently used throughout the research study.

*Classified staff:* Janitors, cooks, bus drivers, and maintenance workers

*Clerical staff:* This work generally involves day-to-day office tasks with executive assistants or secretaries, such as answering phones and entering data into spreadsheets.

*Educators:* Teachers, administrators, and school counselors
**New Normal:** Something that was previously abnormal has now become commonplace. New Normal is also a term used in business and economics that refers to financial conditions following the financial crisis of the Great Recession (Duncan, 2010).

**Public relations:** The school leaders developed deeper communication with the community with sustained changes (Duncan, 2010).

**School district leadership:** The four district leaders within the researched school system: superintendent, treasurer, maintenance and transportation supervisor, and food supervisor

**Sustainability:** The actions and changes that remained even after funding returned

**Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

The assumption of this study was that each school leader created changes within his or her field of responsibility to combat the financial strain of the Great Recession. An additional assumption was that some of the changes implemented remained even after state and local funding returned to the small, rural school district. Several strategies used by colleges, universities, and K–12 public school districts because of the Great Recession are outlined in the literature review. These strategies include enacting fewer school days per week, implementing more extensive “green” practices to save funding during a longer period of time, targeting retirements and restructuring personnel rather than reducing faculty and staff, and developing other methods and practices to combat the financial strain. These and other strategies are assumed to have been implemented in school districts throughout the United States during the Great Recession. A final assumption was that once school leaders developed the New Normal mentality, many of these changes remained after state and local funding returned to the public school districts.
A limitation of using a qualitative case study on a small, rural school district during the Great Recession was that this type of study cannot provide much information to existing studies. Few studies exist regarding the changes implemented during a specific financial crisis at a small, public school district. This qualitative case study presented a specific view of school leaders who are creating and implementing a New Normal mentality independent of each other. The results of this study presented the specific changes employed and which changes remained after state and local funding returned.

Another limitation to this qualitative case study was that the data collected were taken from only four district school leaders. In conducting the research, four district leaders were employed at the small, rural district. In a district this small, they were the only ones with district-wide responsibilities. The leaders maintained a wide variety of roles, whereas in a larger school system, many more leaders are employed to make decisions.

Delimitations describe boundaries set by the researcher that limit the span of the study (Creswell, 2008). The delimitations were put into place to narrow the focus of the study to observe the changes made as part of the New Normal. The delimitations also were put into place to determine which changes remained after funding returned to the small, rural school district. Because this study was a case study, I decided to observe and interview the district leaders of the school system. The case study pertained to the four leaders’ perspectives to determine that sustained change is possible even when a school district experiences hardships. I focused on the four leaders by conducting a study that may affect other small districts creating their own New Normal to become more efficient, even after funding returns.
Conclusion

After continuous cuts in funding during the last decade, the school district involved in this study has maintained a high level of achievement from their students. This study followed a qualitative case study design. This qualitative case study was important and needed for several reasons. A dearth of literature exists relative to superintendents administering effective changes during the Great Recession, while the community expected adjustments without limiting educational opportunities. The available literature pertained to the specific changes schools must endure in relationship to the Common Core standards. Many of the previous studies relating to research on education between 2007 and 2009 were quantitative in nature. The goal of this qualitative study was to focus on gaining a unique understanding of how the changes were conducted within a small school district and which changes remain.
CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

The design of this research study allowed analysis of the school leaders’ lasting creative changes regarding school personnel, transportation, and food services during a period of financial stress. Community members expected changes to be made with little or no influence on the educational programming for the small, rural school district. As part of the New Normal, the school leaders focused on which changes would remain after the return of the prerecession funds.

The purpose of Chapter II is to provide a review of the existing literature. For this qualitative study, a dearth of literature exists regarding small, rural public schools under New Normal circumstances. The review encompasses the following sections: (a) defining the New Normal, (b) adjustments to the Great Recession, (c) school leaders and the New Normal, and (d) a summary of the review of the literature.

Defining the New Normal

School leaders who worked through the Great Recession often discovered their own working definition of the New Normal. Learning from their experiences and past history, building on the experiences and best practices of others, and transferring knowledge quickly and efficiently throughout the organization provided a process of dealing with the financial crisis (Garvin, 1998). In 2010, the end of the Great Recession, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan realized that the New Normal in education meant that school leaders needed to create opportunities and make lasting changes, even after funding returned to a more adequate level (Duncan, 2010). The New Normal refers to
a different strategy for increasing productivity is to improve efficiency by taking steps like deferring maintenance and construction projects, cutting bus routes, lowering the costs of textbooks and health care, improving energy use and efficiency in school buildings, and reducing central office personnel. (Duncan, 2010)

The New Normal also provided superintendents, treasurers, and other school leaders the opportunity to improve the organization because of the crisis (Duncan, 2010). Duncan (2010) planned for the New Normal to “encourage educators, principals, unions, district leaders, state chiefs, parents, lawmakers, and governors to explore productive alternatives to old ways of doing things. Challenging the status quo will take courage. It will take commitment. And it will take collaboration” (p.2).

The New Normal, for the successful school districts during the Great Recession, resisted where the leaders enforced changes throughout the district. After implementation of the changes, they remained after school districts began slowly to regain funding from the state and other sources. According to Rivero and Feigenblatt (2016), “The ‘New Normal’ is an emerging reality where the abnormal becomes the commonplace” (p. 424). In doing so, the New Normal has evolved. The term is commonly accepted as the extreme becoming the norm (Rivero & Feigenblatt, 2016). The global financial crisis prompted the Great Recession leading to the crippling of world financial markets (Wolff, 2014).

In the past, “hunkering down” was the preferred method of handling difficult times in the economy (Rhodes & Stelter, 2010). With the New Normal, companies who recognize the opportunities and modify their business models are able to grow. Managers who learn key strategies can create situations where companies do not just survive, but
thrive (Rhodes & Stelter, 2010). Organizations, or businesses, are able to evolve despite
the challenges of surrounding and increased competition. Businesses can continue to
thrive even when faced with a reduction of resources. Without strong leadership in
business, organizational change will become misguided. Without emotional intelligence
from those at the top, there will be organizational failure (Rivero & von Feigenblatt,
2016). As leaders of business should remain critical thinkers and lead by example, they
must develop a total understanding of everything internally and externally affecting the
organization. In this way, public school leaders must continue to lead and expand the
school organization and its curricula (Rivero & von Feigenblatt, 2016). School leaders,
like those in business, must be willing to generate initiatives within their organization to
enable its students to meet U.S. job requirements.

Adjustments to the Great Recession

The Great Recession from 2007 to 2009 caused many in the United States to
reevaluate their lifestyles. Whether in business, education, or everyday life, millions of
Americans responded to the dwindling economy in a variety of ways. Many people spent
less, saved more, and lived life more simply. Americans have learned to improve their
existences without the idea of consuming (Etzioni, 2011).

In New Normal, Etzioni (2011) determined to discover “whether people would
seek a return to their prerecession lives” (p.780) as soon as the economy would allow all
throughout the United States to do so. The view on the New Normal was seen as a new
source of contentment. Many citizens throughout the country, Etzioni (2011) suggested,
could find improved lives derived from relationships and cultural and spiritual pursuits.
After milder recessions, particularly in 1991 to 1992 and in 2001 to 2002, consumers
returned quickly to the former ways of spending and shopping. The same was especially true after the September 11 attacks. Shoppers reverted to pre-attack levels within a few years (Etzioni, 2004). However, during the Great Recession, consumers had changed their habits to attain some level of contentment (Etzioni, 2004).

The New Normal, for many Americans following the Great Recession, meant cutting back regarding their consumer behavior (Etzioni, 2004). During the Great Recession, people consumed less (Etzioni, 2004). In 2009, 53% of all Americans spent less and 62% of all consumers in the country admitted to cutting back on spending in some way (Newport, 2009). Consumers throughout the country subscribed to a reduction in lifestyle. As the recession affected society, many had simplified their lives: American shoppers bought less expensive brand names, alcohol and cigarette purchasing was significantly reduced, vacation plans were cut back or completely canceled, and hairdressers and barbers experienced fewer customers (Newport, 2009). Since the economic downturn, consumers resolved to spending less in all possible ways. People had chosen to live their lives more simply.

The Great Recession was different from previous recessions. From 2007 to 2010, an escalating feeling grew toward improving the environment (Griskevicious, Tybur, & Van de Bergh, 2010). People throughout the country developed ways to combat the recession and help the environment. More and more concerted movements began to justify helping the ecosystem while battling the financial crisis (Etzioni, 2011). People wanted to make themselves feel better, despite the economic downturn. Some people began to think that society had become lazy, and consumers wanted to be a part of an
important cause (Newport, 2009). The recession reminded many throughout the country that people might be better off if they lived more simply (Etzioni, 2011; Newport, 2009).

Etzioni (2011) examined how Americans reevaluated their lives during the Great Recession. Between 2007 and 2010, a connection existed between personal happiness and the individual struggle against the economic strain. Etzioni expressed that once the economy improved, Americans would continue to thrive under the New Normal, which involved more with less spending (Etzioni, 2011). However, no real evidence existed to determine how the economy would react once the Great Recession completely dissipated.

**School Leaders Face the New Normal**

Abshier, Harris, and Hopson (2011) examined the perceptions of successful small-school superintendents with regard to maintaining or improving district efficiency and financial status. Areas of improved efficiency included personnel decisions, reducing district expenditures through purchasing, and energy use. Glass and Francheschini (2007) reported that since 1925, nearly all of the 10-year studies conducted by the American Association of School Administrators revealed that superintendents considered their role in school finance to be the source of their most serious challenges.

The conditions superintendents faced during and after the Great Recession were daunting. This recession was a situation leaders were not prepared to solve while continuing to maximize student learning opportunities (Glass & Francheschini, 2007). Many school leaders did not have a background in money management or budgeting (Dlott, 2007). Graduate schools often did not prepare future superintendents for saving, cutting-back, or reallocating resources (Dlott, 2007). The challenge, especially for small, rural schools, may have been the need to facilitate higher student achievement in a time of
unstable resources (Odden & Picus, 2008). The danger of financing schools was that smaller school districts were viewed as inefficient (Kappanel & DeYoung, 1999). Small schools were perceived as inadequate because of the inherent diseconomies of scale (Kappanel & DeYoung, 1999). Abshier et al. (2011), through a qualitative study, aimed to identify financial management and fiscal practices used by superintendents within small districts in Texas. School leaders assessed the circumstances, and those in charge determined the methods to ensure students had the opportunity to learn (Abshier et al., 2011).

Patterson, Koenigs, Mohn and Rasmussen (2006), through a qualitative study, examined the decision making of resources allocated during a time when another small, rural school district in the Midwest suffered financially. The researchers conducted a qualitative case study with focus groups and personal interviews with district administrators, school board members, teachers, and parents. Throughout the study, the researchers investigated the cultural values that influenced the superintendent and the school board members.

The school district was operating nine schools over five communities. Declining enrollment forced cutbacks. During this time, the researchers were asked to gauge public support with the possibility of closing three school buildings with enrollment of 23 to 48 students. The researchers conducted the study using theories of organizational archetypes (Greenwood & Hinings, 1993) and organizational culture (Argyris, 1999; Schein, 2004). This allowed the researchers to evaluate cultural values and preferences. Throughout the study, the researchers uncovered historical patterns of people who were resistant to change. The community’s relationship with school leaders worsened rather than
improved. Problems arose through uneven or unfair resource allocation over the varied school building throughout the district. The community, as with many communities, needed to work together. The school leaders took action that made the situation worse.

The researchers understood that the school leaders needed to understand completely that ineffective decision making was tied to the past of the community (Patterson et al., 2006). The researchers determined that school leaders for decades worked to understand and change a school or district’s climate. However, the researchers applied archetypes or patterns to educational organizations to examine the common cultural practices that might be applied in other organizations (Patterson et al., 2006). In this study, the researchers collected and analyzed data through observations, individual interviews, and public documents. These methods were conducted through three on-site observations through all nine schools (Patterson et al., 2006). With the triangulation method, the researchers developed several archetypes, or patterns, through the data collection. The first pattern identified with the superintendent modeling “my way or the highway” as a decision-maker. The second archetype was the practice of communicating less than accurate information gathered to make leadership decisions. The final archetype discovered was the success to the successful archetype. Those who performed in favored circumstances with leadership received greater visibility and advantages (Patterson et al., 2006). The School Board and superintendent were unable to see their decision making process of consolidating buildings was viewed as poorly done. To implement a New Normal method of thinking, the school board and superintendent needed to include the community decision making. Working in isolation with poor communication as a leader would force
the superintendent to leave. Many issues as part of the New Normal were left unresolved (Patterson et al., 2006).

The United States has slowly started to recover from the effects of the Great Recession. Some states improved more quickly than others did. Public schools throughout the country still struggle with local tax revenues from property taxes. Depressed housing values throughout the Great Recession have shown lower receipts while costs for other common purchases, such as fuel for transportation and food, have continued to rise. The New Normal, for school districts in the United States, meant that school leaders faced opportunities in changing the practice of usual day-to-day operations. For school leaders, some problems existed beyond local revenues. Many districts were obligated contractually to increase pay for all teachers (Baker, 2011). The cost of health insurance also continued to escalate (Baker, 2011). Marguerite Roza at the Center for Rejuvenating Public Education determined that various costs for school districts rise at close to 4.5% per year (as cited in Baker, 2011). These yearly increases force school leaders to make consistent budget realignments every year within their own district.

Superintendents made strategic decisions to improve the district even while facing budgetary cutbacks (Baker, 2011). School leaders explored their possible solutions to protect the learning opportunities for students and the influence of the teachers’ effectiveness at the schools. Educators were not the only group who made sacrifices to sustain a school district. The superintendents considered reform and investments while rethinking the staffing model. The primary, long-term focus included who was hired and what would be done with their time (Baker, 2011). The typical consequence when school
districts faced cuts resulted in reducing staff or narrowing the curriculum to meet budget demands (Baker, 2011). Passing the problem on to families would not solve the issue. Bond issues and permanent improvement levies would not pass during the financial crisis (Baker, 2011). A leaner, more productive staff with teachers going beyond expectations and making more money could be the solution to improve many schools (Baker, 2011). Paying teachers for productivity particularly with value-added test scores would improve school districts (Baker, 2011).

Instead of cutting staff, closing schools within the district, or removing programs, some schools reduced operating costs because of the Great Recession (Baker, 2011). For many, the New Normal meant some school leaders have discovered an unusual method of providing professional development and making better use of instructional time (Baker, 2011). School leaders throughout the country were using all of these methods as more schools were going from a 5-day week to a 4-day week. Yarbrough and Gilman (2006) examined strategies of several districts who maintained a 4-day work week. In rural, western Kentucky, a school district with 1,800 low-income students struggled to survive with a weakening tax revenue base. This weakening revenue base was because of a declining population from the closing of a local coalmine. People retreated from the city, causing a burden on financing the local school district. Because of the declining population, combined with continued state budget cuts, the school system suffered. Webster County was forced to cut 20% from its budget. After considering many options, the local school board voted to adopt a 4-day week with students attending school from Tuesdays to Fridays. The new school calendar consisted of students attending school for 163 days with 6.5 instructional hours per day. The school board also implemented 12
teacher planning days with four additional professional development days. This plan followed the state’s requirement of 1,050 student hours each year (Yarbrough & Gilman, 2006).

The New Normal occurred in smaller, more rural school districts sooner than larger schools after the Great Recession. Yarbrough and Gilman (2006) noted several benefits and concerns regarding the decision to transform the Webster County Schools. School leaders found improved graduation and attendance rates, encountered fewer discipline actions and classroom interruptions, created strong professional development opportunities for the teachers, and increased focus with student engagement in the classroom. Financially, the school district saved money through a reduction in utility bills. The district encountered problems in helping parents with childcare issues when school was not in session. Some students struggled with the longer school day, and at-risk students suffered with their needs not being met 5 days a week. While the superintendent believed that the positive results outweighed the negative, the district saved money and student learning steadily improved (Yarbrough & Gilman, 2006). The article did not provide specific data regarding test scores, such as advanced placement testing or state tests given throughout all of the grades. For this district, the four-day school week became an option if specific proof of improved student learning existed since its implementation.

Two factors contributed to preventing children from receiving a large amount of federal spending during the Great Recession: (a) children could not vote and (b) their numbers were dwindling throughout the United States (Aber & Chaudry, 2010). Aber and Chaudry (2010) determined that the value in educating children to prepare for the country’s future is important. Family and government investments in the total
development of children are crucial to shape the nation. With the severity of the recession, families, along with federal and local governments, had not been able to invest properly in the development of children (Aber & Chaudry, 2010). Because of the economic downturn, low-income families endured grueling conditions from a day-to-day perspective. The Obama Administration recognized this and creatively worked to institute a New Normal for millions of families (Aber & Chaudry, 2010). In February 2009, President Obama signed the Children’s Health Insurance Authorization Act, which provided coverage for more than 4 million children. He also signed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), which provided billions of dollars of federal investment in K–12 education and the expansion of the children’s tax credit. This legislation was an effort for the administration to counter the devastating effects of the Great Recession. The economy has been slow to recover new jobs and increase revenue for state and local governments. Aber and Chaudry (2010) determined that increasing federal investments in low-income children and their families requires moving resources away from other objectives, raising taxes during a recession, and continuing high levels of deficit spending. An urgent need exists for investing more into developing a New Normal for low-income children and their parents (Aber & Chaudry, 2010).

In the post-recession world, public school systems continue to face funding restrictions. Leaders perceived the trying time as an opportunity to create strategies to ensure classrooms received the best resources (Aber & Chaudry, 2010). With New Normal thinking, superintendents sometimes considered using private contracts for support, which included transportation, custodial and maintenance, and food services (Duncan, 2010). Getting these services under contract for a public school district would
lead to disaster for the local superintendent without careful considerations (Aber & Chaudry, 2010). Many strategies disintegrated because the critical issues were not raised (Bossidy & Charan, 2002). Leaders too often progressed to using contracts without thinking of the stakeholders within the community. Emotions can become frenzied, and without a successful approach, the superintendent may experience immediate failure (Bossidy & Charan, 2002). The existing issues must be determined before a school district decides to use contracts. Four elements are established when a district uses private contracts: (a) understanding the contracting objectives, (b) completing the contracting analysis, (c) aligning stakeholder expectations, and (d) understanding the context of the situation (Zopf, 2010).

Identifying objectives and exercising a thorough analysis are important aspects of developing a contracted relationship with an outside business (Zopf, 2010). School leader must include all the stakeholders when making significant changes. Without time for buy-in from all people throughout the school district and community, contracting workers outside of the schools would be difficult. The school boards must understand how to orchestrate employee buy-in. The implications of the change, when not well managed, could be disastrous. When adopting a strategy to contract employees, the school board should consider turning the change into board policy. Transparency would allow the school board to act without the intention of losing a local resident employed within the district (Zopf, 2010). For administration, a new organizational structure would compel principals and assistant principals to facilitate an efficient change. With contracting employees from outside businesses, school leaders would face difficulty from everyone involved in the process.
The Great Recession ended in 2009. Public schools endured the devastating effects of the financial collapse. The New Normal has become a point of emphasis for many school leaders. Even though the recession has ended, the nation’s schools still face difficult fiscal conditions (Cavanaugh, 2011). States and school districts have seen their tax bases decline during the past years, and many states are not anticipating happier financial times. At least 46 states, plus the District of Columbia, struggled to maintain a responsible budget heading into the 2011 fiscal year (Cavanaugh, 2011). While political leaders are considered by some to be traditionally indecisive in cutting education programs, the economic collapse forced state and local officials to make reductions and more cuts to jobs and services than they would have a few years ago. The challenge for all district leaders in the future is to make choices that address specific financial concerns facing the district, while meeting long-term academic and financial goals. School systems must determine their own New Normal as a matter of survival (Cavanaugh, 2011).

Amanda Miles, an advisory-panel member for Quality Counts 2011, stated, “We don’t believe that the conversation is about what to cut.” Cavanaugh (2011) stated, “The conversation is, ‘What is it that we want to do? What are our most important priorities? How do we organize resources to do that in the best way?’” School leaders face the challenge of developing flexible methods to meet future financial crises.

**Conclusion**

Even after the economy stopped shrinking in the summer of 2009, its growth has not been nearly strong enough to create the jobs needed to keep pace with normal population growth (Economic Policy Institute, 2012). Workers who lost their jobs during the collapse remained unemployed. In the post-World War II recessions, it took an
average of 10 months for the economy to regain the jobs it had lost (Economic Policy Institute, 2012). After the early 1990s recession, it took nearly 2 years, and after the early 2000s recession, it took more than 3 years to recover. The recovery from the Great Recession has followed the sluggish pattern of these last two recoveries, but likely with an even longer timeline (Economic Policy Institute, 2012). In October 2010, 16 months after the official end of the recession, the economy still had 5.4% fewer jobs than it did before the recession started. The Great Recession has brought increased job losses combined with a slower recovery (Economic Policy Institute, 2012). School leaders have used this recession as opportunity to develop New Normal thinking. This way of thinking became a chance for school districts to not just survive, but to thrive during times of recession.

Based on the review of the literature, a gap exists in the knowledge regarding the subject of this particular study. The aim of this literature review was to highlight the awareness that school leaders need to be fully prepared in this area for leaders to take action when the opportunity becomes apparent. Educators should look at the evidence of what school leaders completed to accelerate student learning and stop doing what does not work during times of financial stress.
CHAPTER III

Research Methodology

The methodology for this research design focused on the emerging changes for school leaders throughout the United States. The Great Recession’s influence has enforced new normalcies for public school superintendents, treasurers, foods supervisors, and transportation supervisors. Because of the financial strain of the Great Recession, public schools have changed. Pressure exists for school leaders to teach students at higher and higher levels with less financial assistance. School leaders are asked to prepare students to compete globally while districts make creative decisions to remove needless spending. School leaders face new challenges and as the term New Normal suggests, difficult times lie ahead for school leaders who will be forced to make lasting changes when or if funding returns.

Design

Case studies involve organizing the data by specific cases for in-depth study and holistic and contextual comparison (Patton, 2002). In a qualitative research study, a case study involves examining the complexity of a single case to understand the activity within important circumstances (Patton, 2002). For this study, the phenomenon under investigation was the changes that remain within a small, rural school district as part of the New Normal after the Great Recession. The case under study pertained to the thoughts and actions of administrators and school leaders in a small, rural school district in Ohio. After collecting the raw data, I wrote the results of the case study. I collected data through in-depth interviews with four school district leaders. In addition, I reviewed
documents related to the financial status of the district where the study was conducted. Interviews were audiotaped. Professionals then transcribed the audiotapes into written documentation. In addition to the interview data, I gathered the district’s financial reports. Once collecting all of the materials was completed, the data were coded for any materializing themes.

Various components make up a case study research design. Case study research designs provide “the argument for the logical steps which would be taken to link the research questions and issues to data collection, analysis, and interpretation” to be clear and easily understood method (Hartly, 2004, pp. 323–333). According to Yin (2003), five components of a research design are specifically tied to developing case studies:

- A study’s questions
- Creating a purpose of the study
- Units of analysis
- Linking the data
- Developing the criteria for interpreting the findings. (pp. 19–21)

In a qualitative research inquiry, a case study answers the question how or why regarding a situation. Case studies are the preferred strategy when “the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus was on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context” (Yin, 2003, pp. 2, 5–10). I specifically questioned how school leaders in a small, rural school district instituted financial changes to combat the effects of the Great Recession. Additionally, I queried what changes were retained as part of the New Normal within the same district.
The how and why questions lead to the second element of a case study research design, which is to clearly define the purpose of the study. My purpose was to understand what budgetary and operational changes remained as part of the New Normal after the effects of the Great Recession began to decrease. Another purpose of this study was to understand the experiences that the educational leaders endured during this difficult time.

The third section of a case study is the unit of analysis. According to Yin (2004), “case study analysis can rely on several techniques whose use might be anticipated during the initial design of the case study; the analysis can be presented throughout the case as the argument builds that addresses the research question” (p. 84). My study’s unit of analysis was the small, rural school district’s changes that remained as part of the New Normal.

The fourth element of a case study involves linking the data after collection. The combining of the data begins after data collection, as themes emerge during review. Linking the data of a case study occurs through pattern matching, explanation building, and cross-case synthesis (Yin, 2004). The themes in relationship to the New Normal emerged to answer the research questions.

The final component of the case study research design is developing the criteria for interpreting the findings. Researchers analyze data through a variety of methods (Yin, 1994). This involves searching for repeating patterns in the data collected. I focused on any themes that repeated through the collection process. Evidence from the findings provided meaning to determine recommendations for future research.
Research Questions

The research question that I intended to answer through this study was “What financial and operational changes were effective for the school superintendent and other educational leaders in a small, rural school in Ohio during and after the Great Recession?” The subquestions included

1. What was the financial and operational leadership role for the school leaders of the small, rural public school district during the Great Recession?

2. What financial and operational changes made within the small, rural school district would be retained as the New Normal after the Great Recession waned?

Setting of the Study

The setting for this study was a small, rural school district in Ohio. In many small towns throughout the United States, schools play an important role in the advancement of a community (Economic Policy Institute, 2012). Because of this visibility, the school system is often an important part of the community. When the economy suffers, schools suffer and the children of the community feel the financial strain in a significant manner.

Children cannot advocate on their own behalf. As a result, a disproportionately small share of federal spending exists that is devoted to children (Isaacs, Vericker, Macomber, & Kent, 2009). After a recession has crippled families and government, school leaders must continue to find ways for children to learn and succeed. Following a severe economic downturn, leaders need to understand that actions should be taken to continue to develop the country’s youth. After the Great Recession, the New Normal in small school districts has played a significant role in education for several years (Duncan,
The Great Recession officially lasted from December 2007 to June 2009, but the effects linger on (Economic Policy Institute, 2012).

With thousands of residents living within the Ohio town of the school district under study, it has been a struggling community with easy access to large metropolitan areas. The small town studied has a population of 11,000 people and daily traffic flow of nearly 40,000 vehicles (A. Lindeman, Councilman, personal communication, December 20, 2013). Many advanced education institutions are located nearby, as well as various business and trade schools. While maintaining a small town atmosphere for the residents, the community leaders work to provide the necessary infrastructure to stimulate economic development. Undeveloped areas of the community have been identified as needing future growth. Because of the Great Recession from 2007 to 2009, the local economy had crippled the small town. In the span of the Great Recession, the town lost six businesses (A. Lindeman, Councilman, personal communication, December 20, 2013). The local economy has a direct influence on the local school system. The rural school district is comprised of three school buildings with more than 1,500 students. Since 2000, the school board proposed three bond issues as part of the Ohio Facilities School Commission shared funding program, with each issue failing (A. Lindeman, Councilman, personal communication, December 20, 2013).

With each unsuccessful attempt, the district risked receiving a smaller percentage of funding from the state (Ohio Department of Education, 2013). Established in 1997, the Commission was responsible for administration of the state’s school construction and renovation program. The Commission was working on, or had completed, all necessary work in nearly two-thirds of the state’s 613 school districts. Time was a relevant factor
when a district attempted a bond issue in support of the Ohio Facilities School Commission. Bond issues had become essential, as the Ohio Facilities School Commission matches a percentage of the funds generated from newly passed bond issues. However, with each attempt, voters turned down the issue with an increasing number of no votes each time. Despite having an elementary school built in 1950, a middle school built in 1910, and a high school built in 1972, the community has not supported the bond issue, largely because of the weak economy. The last attempt, in 2010, was after the Great Recession’s end. Until the local economy recovers, the school district has little opportunity for voter support for much needed school buildings (A. Lindeman, Councilman, personal communication, December 20, 2013).

**Qualitative Case Study**

A qualitative case study was utilized for this study. The purpose of the qualitative approach is “to illuminate the specific and identify phenomena through how they are perceived” within their own unique situations (Creswell, 2008). Case studies involve gathering in-depth information and perceptions through inductive, qualitative methods—such as interviews, discussions, and participant observation—and representing it from the perspective of the research participants (Hycner, 1985). I carefully and thoroughly observed and interviewed school leaders throughout the school district to interpret the data collected (Creswell, 2008). Questions of validity and reliability occur through qualitative studies (Creswell, 2008). The consistency of data is achieved through triangulation. Triangulation occurs when the steps of the research are verified using multiple methods, data sources, and researchers to enhance the validity of research findings (Creswell, 2008). Credible and defensible data collection existed within the
project using the triangulation method. Regardless of which philosophical, epistemological, or methodological perspectives an evaluator is working from, a researcher should use multiple methods and sources of data in the execution of a study to withstand critique by colleagues (Mathison, 1988).

To establish the first aspect of the triangulation method in this study, the interview, I interviewed each school leader. Interviewing requires responding to attitudes, feelings, and gaining a broader understanding of the participants’ responses in a semi-structured format as the primary research approach. All of the interviews were tape-recorded and the sessions lasted around 30 minutes. Establishing the criteria of who to interview was a straightforward task, as only four people are the leaders of the small, rural district. Having a small number of leaders within a small school district is common, where a few people complete the work of many.

The position of interpretivism in relation to epistemology is that interpretivists believe the reality is multiple and relative (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988). The multiple realities of those within this study made up the case study. Each participant provided experiences regarding his or her own reality that led to a New Normal method of thinking. The knowledge acquired in this discipline is socially constructed rather than objectively determined and perceived (Carson, Gilmore, Perry, & Gronhaug, 2001; Hirschman, 1985). Through intensive observations, I was able to put together the meaning of what happened throughout the process of the study.

Interpretivists avoid rigid structural frameworks, such as in positivist research, and adopt more personal and flexible research structures, which are receptive to capturing meanings in human interaction and making sense of what was perceived as reality (Black,
2006; Carson et al., 2001). For this study, making sense of the leaders’ reality provided insight regarding the total picture of the qualitative study. The participants’ leadership and interaction, from a research standpoint, were considered interpretive. An interpretivist researcher enters the field with some insight of the research context, but assumes that this insight is insufficient in developing a fixed research design because of the complex, multiple, and unpredictable nature of what is perceived as reality (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988). The goal of interpretivist research is to understand and explain the meanings in human behavior rather than to generalize and predict causes and effects (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988; Neuman, 2000). For an interpretivist researcher, it is important to understand motives, meanings, reasons, and other subjective experiences that are time and context bound (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988; Neuman, 2000). Through the close working relationship of the educational leaders of the small, rural school district, I connected to their motives. Through each observation and with a review of their documents, motives and meanings became apparent throughout the research.

The epistemology within this qualitative research study evolved through semi-structured, open-ended, voluntary interviews with school leaders of the small, rural school district. The semi-structured interviews supported my attempt to examine what financial changes were effective during the Great Recession and which of those changes became the New Normal. Qualitative research includes understanding “meaning that was socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world. The world, or reality, was not the fixed, single, agreed-upon, or measurable phenomenon that it was assumed to be in positivist, quantitative research” (Merriam, 2002). Trustworthiness, in qualitative research, refers to “whether the findings of a study are true and certain … in the sense that
research findings accurately reflect the situation, and … that research findings are supported by the evidence” (Merriam, 2002). Triangulation is a method used by qualitative researchers to check and establish validity in their studies. The researchers then analyze the data in search of a research question from several perspectives (Creswell, 1998; Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2011; Mathison, 1988; Murphy, 2011). This study involved the use of triangulation.

**Research Plan**

This qualitative study pertained to discovering what financial and operational changes were effective during the Great Recession and remained as the New Normal. I aimed to learn which of the changes still remained as part of the New Normal, despite increased funding, within a small school district. The breadth and the depth of a qualitative design allows the researcher to dive into a selected issue with attention to detail, context, and nuance (Patton, 2002). A variety of methods exists in qualitative research. The researcher determines the important issues when selecting a design to meet the intended expectations of the study (Patton, 2002). The validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from a qualitative design add richness to the case study and the observations made by the researcher (Patton, 2002). Data collection and data analysis supported the research plan in this qualitative inquiry.

**Data Collection**

**Participants**

“The logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in the selection of information-rich cases for” in-depth study (Patton, 1990, p.169). Information-rich cases are those in which researchers can study anything important to the case study (Patton, 1990). The
selection criteria were based on school leaders’ potential to add to the understanding of the New Normal. The choice of these leaders was based on the strategy of purposeful selection. In the early stages of a study, researchers go to the groups that they believe will maximize the possibilities of obtaining the data and lead to more data pertaining to the specific research question (Glaser, 1978). In the case of this study, the participants were selected as they were the four leaders throughout the school district.

**Individual Interviews and Triangulation**

Data for the study were generated through interviews, observations, and document reviews. The approach allowed participants to describe the leadership methods used when dealing with problems, issues, and decisions regarding living within the New Normal. Triangulation increases the credibility of the research through extracting specifics from a variety of viewpoints (Murphy, 2011). Evidence from stakeholders of a school setting contributed to the triangulation of this study. Triangulation can occur through the collection of interviews, observations, and documents (Creswell, 2008). For this case study, four school leaders were interviewed to determine their role in implementing New Normal strategies. Additional questions pertained to which strategies remained, even as funding slowly has returned to many of the smaller, rural districts (Fishman, 2015). Observations occurred in formal and informal settings. Attending school board meetings provided me the opportunity to see the leaders interact with people throughout the small town. Other observations occurred informally in meetings, in their offices, as well as while the leaders were working throughout different areas of the school district.

**Data Analysis**

While developing the plan to conduct this qualitative research study,
I formed steps to execute collecting interview and observational data for interpretation. Collecting and analyzing data in a qualitative research study often takes a long time. To remove personal feelings and biases throughout the process of interviewing and observing, I used bracketing throughout the research study (Gearing, 2004). I attempted to set aside preconceived assumptions in relationship to the school leaders. This was a constant conscious effort as I worked with the district leadership team for a decade.

During the interviews and observations, I worked to suspend the assumptions and biases of the four leaders from the small, rural local school district. This occurred through a careful determination of identifying patterns throughout the interviews and observations.

Creswell (2008) outlined six steps during the analysis process, best described in linear order. Step 1 is to organize and prepare data for analysis (Creswell, 2008). After conducting the interviews, I transcribed the recorded conversations into a word document. I highlighted parts of the interviews to identify common and repeating themes. Step 2 is to read through the data (Creswell, 2008). Once my notes were complete, as the researcher, I immersed myself into the data. I knew all four of the leaders. Looking through the data and maintaining reflection, I strove to be objective regarding how I interpreted their leadership, and I strove to hold an objective viewpoint when reviewing the data collected. Step 3 is to begin detailed analysis with a coding process (Creswell, 2008). I collected the material and divided the information into segments. From the segments, I searched for categories based on the phrases and words the leaders used through the interview process.

Step 4 involves the coding process to generate descriptions of the setting or people (Creswell, 2008). Themes developed in this step. Generated codes lead to a
number of repeated themes through the collected data. Step 5 is to advance how the
description of themes leads to the qualitative narrative of the research project (Creswell, 2008). The repeated narrative themes evolved into longer narrative passages as each leader shared the details of his or her involvement in the New Normal. The findings became more clear and logical from the responses of those interviewed and observed. Finally, Step 6 is to interpret the meaning of the data (Creswell, 2008). A researcher’s background plays a significant role in determining the meaning of the qualitative research gathered (Creswell, 2008). I have been an educational leader for more than 15 years. My work in this field informed my own understanding of what each leader experienced during the Great Recession. While I cannot completely erase my own experiences or biases, I worked to focus specifically on the participants’ words and actions. The participants’ understandings of their own participation in the New Normal drove the qualitative study.

**Trustworthiness of Results**

Issues with trustworthiness continue to persist with many researchers who utilize the qualitative method of inquiry. Various researchers have worked to establish a trustworthy qualitative study (Guba, 1981). Guba (1981) identified four specific issues created to establish accepted methods of trustworthiness within a qualitative research project. The four issues were as follows:

1. Credibility in preference to internal validity,
2. Transferability in preference to external validity,
3. Dependability in preference to reliability, and
Credibility is the preferred measurement to internal validity within a qualitative study (Guba, 1981). The researcher’s equivalent to validity deals with the relationship of the findings to reality (Merriam, 1998). Research results should be scrutinized according to three basic questions: (a) Do the conclusions make sense?, (b) Do the conclusions adequately describe the research participants’ perspectives?, and (c) Do conclusions authentically represent the phenomena under study? (Miles & Huberman, 1994). By asking and completely answering these questions, I strove to remain aligned to the study’s purpose and direction.

Dependability is equated to reliability in a quantitative research project (Creswell, 2008). The concept of peer briefing allows a researcher to become more objective in the design of a qualitative research study (Creswell, 2008). According to Creswell (2008), peer debriefing particularly was required because of a distinctive part of qualitative research: The researcher becomes an instrument. In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary person responsible for data collection and analysis (Spillett, 2003). Every researcher possesses a skill set that includes strengths and weaknesses, and no matter the strengths, a level of subjectivity remains in a qualitative study (Spillett, 2003). To further diminish subjectivity levels within a qualitative study, the researcher should use a peer debriefer. This person could be an advisor, colleague, or trusted person to review certain aspects of the study (Spillett, 2003). The peer debriefer examines the writing for over- or under-emphasized points made. The colleague or advisor would view the writing for general errors or obvious biases. I used colleagues and librarians to read excerpts of the study to identify vague writing or general errors.
Confirmability refers to the quality of the results found in a qualitative inquiry (Shenton, 2004). The information presented reflected the participants’ viewpoints in the research inquiry. The intrusion of a researcher within a qualitative study is impossible to remove completely (Shenton, 2004). Triangulating throughout the inquiry promotes confirmability to remove the effect of investigator bias (Shenton, 2004). This research inquiry included triangulation through observations, interviews with four school leaders, and document review.

**Conclusion**

This chapter presented the design used in this qualitative case study, as well as a description of the setting, participants, and techniques used for analyzing data. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and collected documents. The main reason for data collection from these leaders was that district leadership includes every facet of school personnel from the elementary to middle and high school buildings. These leaders include support personnel in fiscal management, food services, transportation, and maintenance. The goal was to gather data from the only four district leaders who represent the entire leadership throughout the small, rural school district in Ohio.

When people are involved as subjects in research or related activities conducted as a researcher at Ashland University, I had the responsibility for ensuring that the rights of the four school leaders studied were protected throughout the qualitative research case study. The research on the school leaders consisted of observations, document collection, and interviews conducted on or off campus. The guidelines involving human subjects definitions and processes were reviewed prior to submitting the research proposal.
CHAPTER IV

Results

Through this research study, I sought to investigate district-level administrators’ perceptions and experiences of analyzing and evaluating changes with personnel, finances, transportation, food services, and utilities growing out of the Great Recession that still remained as the New Normal for this small, rural, public school district in Ohio. The following research questions informed this study: (a) What was the financial and operational leadership role for the school leaders of the small, rural public school district during the Great Recession?, and (b) What financial and operational changes made within the small school district were retained as the New Normal after the Great Recession waned?

During semi-structured interviews, participants described their perceptions and experiences in their area of operation with data collected concerning the New Normal after the Great Recession. They also discussed their use of findings to improve the operation within the school district. The research findings of this study were constructed from the analysis of the following data sources: semi-structured interviews, school district documents, and the researcher’s observations throughout the buildings.

Background

The participants of this research study were four administrators from a small, rural school district in Ohio. They ranged in age from 35 to 55 years old; two were female, and two were male. On average, participants had 17 years of administrative experience. One participant reported fewer than 6 years of administrative experience, and two administrators claimed 15 to 30 years of administrative experience. In addition, three of
the four participants reported having worked outside of education in steel mills, drug
counseling offices, and managing restaurants.

All four participants described themselves as having educational experience and
business experience as part of their current roles as administrators. Each administrator
identified him or herself as the leader of his or her specialty within the school district. For
reporting purposes, and to protect participants’ identities, each participant was assigned a
pseudonym.

The administrators encountered various perceptions as the Great Recession
shredded the economy from 2007 to 2009. The events of the financial strain allowed the
school leaders to exploit the disaster as an opportunity to make sustainable changes
within their positions. When asked about their perceptions and experiences, some of the
participants described when they first recognized the Great Recession was affecting the
organization. Others spoke of the specific designs implemented to make much needed
changes. The leaders also addressed the timing of the opportunity to change. This section
of the narrative reports on those specific issues.

Each of the four participants reported distinct memories regarding when the
recession had influenced their decision-making. Kendra (pseudonym), the superintendent,
was first to discuss how the recession was distressing the school district. In this small
community, the effects of the Great Recession were seen throughout the small town. In
mid-town, several buildings displayed “For Rent” or “For Sale Signs.” Many homes
throughout the town looked well worn. Many housing updates were needed but none
could afford much. Pizza shops and bars seemed to be the driving businesses that,
through the years, were recession-proof. Walking around town, the structures in need of
deepest repair were the school buildings. Ancient, sagging, brown and grey buildings were left without landscaping. The buildings, at least on the outside, prove that no one had enough money or energy to care. The researched town was often difficult to figure out to the few outsiders who tried to establish residence in the rural area. Businesses had withered away and disappeared during the Great Recession. Public dwellings illustrated the look of corrosion. Still, the people were often pleasant and friendly. In this small community, everybody knew everybody. The superintendent was quickly known with a brief glance. If she were to walk through the town, many of the residents would wave and many would speak to her by name. While her brother was on the school board, the superintendent’s family owned a successful auto collision business. When residents spoke to Kendra, they referenced the old school buildings or beat up cars being rebuilt. These were the topics most often discussed.

The superintendent was keenly aware of how conspicuous she was living less than a mile away from the school board office. Taking just a few steps out of the board office on the sidewalk, people driving by would immediately beep or call her name and wave. Kendra admitted that the attention was flattering and annoying at the same time. Living so close to her office, she admitted she had sacrificed her private life for her professional life. Kendra surrendered her personal freedom to become superintendent of the small, rural school district. She combated the constant intrusions through escaping on mini-trips with her husband and other relatives. Before becoming the superintendent, she had served the district for 14 years as the middle school principal. It was in this position where she had the opportunity to think and act with the New Normal in mind.
At the time of the study, the Great Recession had long been over; however, many public schools in Ohio still felt the financial effects of the budget cuts. All four participants clearly exploited the cutbacks as an opportunity to improve their day-to-day business as leaders within a public school district. The superintendent used the Great Recession as an opportunity to improve personnel within her building when she was a middle school principal. This happened when she did not replace retired personnel positions. Those vacancies gave her an opportunity to hire other needed teaching positions or the opportunity to strengthen a different department. The improvements made, with specific consideration towards using the Great Recession as an opportunity, were endless. The treasurer, Stuart (pseudonym), developed methods to generate more effective procedures and attitudes to balance the district budget. He did this largely through his work and constant discussions with the school board. Their vision and direction altered through his leadership and guidance.

Dave (pseudonym), the maintenance and transportation supervisor, approached the financial strain as an opportunity to reorganize janitor duties. He also cultivated new ways of thinking with his bus drivers. As a result, buses remained in better condition and lasted longer. Finally, Rosie (pseudonym), the food service supervisor, faced enormous cuts with a positive and creative attitude. When the study was conducted, all four participants relished the prospect of revealing their various stories. Through long interviews, each participant provided similar themes that began to materialize and eventually overlap.

The bright yellow administrative office building is positioned in the middle of the small, rural town. The office sits next door to an auto mechanic’s business. The building
is positioned central to several pizzerias and two bars. The ancient structure is an old house built in the early 1900s. The family who once lived there sold the dwelling to the school district in 2001. While the price was reasonable, the community often voiced its displeasure at this purchase. Many people in the town viewed the acquisition as another waste of taxpayer money. Before its purchase, the administrative office was located a mile away tucked in the bus garage. In time, people eventually viewed the School Board Office with reluctant pride. The building consists of two stories. On the first story, the superintendent’s office is easily accessed through the front door. Often, that floor is busy with activity of visiting administrators, teachers, and various business people. Other administrators cruised through the halls in search of answers to their questions. The phone in the school leader’s office never stopped ringing. She told outsiders to enjoy the vibrant life of the office, but to work confidants she longed for peace and quiet. Because of constant commotion, Kendra often experienced little silence.

On the second floor is Stuart at the treasurer’s office. Upstairs, the halls were silent. On that level, the business of school funding permeated the floor. Visitors rarely went to see the school district’s treasurer. No one understood school funding or the position of the chief financial officer of the district. Quiet and unassuming, Stuart stated that he played the role of treasurer as one behaving as a human calculator. When questions or explanations were asked, he offered just the facts and nothing more. To elicit explanations or to expect a reasonable suggestion as to what one might do with his answer, that person usually walked back down the stairway with more questions than when he or she first arrived. People throughout town seemed to view the layout emblematically of the two school leaders. The superintendent was placed forever below
the treasurer. This symbolic layout was not lost on community members who viewed the treasurer as the real, and final, decision-maker for the small district.

The maintenance and transportation supervisor approached me immediately after the formal invitation was sent to him to participate in the research. Dave was a large, powerful man. He used his presence to get smaller, weaker people to do his bidding. At first glance, Dave, as the maintenance and transportation supervisor, would never have any problems with those who worked for him. In his short time at the small, rural school district, few people had opposed this school leader. This was, I discovered, not because of his intimidating aura. He accomplished many projects where so many before had failed because of his attitude. In the years he worked in the district, he had always tackled every problem with an air of joy. Work to him often meant an opportunity to shine. He enjoyed his job and he enjoyed working with all of the people with whom he spent his days.

The foods supervisor was a person who engaged in conversation, easily employing constant eye contact. Short in stature and covered in freckles that lightly sprinkle her face, Rosie had always been quick to smile even on her most frustrating days. Like many food supervisors in public schools throughout the United States, she had to endure many federal changes and still maintain a profit in her cafeterias throughout the school system. Once she began the interview process for this research, she saw it through to the end, taking time to explain fully each point and answer each question asked. Rosie was proud of her accomplishments and honest about her situation. She was hired in the district as the Great Recession began to strain the school system. This, combined with the federal mandates to improve the quality of the food served, made her work difficult. On top of this, she was not from the town. In small, rural communities, a new person is often
viewed with suspicion. When that new person instituted changes in the ways things had always been done, the situation became unwanted. Somewhat uncompromising in her responses, she offered no excuses or complaints. She was committed to unearthing some way to make her cafeterias successful during exasperating times.

**Study Findings**

The interviewees contributed various amounts of information to establish two emerging themes that complete the narrative. Some participants talked at length on both themes. Some of the leaders contributed to both themes with vivid descriptions of the struggle with the Great Recession. All participants’ voices and views were represented in this study. The emerging themes from the interviews were as follows:

1. The participants’ leadership and experiences in recognizing the signs of the Great Recession and in recognizing the opportunity for financial and operational change.

2. With each financial and operational decision made as part of the New Normal, the administrators’ perceptions and experiences were unique to their positions as they searched for methods to continue to improve and change their part of the operation.

Throughout the process of interviewing each participant, his or her responses often overlapped into each theme. The data collected described where each response fit most logically. This theme is discussed in two parts: (a) perceptions and experiences with recognizing signs of the Great Recession and how it affected the district, and (b) opportunity for change. Each subtheme was further divided into parts based on the participants’ perceptions and experiences with work and an opportunity for change.
Theme 1: The participants’ leadership and experiences with recognizing the signs of the Great Recession and the opportunity for financial and operational change.

The superintendent was keenly aware of how conspicuous she was living less than a mile away from the school board office. Her home being only a mile away, Kendra had blended her work world with her private life. As superintendent, Kendra—with no regret—enjoyed her leadership role of the small, rural school district.

In 2007, four teachers retired throughout the district. None of the teachers were replaced with new educators. The small district decided to absorb their positions to prevent the inevitable reduction of staff later due to the financial crisis. At the time, Kendra decided to combine the recently retired reading teacher’s position with the current English teacher to create a language arts teaching position. Students were affected by this. Reading had been taught for an hour daily, while English had also been taught for an hour each day. Language arts the following year was taught for only one hour daily. Students lost valuable learning time. Because the language arts teacher was a dynamic educator, the new way eventually worked. This was the key that led the superintendent to exploring the “New Normal” mentality. For her, the key to success was locating and hiring dynamic educators who could operate by doing more with less. The enthusiastic teacher worked to implement cross-curricular writing to make up for the lost time. Teachers in social studies and science expended time teaching students how to write throughout the course of the year.

At the onset of the Great Recession, the superintendent made immediate changes anticipating the worst. The school district passed a 1% percent local income tax on earned
income. When people began losing their jobs, valid concern existed that the school district would face substantial cuts in the school budget. As the middle school principal at the beginning of the recession, Kendra recognized the opportunity to help the school district. In the district, each principal was responsible for his or her own budget. When Kendra completed the building budget in the spring of 2007, she developed a subtle plan that became part of the entire district’s eventual New Normal.

Overall, as a district, the superintendent seized an opportunity to invest in the New Normal whenever possible. The school board, for decades, had mirrored what was considered fashionable in education. With the Great Recession, the district changed the way of thinking. The superintendent led this charge. Kendra clarified:

Look at how our district has changed. We spent thousands of dollars trying to be trendy. Money spent on technology, staffing, and development just to appear as though we were just like all of the other ‘good’ school districts in the surrounding area. We decided to become much more conservative. This was our biggest ‘New Normal.’ We ran our district in a conservative, really very tight, fashion. If we needed something, we got it. Our school board loved the idea of limiting budgets with departments throughout the system. We took that kind of thinking to a higher level. This was our mentality in the midst of the recession. And it has worked well. Our school district will never go back.

The result of the New Normal was that the community had quickly recognized that the school district had become more conservative and voting taxpayers applauded the efforts. This resulted in the new conservative style of thinking: the district for the first time in decades had a carry-over of surplus money going into the following school year.
While many surrounding districts reduced their teaching force, the small, rural school district battled the recession without losing teachers.

The financial strain still prompted the superintendent to find measures to make compulsory changes. The Great Recession forced the superintendent to examine personnel issues. She found herself asking every day, “How can we use these tough times to make our district better?”

The New Normal made personnel issues the key to improving the district. The Great Recession provided the school leader the opportunity to improve the district and fight the financial struggle. Kendra realized finding the right personnel was imperative. She believed that if a person was effective in the classroom, others would notice. To fight the recession, sometimes the situation demanded perfect timing and the best person. In a small, rural school district, the New Normal could trigger positive transformations. If these personnel changes could occur in an undersized district without anyone really noticing, then the superintendent discerned that change to stay implemented. Her simple, but decisive action allowed the district to thrive in the New Normal setting while the Great Recession negatively affected surrounding school systems.

The school treasurer, Stuart, saw the effect of the Great Recession at its onset in 2007. Just before the Great Recession unleashed, the school district passed a 1% income tax levy on earned income for all residents throughout the village and township. The school board and educational leaders celebrated the passing of the levy after watching it fail with two earlier attempts. Once the Great Recession began, the leaders were concerned. Revenue was dependent on the adults within the school community working and maintaining an income. Stuart explained, “We watched the results of the recession
very carefully. I was concerned on how this would impact the school district. But we also recognized that we could make changes that needed to happen for years.”

Many in the small town had lost their jobs. Voters were not obligated to pay the 1% income tax when they possessed no income. Based on earned income, Stuart understood this helped pass the levy when it had failed miserably the two previous attempts. The school district experienced a series of deep cuts in all of the school buildings. Stuart discussed that the district was run with a “bare-bones” mentality. The reductions made were chosen carefully. Every cutback made was completed without affecting the classroom when possible. The district at this time began to change in its approach to budgetary situations. The school board changed its philosophy. Before the Great Recession, the board operated with the treasurer making decisions that might be considered trendy from a financial standpoint. After making cuts throughout the district, the treasurer was determined never to make the faculty experience that stress again. The leaders used the Great Recession as an opportunity to protect the district and to become more efficient in spending. Shared services became the solution at the onset of the financial strain. Physical education teachers began teaching in two buildings. Art, music, and counseling all began to travel from building to building. This is a practice that still continues in many schools. Librarians, as they retired, were replaced with teacher aides. As long as classroom instruction remained intact, shared services became the New Normal.

Stuart, as treasurer, had the longest tenure as a school leader within the district with close to 30 years of experience. When the Great Recession occurred in 2007, he recognized that the school district was in a precarious position. Months earlier, the
community agreed on a 1% income tax on earned income. Once the recession arrived, many people lost everything. The school board monitored the situation carefully. Years before, Stuart had experienced a situation where the district had teacher lay-offs because of massive budget cuts. Stuart did not want to experience that situation again. While scrutinizing the levy passed in 2007, Stuart had two relentless thoughts, “Where could we make changes to improve our financial situation?” and “What changes would work so well that they would remain as common practice?”

When Dave received the request to participate in the research, he burst with excitement. He revealed, “I have never had the opportunity to talk to anyone on the changes I started that helped the district. I did a lot on my own simply because I recognized the opportunity.”

He exulted in the chance to offer discourse on how the Great Recession affected everything in the school system. To him, this was not boasting. Dave relished the prospect at participating in a research study. He understood that others could learn from the improvements he had implemented because of the financial strain. Dave had been with the school district for four years as the maintenance and transportation supervisor. He spent decades working in a steel mill in Massillon, Ohio until he was hired as the maintenance supervisor in a large city school district where he worked for five years. He identified how the Great Recession affected school districts through a variety of ways.

Transportation also needed to address many expensive issues. For years, the school district had bused preschool students in the middle of the day. This was costly for a variety of reasons. Bus drivers made extra money for taking the midday routes. Wear and tear on the buses with the additional trips was always an issue for the transportation
director. Dave identified the devastating effects of the Great Recession as soon as it materialized throughout the country. He realized money could be saved through changing bus routes. This simple act became a New Normal for the district that saved thousands of dollars. However, he found himself constantly asking, “Where can we improve as a result of this financial mess?”

Dave was obsessed with making changes throughout the school district. People had the tasks to perform every day and it had worked year after year. Then, when the teacher or administrator had that task taken away, this caused a great deal of stress. These same people would ask, “How will I get this done?” Dave realized when bombarded with these questions, “No, that is not right. Teachers and administrators want things in a certain way because that’s how it has been for 20 years.”

Dave had an epiphany in the midst of the financial strain. He recognized that the desires and wants of the employees within the district did not need to be accomplished in the manner they often demanded. Money did not always have to be spent. Dave sought to find a more cost-effective method and encourage teachers, administrators, and maintenance workers to adapt to new ways of functioning.

Dave realized that educators, without being derogatory, travel through a series of routines. Too often, teachers do not realize or care about time, money, or effort spent in satisfying their requests, according to Dave. Dave explained:

I began to think in terms of food. It was like a person who eats steak every day. That steak can be awfully expensive. Sometimes, it’s all right to eat macaroni and cheese. You still get full. You are still alive and surviving. Things are still moving along. We survive.
Rosie worked as the foods supervisor on a college campus at the beginning of the Great Recession. She had been in her current position at the small school district for the last four years. The recession caused many cutbacks in labor. As a supervisor, she could train workers. Rosie also had the time to evaluate her staff to ensure that food was prepared at its highest level. Once the recession commenced, time became an issue. As management was now on the floor looking after customers with the rest of the service, no time was left to properly train staff. Rosie insisted that customer service suffered at first; however, she took the occasion to assist while working. This gave her a new perspective as she assessed what was needed to improve on a more immediate basis. She explained:

“Working on the floor helped me in several ways as a leader. I was doing the work as a server. All of my employees quickly recognized I was very good at their job. And I could quickly evaluate what worked best because I was so hands-on.

This was a welcomed change for Rosie as she often spearheaded change for the sake of saving the university money.

As the Great Recession erupted, the cost of everything began to rise. Gas prices, foods, utensil supplies, and anything involving serving food to college students seemed to escalate in cost. When she moved from the college campus to her current rural K–12 public school system, Rosie recognized the recession had given her the opportunity to make changes there, too. In her mind, Rosie continuously used the financial decline as an opportunity to improve her food service at the university and the rural school district. When she arrived at the small school district, she recognized how invasive the financial strain had been. No meals were created for students from scratch. Part of her joy at being in charge of food services derived from making special meals for the students.
The recession and federal mandates changed all of this. All food was prepackaged. The government had also forced schools to count calories. The cost of food had risen dramatically, which also encouraged prepackaged foods. Making meals from scratch no longer existed in any of her kitchens throughout the school district. The Great Recession and the new mandates forced Rosie to make changes as costs and government directives continued to fluctuate. For years, she worked with too many cooks who insisted on running their own kitchens without regard to her leadership. The Great Recession provided her the prospect of change. With the prepackaged food and meals, she was able to hire unskilled workers. This enabled her to completely train her new employees the way she wanted them to run the cafeterias. Many of her workers had no culinary experience. However, she sought people who were great with children. In addition, Rosie sought those who were willing to work hard no matter the circumstances because of the financial strains. She demanded positive attitudes at all times and the atmosphere improved even when the meals did not.

The Great Recession also affected the work done in the kitchens in the least likely places, according to Rosie. Food prices began to rise. All at once, farmers were charging higher and higher prices for their foods. The price of gas soared throughout the country. As a result, food delivery trucks charged more. Electricity rose and the kitchens in all of the school buildings were forced to endure the higher prices. Unlike a restaurant, Rosie could not raise the prices for lunches. She stated:

I didn't like somebody coming in and telling me we were doing everything wrong. We were giving kids what they loved. We had huge lunch counts; they were
happy. Nobody was complaining . . . But I kept thinking, ‘Where could we
improve? What changes were needed, and needed quickly?’

Rosie ascertained what many around the local community argued. The required
reductions in fat, salt, and calories, and increases in fresh produce and whole grains had
forced school cooks to create meals that students would not eat. In addition, Rosie argued
that with the recession, the number of children who ate free or reduced-priced meals had
increased. That shift was because more children met the free lunch criteria, which
allowed them to provide free meals to all students. Rosie realized with the recession and
new legislation, real opportunity existed to make significant improvements in her
kitchens. Rosie stated that her process was slower than she liked, but she never deviated
from the New Normal. It was her business experience at the university level, Rosie
explained, that helped her induce the kinds of changes she made as part of her New
Normal. She made these change as soon as she recognized the devastating effects of the
Great Recession and the new legislation.

**Theme 2: With each financial and operational decision made as part of the
New Normal, the administrators’ perceptions and experiences were unique to
their positions as they searched for methods to continue to improve and
change their part of the operation.**

The administrators throughout the small, rural district sought to improve their
organization during the financial crisis. “The method of instructing writing worked well
with some teachers. Others were never really able to adapt to the new method of writing
across the curriculum,” explained the superintendent. Older, seasoned teachers struggled
to execute proper writing skills. Within the curriculum, this process was not satisfactory;
however, financially and organizationally, the changes because of the Great Recession were successful during a period of several years. Not replacing retired staff and enforcing writing across the curriculum was a decisive first step towards the New Normal. This practice remains throughout the rural district today. These changes were initially implemented in an attempt to slow down the damaging consequences of the Great Recession. The superintendent was able to execute steps to take advantage of the unusual circumstances because of the recession. The New Normal eventually functioned well because of the dedication of the younger staff doing more with less.

For years as a principal, Kendra would discuss with all of the departments in her building their allotted budgets for the upcoming year. Teachers, counselors, librarians, and office secretaries knew how much funding they received each year. The employees recognized that they were “allowed” to spend as much as their budget allowed. Kendra conferred with several faculty and staff members. When the budget came to the building, she seized an opportunity to take part in the New Normal. The superintendent explained:

When I was a middle school principal, I saw a relatively easy way to save the district money. Instead of budgeting per department, during a staff meeting I told the teachers to tell me what was needed. I realized if the teachers didn’t need something, they wouldn’t ask for it. When they did request something, I got what they needed.

This became her first exercise as superintendent in the New Normal. With the Great Recession triggering constant financial anxiety, Kendra directed her principals to conduct this simple practice throughout the district. For years, teachers were instructed to spend the money budgeted within their respective departments. Department chair-people pushed
teachers to spend the full budget in fear that school leaders might diminish the allotted share. Because of the change in allotting the total budget, the school has changed thousands of dollars each year.

As a district, reduction in force had not happened for many years. The superintendent understood the prospect of making important changes without people losing their jobs. Kendra stated:

We took advantage of retirements. We knew we had to reduce our dollar amount in personnel spending. Our librarian retired. So, we hired an aide and taught her how to run the library. A counselor retired, we kept one guidance counselor in each building and we helped them reorganize their work to save money. Rather than replacing people leaving the district, we hired aides to replace where we could. We reorganized the workloads of existing employees. As a district, we became stronger, more efficient.

During the day I went to interview the treasurer, I waded through the noise and busy visitors on the first floor. Climbing the steep, narrow stairway, the lighting got darker until the entrance to the halls of the second floor. Stuart sat at his desk in silence as if he had been waiting for the interview patiently for hours. His office, like the hallway, was utterly quiet. Despite the fear that he would have little to say, he was cordial and friendly. He was not used to offering his personal views on any part of school business.

Stuart was not accustomed to being recorded in an interview situation, either. While his eyes widened when the recording device was produced, he recovered with a smile and proclaimed he had been waiting to begin. He presented himself in a neat appearance. His office, like his desk, was largely uncluttered. Stuart came from a large
family and many worked in different school districts throughout Wayne County. As treasurer, he had been the constant in the district. While superintendents replaced each other every two or three years, he maintained his position for more than 20 years. As a result, people throughout the community viewed Stuart as the answer to many of the school district’s problems. He accepted no excuses for inadequate work. Stuart tried to maintain the views of the community. Community members expected the district to be careful and responsible with its spending. He distanced himself from much of the chaos that superintendents would often face to always strive toward the mission of the district.

The opportunity for lasting change happened at the onset of the Great Recession. Stuart seized the moment as he realized it was an important time to modify the school district’s outlook on finance. The school board, at the time, worked with the superintendent, who desired more popular methods of moving the small, rural school district forward. Large amounts of money were spent on speakers for professional development purposes. The speakers arrived at the beginning of the year or in the middle of a school year. The presenters would speak to the entire district staff during their visits. The teachers often listened with little interest. Stuart understood that the teachers, while attentive and polite, did not buy into what the speakers were discussing. Too often money was also expended on technology to satisfy the need for the moment rather than developing a three or five year plan. A superintendent would arrive with a new plan for technology that would be followed until he or she left. Then the next leader would have a completely new idea for technology that would cost the district thousands of dollars. Curriculum direction also seemed to change with each new superintendent. Money and time spend on its development were approved by the school board. The board craved to
be like other successful surrounding school districts. If other school boards demanded the best speakers, or the newest technology, or the latest trend in curriculum, then Stuart’s district insisted on the same.

The Great Recession enabled the Treasurer to construct a New Normal that would benefit the entire school district for years. Stuart began working with the School Board to change their mentality regarding how business was conducted in making the district appear more appealing to the community. Stuart explained how he spoke with the board:

I told them that because of the recession we had to look at things in a different way. We had worked hard to ensure that cuts in staff would never happen. I advised them that we could no longer afford to spend on “trendy” things to keep up with other districts. We had to examine everything from a financial standpoint. This meant we would account for every single penny spent. We had to have our people prove the need for curriculum, programming, technology, everything.

Even as the effects of the Great Recession diminished, the school board recognized the success of Stuart’s demands with his New Normal. Each administrator was asked to determine where each dollar was spent on building budgets. The members quickly learned to request for those demands tied to need. The leaders of the district provided professional development, and the district stopped spending money on motivational speakers. The district used administrators to conduct break-out sessions on opening day and in-service days to work with teachers on curriculum, classroom management, technology, and state testing. Teachers agreed that these methods proved to be more effective in helping them with challenges of teaching every day. A technology committee of teachers, administrators, and the superintendent was created to determine a
five year plan for how technology would be developed. No matter how leadership changed, the committee would steer a more constant direction for the school system.

This simple change in philosophy, put forth by the treasurer, became the New Normal for the district. The school board had discovered that surrounding districts were mirroring the methods Stuart suggested. The enhanced image of the school district throughout the community had progressed since the onset of the Great Recession. Stuart explained:

The public understands we are being responsible for money generated. They know we look at everything very carefully with anything tied to economics. We know the public understands we are a bedroom community. We don’t have smokestacks in every yard. People struggle. They know, in the end, we are careful with their money. The public appreciates our views of economics in our district.

Stuart was instrumental in the school district participating in the New Normal. He was the first to understand that difficult financial situations sometimes could be a spark to a new way of thinking. To a casual observer, Stuart was a conservative person who calculated every step of the district with the mind of a computer. Upon closer observation, a person would discover that Stuart was aware of the world around the school board office. He used the financial crisis as an opportunity to improve the organization.

The Great Recession also quickly affected the work of the transportation and maintenance supervisor. Early on, a distinct lack of work requisitions existed for Dave and his maintenance crew. Fewer and fewer purchase orders were requested. Principals were experiencing vast budget cuts. No money existed to cover the cost to repair things in
all of the school buildings. Nothing was being repaired or maintained unless an absolute emergency existed. The agony of delaying school maintenance wreaked havoc in all of the schools. The wear and tear would show quickly, but Dave mentioned that he was helpless at the onset of the Great Recession to enact the appropriate measures. He and his maintenance workers experienced long periods of inactivity. Then, they endured impossible situations of having little time or only money to resolve emergencies. Dave began to realize that old practices of maintenance and transportation needed to change. He stated:

This style of working put all of my guys behind the eight ball. Teachers and community people would complain all of the time. Clearly, things needed to be fixed. But the higher-ups would often prevent us from getting work done that needed to be done. The recession gave maintenance guys a bad name.

The Great Recession made him a better leader. Dave focused on ways to save the school district money. As the maintenance supervisor, he became more prudent in his shopping practices. Dave explained:

In the old days, I would find a company and establish relationships with salespeople to make my job easier. With the Great Recession, I shopped for the best price. I would dicker with salespeople. I figured if I didn’t watch the money, cuts would happen. In a small district like this, I could lose my job. My new way was to become a more efficient leader. And honestly, that should’ve happened years ago.

From the steel mills to his current job in the small school district, Dave searched for ways to become more efficient. He stated that his crews worked frugally at the start.
For example, stripping and waxing floors were done every three years instead of every summer. This immediately saved time, money, and effort. He never did anything twice. For the first time in his long career, Dave said that the Great Recession forced him to ask himself, “Where could we save money?”

The Great Recession enabled Dave to make changes. The district informed parents that preschool transportation would cease because of lack of funding. With the dire financial situation during this time, the school district received almost no complaints on the change with transportation. With this simple solution, Dave estimated that the school district has saved more than $50,000 each year since the end of preschool transportation. This was a change that needed to occur years ago, according to Dave. Dave exploited the times to introduce a New Normal and the school district benefitted.

The Great Recession provided Dave the opportunity to eradicate the practices that needed removal. Doug understood once he implemented his plans to help the district save money, his New Normal would remain. Beyond changing bus routes to save money, he deliberated on the various traditional practices of the district. Transportation, which he believed no one in authority ever gave much consideration, was in need of a change. He kept thinking, “Changes are needed. Where do I begin?”

Dave thought about when he worked as a maintenance supervisor at a different school district. A man there was in charge of the football stadium all 12 months of the year. For years, that was the job: work eight hours a day at the stadium and keep the place spotless. During the winter months, Dave realized that this worker did not do much. Therefore, Dave began to have him help with plowing snow throughout the school district and at the stadium. This worker, an affable employee, did as he was asked. Before the
union understood what was happening, Dave had made this a common practice. For years leading up to this simple request of the stadium worker plowing snow, the school was required to hire a substitute worker to either plow or watch over the stadium. Using workers internally became a New Normal.

This method of using his own people internally to get work done was a new way of doing business that would never had succeeded in the small, rural district without the financial strain of the Great Recession. He began to assess all of his workers and their responsibilities. Bus drivers, maintenance men, and janitors were carefully inspected. Dave discovered gaps in their day where people could be used rather than to call a substitute. He trained all of his janitors to spend time in all of the school buildings. Therefore, if a substitute janitor was needed, Dave would call a second shift janitor in to work first shift in a different building. As a result, many changes occurred. First, Dave explained, janitors developed a territorial attitude about their building. Having this removed encouraged the janitors to care about the district rather than their own building. Second, Dave stated the janitors developed more of a team effort mentality. His crew eventually believed that everyone was working for the whole district and each person became more valuable. Last, this New Normal saved thousands of dollars for the district during the first year of its implementation. Dave said:

Obviously, this worked very well for the school district. Absenteeism improved because missing work meant your work partner was covering for you and not some nameless, faceless substitute. Even with a slow recovery in our country, we saved too much money. We would never go back to the old ways again. This way made too much sense and it didn’t cost our schools a nickel.
With transportation, Dave began to use the same approach as with his maintenance workers. If a bus driver would call off for the day, Dave would approach a newer bus driver with an offer for the day. These drivers, being new, often had the shorter routes and, thus, earned less per hour wages. Dave would have the younger driver take the longer route to earn more money for the day, while the supervisor would drive the shorter route without using a substitute driver for the day. This New Normal worked well even as he experienced resistance from the noncertified union. The opportunity to have employees make more money silenced those opposed to Dave’s changes. With the changes still in effect, Dave estimates that since 2010, the school has saved more than $15,000 through using people in a more effective manner. He continues to work with janitors and bus drivers to think differently in order to help the district. Dave stated:

The ability to be flexible has helped me help our district. I spend a lot of thought and time working to cross-train our workers to save the school a lot of money. Everybody knows what everybody else does. With the financial cutbacks, we could never have done the things we continue to do today.

Leadership within the food department also faced dire financial circumstances. However, opportunity also presented itself. In Rosie’s mind, the Great Recession appeared in the least likely of places. Food prices rose, but the amount they charged for lunches did not. If gas prices increased, the delivery of food would also rise. As the cost of electricity in the kitchens increased, Rosie noted that this put a strain in her budget, as well. Overnight, she was often left with poor quality of food and people who were not qualified to prepare the meals at all. While this was frustrating at times, Rosie also
viewed these dire circumstances as an opportunity to improve the system in places that were long in need of change.

Rosie, as the leader of the food services, encountered so many obstacles in which she did not know where to begin to expound on the measures taken to practice within the notion of the New Normal. Once the Great Recession began, Rosie realized that opportunities existed to make improvements within the foods service throughout the school district. The recession, combined with the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, afforded Rosie the prospect of saving money for the district. She did this while adhering to the new federal regulations. During the course of several years, the kitchens throughout the school system changed. “Preparing food changed almost overnight. Nothing was made from ‘scratch’ anymore. Government regulations meant we had to count calories, count everything!” Rosie said.

The new legislation combined with the economic downturn from the Great Recession created the opportunity for change in the kitchens of the small, rural school district. Rosie explained:

Items such as pizza, chicken patties, and biscuits can be found in any school recipe books everywhere. That pizza made in the past was never pre-made. It was never processed and sent directly to our ovens. Even a standard cafeteria dish like pizza was created by the ladies who knew how to cook. Regardless of how much saturated fat it contained, home-cooked items were on many levels better for students than something already prepared and prepackaged.

Rosie mentioned that something made from scratch does not contain the added preservatives and artificial flavors included in most prepackaged meals. All of these
problems were interconnected and the food available was rapidly changing. Everything was prepackaged and nutritious. Even the vending machines were changed. “For years, the vending machines were a great source of revenue for our kitchen. The new rules changed that. And students just stopped using the machines,” explained Rosie.

As a result, the vending machines were vanishing throughout the school district. Only one remained in the high school. Rosie slowly started to remove all of the junk food from the high school. The students noticed almost immediately. Even the principal and teachers perceived changes were happening in the cafeteria. Vending machine profits had always gone back to the principal’s account to fund various events throughout the school year. Rosie fought, and she was successful, in her initial steps within the New Normal. She wrestled the funds from the vending machine away and began to use the money in search of food programs to improve the healthy eating habits of her students. This process, although slow at first, had reached a high level of success.

Along with removing junk food from the vending machines, Rosie began to implement other methods to improve the food culture throughout the school district. She initiated several conversations with local farmers in the school community. Rosie stated:

It was something I wanted to do . . . Being a rural community, we are surrounded by many local farms and all this beautiful farmland. I wondered if they would be willing to help supply some food and help keep our costs down.

Initially, she focused on getting local apples and potatoes, but the amount has grown rapidly. Rosie was surprised at how quickly the community delighted in becoming involved in feeding the students. Rosie confirmed:
I recognized a great sense of community spirit and pride when I reached out to a couple of the local farmers. For a chance to help feed our students, I got a great sense of joy from the families who were involved.

Using local produce allowed her to change the operation within her cafeterias throughout the district. Rosie constantly worked with the unskilled cafeteria workers to help show them how to prepare food for students. She enjoyed the process of helping her workers. More importantly, this developed a sense of pride with her workers. They began to take ownership of the food preparation. Rosie explained:

The recession forced us to eventually hire unskilled workers to prepare prepackaged foods that the students absolutely hated. Using local farmers at a far cheaper rate helped us in so many ways. Our workers prepared food. There was a sense of pride. No longer were the ladies going through the motions. They cared about what they were making. Even better, our students noticed the improved foods and they also noticed better attitudes from the ladies. Local food has begun to help in every way.

Rosie attributed her program's success to the support of about two or three farmers with whom she worked most closely. Initially, she discussed the opportunity of working with local people. Rosie said:

The ones that wanted to deal with us the most understood that this helped our own. They had a sense of pride that they were taking care of the children of the community. . . . They really wouldn’t make much money. This community always been supportive when they could directly support of kids.
The New Normal for the food services throughout the district has continued to transform. For Rosie, she believed that the food services of the district were nowhere near where she wanted them to be. The Great Recession had a harmful effect on the food services. In her estimation, the financial strain had influenced her professionally on several levels. She was obligated to hire more unskilled kitchen workers who knew little about preparing food for a large group of children. Prices with everything involving her kitchens continued to soar, while her budget remained the same. For a while, at least at the beginning, Rosie stated that her frustration escalated. She was doing a lot of the work and receiving little from her labor. However, working with her cooks who knew nothing about food preparations gave Rosie a sense of fulfillment. Pride also swelled throughout the ranks of cooks in every school within the district, according to Rosie. Her relationships with local farmers also expanded with her establishing the possibility of using the farmers to assist in helping students. Her New Normal was preparing healthier food at better rates. During this time, the sense of pride and community continued to escalate with herself as the leader as well as with her cooks.

The effects of the worst economic decline since the Great Depression forced changes on state governments and the U.S. economy that could linger for decades. The country lost almost an entire year's worth of economic activity, nearly $14 trillion, during the recession from 2007 to 2009 (Groovum, September 15, 2013). The loss during this time throughout the United States was significant. The small, rural school district experienced the financial strain early with the onset of the recession.
Summary of Leaders

Each leader from the small, rural school who participated in this research project recognized the need to do something special within his or her part of the organization as the country was engulfed in the economic crisis. Each participant recognized the opportunity to make improvements within the school district that had never been made before. Decisions made concerning the New Normal were fitting. Kendra, when she was a middle school principal, opted to make changes on a small scale and evaluate the success of the changes. With success, she expanded strategies to reach every corner of the school building. She maintained this practice as superintendent. Kendra adjusted how teachers maintained their classroom budgets. Teachers ordered for their classroom based on need. In the past, teachers were instructed to spend the allotted amount each year for fear that it would be lost forever if not used. In the middle school, this simple New Normal saved the district thousands of dollars. As superintendent, she enforced this practice throughout the school system. This directive could have triggered disagreements throughout the small, rural town. Too many teachers had become accustomed to spending the fully allotted budget, an expectation that had been firmly in place for many years. Once the Great Recession swept through the country, Kendra used the crisis to execute her plans for organizational improvements.

For Stuart, he recognized the need to make changes long before the Great Recession. As treasurer, he felt his role was to facilitate the desires of the school board. He was careful to report only the things the five members on the board requested. Still, Stuart realized things had to change. He had been treasurer for many years. During that time, he worked with seven superintendents. Each had their own philosophies and designs
regarding how money should be spent. Often, the school board readily agreed with the superintendent. Eventually, the school district passed a 1% earned income tax, according to Stuart. This tax solved many financial issues for the school system until the financial crisis struck. The school experienced a series of devastating cuts in staff. The community was nervous with the income tax because of the recession. Then with teachers losing their jobs, the leaders received even more criticism. The constant turnover of the superintendency added more confusion and negative feelings toward the district from the community.

Stuart recognized the opportunity to make a significant change in the organization. His idea was to convince the school board to change its philosophy regarding how the district would spend its money. Up to that point, the school board spent money in a trendy manner. Money was spent with an attitude of keeping up with surrounding districts. For example, Stuart was often asked to spend money on new technology. The board also asked him to financially support various superintendents and their requests for professional development, no matter how costly. With the Great Recession, Stuart used this as an opportunity to convince the school board to change its philosophy. The board began to evaluate everything that required money to be spent. No longer going with popular educational ideas, Stuart stated that the board members examined every penny spent. His school board agreed to account for how money was spent. In addition, the board agreed to allow Stuart to deny all requests unless the need was proven. This included technology, staffing, professional development, and facilities. Stuart asked them to become more involved and to demand more answers no matter who led the district. This subtle change had the largest influence on the district. Even as the
For Dave, he relished the opportunity to make significant changes in maintenance and transportation. For too long, he viewed that many aspects of the work being done needed modified. He worked with many who were strong in the Union and they were reluctant to do things differently until the Great Recession affected their work. Dave seized the opportunity in many places. In transportation, he stopped a preschool bus route that took place in the middle of the day. This provided extra driving opportunities for his drivers. Even though it had been considered wasteful for years, no one would remove the route as it provided more money for the bus drivers. With the recession, he eliminated the route, which saved the district thousands of dollars in wages, gas, and wear and tear on the buses. Once removed, the school district has not returned to the route.

With maintenance, Dave trained janitors to work in other buildings rather than their own. In the past, this would have been impossible as the janitors were territorial within their own buildings. Because of the financial crisis, he trained his people to work in other buildings. Dave mentioned he had one purpose in mind. Absenteeism was strongest with the janitors throughout the school system. The janitors averaged far more days off than any other workers did. Dave made plans regarding the janitors’ schedules to save the district money. When a janitor called off, he would go to another building and direct a janitor to give a “bare bones” cleaning in the primary building. He would then instruct his janitor to leave and go to the building with an absent janitor. Then that person would give the same “bare bones” cleaning in the second building. Dave reasoned that a substitute janitor would do the same limited work as his full time janitor doing the
minimal cleaning. As a result, he saved the district thousands of dollars instead of paying for a substitute janitor. This action was something the union would never have allowed; however, with the Great Recession, Dave recognized the opportunity to engage a New Normal. This practice has remained even as the Great Recession abated.

For Rosie, she seized opportunities even as she faced difficult times. Michelle Obama had pushed successfully to enforce many changes in school food programs. With Rosie’s cafeterias barely showing a profit, she relied on unskilled cooks to prepare food for large masses of students. On top of all of this, the Great Recession forced the price of food to rise and Rosie was forced to serve food to students at the same price. Faced with these daunting circumstances, she refused to be beaten. Her enthusiasm and creativity provided her the opportunity to partake in a New Normal. Rosie became much more hands-on in her leadership. She modeled the work she expected her cafeteria workers to exhibit. She trained them to become more skilled in preparing foods that never got wasted. Rosie also enlisted the help of local farmers to provide food for the school. This was an important public relations move, according to Rosie. The farmers were excited at the possible prospect of helping as they, too, were affected by the Great Recession. This provided the prospect of saving her cafeteria money as the budget continued to shrink.

Quietly, each leader relished the opportunity to make changes. Each person interviewed admitted certain aspects of past practices in the school system were out of control. Some of the practices occurred simply because it was the way the practice had always been done. Past practice was firmly entrenched at many levels through the district. The Great Recession crippled the district financially, but the crisis also provided much needed opportunities for change.
With the first attempt at establishing the New Normal, the school leaders sought additional practices to make needed improvements throughout the district. When one particular idea worked well, each leader became introspective. On their own, each leader began to examine his or her own role in the organization. Through the interview process, without any knowledge of what questions would be asked, all of the leaders in some form expressed their desire to improve the district. Each asked themselves, “What else could be done to save the district?” “What changes have always needed to happen?”, and “What more could I do?”

During the Great Recession, the New Normal reshaped the thinking of each leader and specific patterns began to emerge. Kendra saved the district money as a principal budgeting each department’s money. As superintendent, she used this simple method as a rule throughout the district, thus saving thousands of dollars. With success, she found herself asking, “Where else can money be saved?”

Stuart made perhaps the most significant influence on the New Normal. At the launch of the financial crisis, he worked closely with the school board. As with the superintendent, Stuart began asking himself the same questions regarding where money could be saved. As a group, the treasurer and school board agreed to rethink its philosophy on money spending. The board decided to stop emulating the neighboring districts. Stuart claimed that they decided to forego the trends in school curriculum or technology or classroom management. Their decisions were based on where money could be saved. This change in thinking happened slowly but in a deliberate manner. As a result, Stuart found that the neighboring districts were mirroring his philosophy. Dave continuously inquired from within, “What else can be done to improve our situation?”
Transportation and maintenance were engulfed in the New Normal throughout the majority of the Great Recession. Their leader seemingly recognized opportunity everywhere he looked. Dave maintained experience, a tough skin, and a large amount of creativity to enlist his workers into the New Normal. As a result, Dave saved the school district thousands of dollars. No one instructed him or advised him to do anything different. He recognized opportunities and he imposed his will on the situations. Once he experienced success with his implemented changes, he realized nothing would stop him. When Dave was hired, he saw the need to correct many things in transportation and maintenance. He was bound to tradition and a mentality that verged on paranoia when change was mentioned. With the recession, he understood that this provided him the opening needed to enforce changes that would last well into the future.

Rosie also found herself asking the same questions, “What more can I do?” and “How can we improve the food service of the school district?” Her questions differed in tone as the financial crisis ripped through the country. Rosie sought ways to improve the food service as a matter of immediate survival. According to Rosie, too often, she felt alone. She was new in the school system and did not realize that the other leaders were experiencing similar pressure. Her job was to run the kitchens at a profit or, at least, at a “break even” point. With higher gas prices, higher food prices, and higher expectations from the federal government, Rosie realized that her food service would sink quickly in unless she engaged in cost efficiency measures. Rosie also felt pressure at working with cooks who knew almost nothing about creating food for mass consumption. Her cooks, as women who lived within the community, often viewed her as an outsider and questioned her direction. Rosie maintained a creative mentality to avoid work burnout; she also
mentioned that she sustained her creativity as a matter of survival. She asked herself the exact same questions as the other school leaders. At times during the interview, Rosie’s tone was grim. These patterns, or the questions each leader quietly asked him or herself, emerged throughout the survival process. Each leader experienced a pattern as they asked the questions to help the district survive. The school did not conduct a discussion on the changes, nor did the school board make any formal plans. Each leader recognized an opportunity and seized it.

Throughout the process of interviewing all of the school district leaders, the participants’ responses had common themes. These patterns emerged throughout the interviewing process. Each leader, while in reflection, asked him or herself the same questions. Repeatedly, I heard the same questions asked, “Where could I save more money?,” “What else could be changed, what else should be changed?,” and “Where can we improve?” The acuity of their experiences gave the school system the opportunity to change and improve organizationally.

With the financial strain from the Great Recession, those in charge throughout the rural district used this as an opportunity to improve. The events of the crisis allowed each person to thoughtfully make the most of situation and make long-lasting change. Each person remembered the first signs of the Great Recession hurting the district. All of them spoke of the timing to make needed improvements in a situation weaker leaders might find hopeless. To survive this period, especially in a small school district, the leaders had to be courageous. The people who led this district made decisions that affected hundreds of students, teachers, and families. Still, they all moved forward with purpose. The leaders used the financial strain to make improvements within their own organization.
Each leader understood that the recession provided them the opportunity to make the school system function with marked enhancements. As a result, the school district continued to flourish. The school has remained a source of pride for the community and for those interviewed for this research project.
CHAPTER V

Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to delve into the events of creative budgeting and planning within a small, rural school district reducing the influence of a financial crisis. Through this study, I explored the actions of the resourceful preparation within a school system in relation to personnel, transportation, foods, utilities, and what remained after adequate funding returned. This chapter restates the purpose of the study, as well as includes a summary of the procedure used in the study and a summary of the emerging themes. I provide recommendations for school leaders who see the opportunity for change and for those leaders who have the courage to make those changes. This chapter also details the conclusions of this study, organized for the reader in order of the case study responses to the study’s research questions. The relationship of all of the findings and the recommendations for future research end the chapter.

Creative budgeting during the Great Recession led to a New Normal within a small, rural school district in Ohio, even after the reductions became less necessary. The available literature in this understudied area has mainly pertained to the continued cuts schools must endure while maintaining high academic standards. A few researchers also suggested that school officials enforced constant cuts, but few studies have included which effective changes have remained as the New Normal for school districts in Ohio. Given the recent modifications in school budgets during the Great Recession, school leaders were evaluating their organizations at a nonstop rate. It was desirable to conduct a study to explore the events of creative budgeting within school districts in relationship to
transportation, foods services, utilities, and what strategies the district would retain after adequate funding returns.

**Summary of the Procedures**

I conducted in-depth individual interviews with the school leaders who participated in the fiscal restructuring in the small, rural school district. The leaders agreed to share their own stories and leadership perspectives. They consented to explain their specific steps taken in assisting their school district to thrive during the most difficult times throughout the Great Recession. I audiotaped the interviews, which were then professionally transcribed. Data analysis assisted in establishing the two emerging themes:

1. What were the participants’ perceptions of and experience with recognizing the Great Recession and how was the financial strain used for sustainable changes?

2. With each decision made as part of the New Normal, what were the administrators’ perceptions and experiences unique to their positions as they searched for methods to improve their part of the operation?

**Summary of Themes**

The school leaders of the small, rural district who participated in this study shared their perceptions of the school system evolving into the New Normal during the Great Recession. As they revealed their thoughts and observations, themes emerged throughout the progression of the district’s New Normal. A discussion of the themes follows.
Perceptions and Experience With the Great Recession

All of the leaders revealed perceptions and experiences regarding how the Great Recession changed public school districts throughout the United States. Each recognized the recession’s devastating effects early in the small, rural district where they worked.

Kendra, then a middle school principal, revealed her experience with staff loss because of a financial crisis. Once teachers lost jobs because of lack of funding, Kendra decided to use that experience. Long before the Great Recession, she began implementing a restructuring mentality. She insisted her teachers spend money only on things absolutely needed. Once a teacher retired, she used that as an opportunity to combine teacher duties and teaching assignments. As the Great Recession affected their district, Kendra’s experience provided her with the ability to make changes within the district to improve the organization.

Sometime before the Great Recession, the school district treasurer voiced concerns with the school finances. Stuart experienced financial difficulties well before the recession struck the small, rural school district. For years, the district relied on a 1% income tax. As a new tax in 2006, Stuart knew the tax would be an adjustment for the community. Because the income tax was on earned income only, Stuart decided that the voters would learn to appreciate the tax as a method for funding the school district. Once the Great Recession began, the school treasurer experienced fear for the district. They had a series of deep cuts. This eventually led Stuart to persuade the school board to change its philosophy. He saw this as a necessary opening to embrace change. Eventually, the school board agreed with him. Their embrace of his new approach led to saving the district thousands of dollars.
Dave’s perceptions and experiences, as the person in charge of maintenance and transportation, provided him many opportunities for change within the small, rural school district. As a former employee of a steel mill, Dave expressed that his work with powerful unions afforded him the capability to work with his current union to eventually get them to embrace the new practices. He indicated that he saw opportunity everywhere. He removed frivolous cleaning practices during major cleaning projects. He changed transportation routes that were implemented to pay drivers more money. Along with that, Dave began to combine bus routes to save larger amounts of money. He became more prudent in shopping. Dave searched for the best prices and also tried to work the prices down for the benefit of the district. He planned better as a leader who participated in the restructuring. Around his district, a dozen unfinished projects existed. Dave explained the district owned expensive equipment that was purchased and never used. Other things, like baseball dugouts, were poorly planned and built. Dave also had his maintenance team learn other buildings so that he could move people around and save money during call offs.

Rosie described her perceptions and experience of making improvements during a recession as a challenge. Her previous work in college gave her the experience to help teach others skills of survival in feeding a large number of people. When the Great Recession struck, Rosie used that experience to make needed changes in the researched school district. She used that opportunity to change how food was delivered to the school district. She indicated how much she enjoyed teaching cooking skills to her cafeteria workers, even as they viewed her with suspicion as an outsider. She voiced many concerns throughout the interview process that the food services were up against a
difficult situation. Beyond the Great Recession, Rosie battled Michelle Obama’s changes concerning what food could be served to children. She viewed all of these hardships as an opportunity for change. She continued to work with her cooks to make quality food with limited resources. She contemplated using more local farmers as a source to alleviate the rising costs of food. Her embrace of the restructuring seemed to work; however, she decided to leave the school system for a larger and wealthier school district.

**Unique Positions and Questions Asked**

As school leaders in the small rural district, each of the four people interviewed held unique positions. Each leader viewed the frustrations of how business had always been conducted. They expressed annoyance because these practices continued even at the overall detriment to the school district. For Kendra, asking her teachers to budget departments based on need was a difficult task. Many educators were used to and expected to have funds to support their classroom needs. Combining services within a building or sharing services with two buildings saved thousands of dollars. None of these changes were possible until the restructuring occurred during the Great Recession.

Stuart grew tired of needless spending with each new superintendent hired during his long career as school treasurer. He took the initial steps to change philosophical thinking with the school board regarding spending money on technology, professional development, and personnel. His unique position gave him the chance for the district to embrace a restructured way of thinking. This mentality resulted in saving the district during the largest financial strain to hit the country since the Great Depression. Dave and Rosie also had the unique position of making needed changes because of the Great
Recession. All four of the leaders recognized the need for changes even before the financial crisis.

As the restructuring of the organization resulted in an improved direction for the small, rural school district, each leader asked similar questions. At different times, without discussing the changes with anyone else, the leaders were constantly asking, “Where else could I save money?” “What else can we do to improve?” and “What more can I do?” The questions asked were the essence of the New Normal method of thinking. The leaders saw an opportunity to change where a district needed improvements. They found themselves asking what other sustainable changes were required to make the school system stronger and more efficient. All participants asked these questions without a formal plan or a discussion of any kind with anyone else throughout the organization.

Conclusions

Research Question 1

*What financial and operational leadership changes were effective for a small rural public school district during the Great Recession?*

Throughout the time of the Great Recession, the school leaders in the small, rural district in Ohio experienced many financial and operational changes within the district. These changes, specifically the restructuring, remained long after the financial crisis ceased and became the New Normal. These modifications made throughout several levels within the district continued even after the strain ended. The New Normal were the changes that remained to help improve the school district. Even as the state began sending money back into school districts as the national economy slowly returned, the modifications throughout the small town school district continued. As a result, the school
district changed the organization to make major operational improvements. The leaders of the school system accomplished this under the stress of a massive financial crisis throughout the country.

The superintendent exhibited the first example of participating in the restructuring. In 2007, Kendra was the principal of the small middle school. This was where she worked creatively to make needed changes within her building. Upset by conversations she had heard for years, she implemented the purchase of classroom materials based on need. The teachers eventually bought into the new system. Each educator began to turn in a list of needed things to be purchased within each department throughout the building. During this time, Kendra learned early in her leadership role that adjustment times were needed. In her mind, changes could occur in a large fashion with grand, sweeping transformations, or change could take place gradually, which she compared to drops of water dripping quietly on a stone. Eventually, those droplets would wear a stone away completely. This simple modification made a substantial alteration to an common practice throughout the middle school. A significant amount of money was saved in a short period of time. Kendra proposed this budgeting practice to the principals once she became the district’s educational leader. Gradually, the entire district conserved their money. Some teachers were not happy with the new practice; however, Kendra had waited for the opportunity to enforce this practice throughout the school district.

Stuart, the treasurer, spent years with the researched school district. During his long tenure, he admitted to having worked with seven different superintendents—seven school leaders with seven different methods of running the school system. Each superintendent would spend money on professional development and technology in
distinctively different approaches to help teachers fulfill the district’s vision. Then, the next superintendent would arrive, explained Stuart. More money, time, and effort was spent changing the district vision. The next leader spent money on professional development, technology, personnel, and anything else to help move the district forward. This process continued. During the years, the members of the school board supported each superintendent. As a result, Stuart confirmed, the direction of the small, rural school district changed every three years more than three decades.

Stuart’s presence at the district never wavered until the Great Recession hit. Stuart recognized an opportunity to make a significant change throughout the entire organization. He saw the signs of a recession as early as 2006. In his mind, he organized and prepared; he managed the process and conducted action to completely transform the school district.

For Dave, the changes made may not have directly influenced student learning; however, he initiated several successful operational changes to minimize the effect of the recession. At the beginning of the Great Recession, he enforced a change in removing frivolous exercises that wasted time and money. Dave and his workers stripped and waxed the floors every three years instead of every year. This simple practice saved time, money, and effort. Before the Great Recession, no one ever inquired if a more practical method made sense. As the financial crisis ripped through the country, Dave implemented this practice in the small, rural school district. This practice ultimately became the New Normal and the school district improved through difficult times. As the transportation supervisor, Dave also instigated several practical modifications, which became part of the New Normal. He decided to stop a preschool route that required bus use and additional
wages paid to bus drivers. Too often, old practices remained because it enabled others to remain employed. However, as Dave explained, the Great Recession enabled him to make changes. He knew maintaining the preschool route would not affect the lives of the students of the small, rural, school district. Therefore, at the height of the Great Recession, he stopped the preschool route. While this was a change from past practice, Dave estimated the district saved more than $55,000 in the first year. This practice remained as the New Normal.

Dave developed other cost-saving procedures, such as becoming a more prudent shopper. Whether looking for massive equipment to air condition or heat a building, or a new school bus, or light bulbs, Dave interrogated every company and he sought several quotes for each purchase. Dave believed the new approach made him plan better. For years, buses were parked in an open area. If one was not being used daily, then that bus would be parked outdoors exposed to the elements. He had a small garage attachment built that connected to the bus garage. According to Dave, people, including his supervisor, believed he was wasting school funds. Even at the highest point of the Great Recession, he asserted that if the school district put a slightly used bus in a garage and he could squeeze another year from any of his buses, that garage would pay for itself. He contended that if the school could procure another three or four extra years from buying new buses, the district would save $80,000 to $100,000 a year. Within 2 years, he proved to be correct. Bus purchases had gone down significantly since the financial crisis began.

For years, Dave fought with bus drivers, janitors, teachers, and supervisors when implementing his new practices. Because these workers had performed the same task, the same way every day for years, they experienced stress when Dave tried to implement
changes. As a leader, Dave realized when people complained that things needed to be done a certain way, it was only because they were used to that method. He asked his workers to dig a little deeper and try to identify smarter ways to perform their jobs. Dave compared the old approach to eating steak all of the time, year after year, and then, suddenly, everyone was forced to change and eat macaroni and cheese every day. He advised his workers that all would survive. The recession allowed him the room to eliminate wasteful practices and harmful traditions. The small, rural school district thrived while other similar school districts struggled with adjusting to the financial crisis.

For Rosie, she battled the Great Recession affecting lunch prices. As the financial crisis swept through the country, she found her job as the food director a difficult one. The economy affected gas prices, food prices, and delivery prices, but the cost of lunches remained the same for her students. On top of the strained economy, Michelle Obama had championed the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act. This resulted in Rosie’s cafeterias struggling to turn a profit. The higher the prices soared, the lower quality of food was served to her children. The lower the quality, the less she would have students buying lunches. She feared that her cafeteria would eventually close. To make matters worse, Rosie was surrounded by cafeteria workers who had no experience preparing foods for mass consumption. In addition, because Rosie was an outsider, the workers were distrustful of any of her ideas to improve the difficult times they faced.

During the financial crisis, Rosie toiled to make the cafeteria services of the small, rural school district a success. She yearned for the day when the food service would operate with a profit rather than at a loss. Staying positive, Rosie refused failure. Situations that had frustrated her as a leader fed her desire to be successful. She
demonstrated leadership and creativity in helping her food service during the Great Recession. To save money, Rosie began ordering prepackaged foods. Her initial frustration at her workers having no idea how to cook for the mass of students changed with the prepackaged foods. With the recession, nothing was prepared from scratch. Having an unskilled work force, the prepackaged food worked well. In addition, the direction and guidance she provided was successful, and the workers had little choice to vary from her leadership.

Rosie stated that the Great Recession appeared in the strangest places. Ingredients packaged together saved her cafeteria’s money and hiring unskilled cooks also saved her money. The economy forced prices to raise everywhere other than in her cafeteria. Therefore, she eventually used local farmers to supplement the cost of shipping fruits and vegetables to the school. She demanded accountability from her workers throughout the district. As a result, she recognized her influence on the lives of her cooks and students was a successful one. The changes she implemented as a matter of survival were a success. Many of her modifications done throughout the district needed to happen. After the desperate times ended, she understood her improvements were necessary.

Research Question 2

*What financial and operational changes made within the small school district will be retained as the New Normal after the Great Recession waned?*

For Kendra, she displayed successful leadership that developed ripple effects for years following the Great Recession. Her budgetary practices in her own building spread to the whole school district once she was superintendent. She carefully organized and prepared before she implemented the practice of a needs-based budget as part of the
district’s New Normal. The district leaders, with her guidance, began to ask teachers questions regarding their budgets, “Tell me what you need.” This question saved thousands of dollars throughout the course of the Great Recession. This practice continued in all of the buildings long after the recession ended.

Kendra focused on personnel issues through the Great Recession. Once a librarian retired, she replaced the full-time librarian with a library aide. Then, once an English teacher retired, Kendra looked to combine the duties of other teachers to fulfill that position. If she hired the right person, this New Normal worked and remained. She indicated that if a person ran a district in a conservative, tight fashion, students would have the opportunity to learn at a high level. Kendra believed if a district is conscientious regarding its spending, it did not matter how much funding was available, as long as the leaders behave in a responsible manner.

Stuart understood better than most the influence of the New Normal throughout the school district. He assisted in establishing a new mentality regarding how the school board viewed spending. The board demanded accountability with how every penny was spent. In the past, administrators and teachers were sent throughout the state to learn how to implement better practices in educating students. To save money, the board insisted on bringing experts into the district. And to save money from hiring speakers, the board asked leaders in the school system to assist others how to improve their leadership and teaching. The school board became conservative in adding any new staff. Stuart convinced them to question every major decision made to portray a conservative approach in school funding. He created this New Normal mentality but also recognized the importance of the board supporting that mentality.
Dave recognized the connections made with his workers. The Great Recession afforded him the opportunity to make many changes with his maintenance workers and bus drivers. Many of his initiatives remained even as the recession eased. He created a new mentality within most of his staff. Dave praised their willingness to become more flexible during the financial crunch and this flexibility remained. Occasionally, he experienced some lingering resistance, but it largely faded. He continued to cross-train all of his workers so if one was absent, a janitor was sent to another building to fill that void. Dave created a system where everyone knew everyone else’s job. They continued to cover for each other while saving money for the district. He recognized that his many changes affected his workers.

The bus drivers and maintenance workers were proud of the changes. Dave trained them all and he constantly reminded them why they had to change. He believed that many were proud that they participated in these changes during difficult financial times. They were successful during the Great Recession and the workers thrived during the changes. Dave recognized that a dark side existed with the New Normal. As a leader, and as a person who worked in management, Dave made decisions to best help the organization. He used his leadership skills to get the workers to accept the changes. He understood some in the union fought his direction as a few insisted the contract be followed. The union insisted resistance even at the cost of more money spent. Even as the Great Recession crippled the district, the union fought Dave’s attempts at making significant changes. He believed that as the financial strain continued, the union weakened in their stance. His New Normal practices have become routine for most of his workers.
With Rosie, she implemented many practices with the food services in the small, rural school district. Prepackaged foods were still delivered to the school district to keep the cost of food as low as possible. The unskilled workers learned how to serve students. She indicated that many of her workers in all of the school buildings displayed pride in serving the students. Her connections with the local farmers continued whenever possible. Even with all of the changes, the food services struggled to fashion an acceptable profit. The strain of the work affected Rosie. She demonstrated a positive outlook; however, she left the small, rural school district to run the foods service at a large, neighboring district where finances were not as difficult to manage.

**Overarching Conclusions**

The key question that nearly every manager will ask himself or herself at any point during a typical day is “Why do people behave the way they do?” Many scientists since Kurt Lewin who study organizational behavior ask this same question. Lewin’s formula attempted to answer to this question in the simplest of terms (Lewin, 1951):

\[
\text{Behavior} = \text{Function of the Person} + \text{Situation}
\]

That is, a person’s behavior is determined in some part by the person’s own traits, abilities, and temperament and in some part by the demands and pressures of the particular situation (Thompson, 2008). In nearly any situation, behavior is the result of personality plus certain things in the situation. An implication of the “person” is that characteristics of people are relatively stable across time and situation which can often be measured or assessed (Thompson, 2008). This was true throughout the research study in the small, rural town in Ohio. The school district studied maintained leaders who worked with those considered stable and dependent. The workers were used to the sameness of
the day-to-day work. They seemed to take comfort in the fact nothing changed in their jobs. The financial crisis forced the leaders to implement dramatic changes. The situation evolved and this ultimately affected the behavior to change through the rural school system. In contrast, features of the “situation” are less stable, but are relatively easier to change or manipulate (Thompson, 2008). For example, if a teacher struggles to manage an effective classroom because one person is too talkative. Thompson (2008) suggested it is much more difficult to change the person than it is to change the situation such as enforcing a hand-raising rule or hiring a meeting facilitator. Time after time during the financial crisis, the school leaders recognized opportunity and they each changed the situation. This provided needed improvements throughout the school system.

The leaders of the small, rural school district in Ohio in the study engaged in the restructuring during and after the Great Recession of 2007 to 2009. The leadership behaviors held in common during the Great Recession as part of the New Normal include the following:

- All used the financial strain as an opportunity for change within the organization.
- All experienced similar perceptions and experiences in recognizing the financial damage of the Great Recession throughout the small, rural school district.
- All asked themselves the same question as they engaged the district in the restructuring process, “What more can I do?”
- All implemented effective changes as part of the New Normal.
• All made financial and operational changes within the small, rural school district that were retained after the Great Recession ended.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

• Use a quantitative study regarding funding saved after the Great Recession in multiple school districts throughout the state of Ohio.

• What practices returned to the former approach as the need to save money waned and why?

• Conduct a quantitative study comparing large school systems and small school systems implementing restructuring strategies during a financial crisis.

• Conduct a case study to determine how other school leaders adjusted to the Great Recession.

**Concluding Remarks**

The Great Recession of 2007 to 2009 devastated school districts throughout the United States. These school districts faced many challenges because of the failing economy. Educating children necessitates an understanding of the effect of the economy on school districts. School leaders must understand the rising questions and concerns regarding the influence the local economy has on transportation and food services and other services within a school budget. With an ever-changing economy, school leaders must be prepared to make crucial changes pertaining to both practices and personnel. During the Great Recession, Ohio public schools faced dire circumstances in state and local funding. School leaders worked to maintain instruction as the first priority. Non-instructional expenditures, such as transportation, food service, and utilities suffered. The slow return of expected economic growth lingered for years after recession ended.
This qualitative multiple case study was important and necessary because little literature exists regarding superintendents creating effective changes with personnel, transportation, or food services during the Great Recession where the local communities expected adjustments without limiting the educational opportunities for the children. The literature tends to focus on the specific changes schools endured in relationship to the Common Core. The results of this study adds knowledge to a neglected area of school management and provides information for school superintendents, treasurers, educators, and policy makers to better understand the needs of school leaders searching for methods to budget finances within a district without harming the education of children. Through this study, I examined what changes remained and became the New Normal, which reshaped the process of funding school districts. This investigation provides information for researchers who wish to study school leaders who enforced effective lasting changes when local dollars shrink during a recession.

Creative budgeting during the Great Recession and the revised budgeting within public school districts became a common practice throughout the United States. The available literature in this understudied area pertains to the continued cuts schools endured while maintaining high academic standards. Almost no studies includes explanation of which effective changes had remained as the New Normal for school districts in Ohio. I explored the events of creative budgeting within a rural school district in relationship to transportation, food services, utilities, and what would be retained after adequate funding returns.

This qualitative multiple case study contributes significant findings to the literature. A dearth of literature exists regarding superintendents producing effective
changes with personnel, transportation, or food services during the Great Recession where the local communities expected optimal educational opportunities for the children. The available literature mostly focuses on the specific changes schools must endure in relationship to government enforced testing. After conducting a case study on the small, rural Ohio school district, I researched what changes remained as the New Normal altered school funding for school districts. Finally, this study provides information for researchers who wish to study school leaders implementing effective lasting changes when local funding is not available.

In general, qualitative research methods are especially useful in discovering the meaning that people give to events they experience (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The purpose of this study was to discover the affect of the Great Recession and the New Normal on school leaders with their collection, analysis, and use of data to ultimately improve student success in school. In recent years, because of the effects of the Great Recession, public school districts learned to adjust and live within the boundaries of the New Normal and doing more with less (Duncan, 2010). I examined the perceptions and implementation of opportunity and need as a matter of survival.

After continuous cuts in funding during the last decade, the researched school district maintained a high level of achievement from most of its students. Even as students who participated in free or reduced lunches rose to more than 50%, state and national test scores continued to rise. The goal of this project was to study what financial changes and work practices were effective within a small school district because of the effects of the Great Recession. Several administrators within the school district were
studied and interviewed to determine what changes created during the recession still remained.

This qualitative multiple case study was important and necessary for several reasons. Through this study, other school leaders could learn that methods exist to implement effective changes during bleak financial times in a public school system. The available literature has mostly pertained to the specific changes schools endured in relationship to the Common Core. I focused on gaining a unique understanding of how the changes were conducted within a school district and which changes remained. Creative budgeting for school leaders had become a common phenomenon in many public school districts throughout Ohio during the Great Recession. Creative budgeting with transportation, food services, and utilities forced superintendents to scrutinize the district from an organizational position. The study added knowledge to a neglected area. The research study provided information to school superintendents, treasurers, educators, and policy makers to better understand the needs of school leaders searching for methods to budget finances within a district without harming the learning opportunities for children. In all, the study revealed what changes remained as the New Normal, even as adequate funding became available for most school districts throughout Ohio.
REFERENCES


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Appendix A
Interview Questions for Dissertation

1. Tell me about the time you first recognized the Great Recession was affecting the school district.

2. What financial changes were effective after the recession?

3. What operating procedures or changes remained as the “New Normal” after the recession ended?

4. Tell me about the school system and your work before the recession and how it changed during the Great Recession?

5. How did you feel when all of the changes began to occur? How did you feel when you realized all or some of the changes were working?

6. Has freezing of hiring employees happened during the recession? How had the process changed as part of the New Normal?

7. Has there been an adjustment of pay scale to make up budget cuts?

8. Have professional development opportunities for staff been limited? Does this remain?

9. Have newer faculty been dismissed or programs consolidated?

10. In the end, which changes implemented actually improved the school district? Explain.
Appendix B
Consent Form

(Participant Consent)

A. PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND
Mr. Shawn Braman, a student in Ashland University's Doctoral Department in Educational Leadership, is conducting a research study to help understand the "New Normal" in education in a rural school district in Ohio. You are being asked to participate in this study because you may have extensive knowledge on which financial changes were effective and retained after public schools recovered.

B. PROCEDURES
If you agree to be in the study, the following will occur:

1. You may be interviewed for no longer than two 30-minute audiotapes.
2. After both tapes are completed, you may be asked to take part in a focus group discussion led by Shawn Braman. During the focus group, you and other group members may be asked to discuss reactions to the tapes. An audiotape will be made of this discussion. This discussion may last no longer than thirty minutes.
3. You may be asked to respond to a questionnaire about your reaction to the audiotapes. It may take approximately fifteen minutes to complete the questionnaire.

C. RISKS/DISCOMFORTS
The researcher does not anticipate any risks or discomforts through any participation within the study.

D. BENEFITS
There will be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study. However, the information that you provide may help professionals better understand how leaders in education learn to adjust and to thrive in conditions of the "New Normal" as a result of the Great Recession from 2007 to 2009.

E. COSTS
There will be no costs to you as a result of taking part in this study.

F. PAYMENT
There will be no payment for your participation in this study. If you decide to withdraw prior to study completion, you are free to do so at any time.

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY. You are free to decline to be in this study, or to withdraw from it at any point. Your decision as to whether or not to participate in this study will have no influence on your present or future status as an employee.
HUMAN SUBJECTS REVIEW BOARD

SUMMARY OF PROPOSAL

Summarize the proposed project and procedures to which humans will be subjected. Consent form(s), questionnaires, etc. must be attached. The summary should include purpose(s), solicitation and number of subjects, data collection procedures, an explanation of how consent is obtained, procedures for maintaining confidentiality and any potential risks involved for the subjects. Explain the nature of any deception if it is part of the design.

1. Project Description

Describe the specifications and objectives of your research, the data collection procedures, and any features of the research design that involve special conditions or procedures for subjects.

The essential research question that this study intends to answer: What is the financial leadership role of the school superintendent in a small rural school in Ohio during and after the Great Recession with consideration to the new normal? This study will also address the following research sub questions:

1. What operational and other changes were necessary in a small rural public school district during the Great Recession and the extended recovery period?
2. What changes made within the small school district will be retained as the “New Normal” after the Great Recession wanes?

2. Subject Recruitment

A. Explain how subjects will be recruited. Include sources from which they are recruited, where and how subjects will be first contacted, and recruitment techniques to be utilized.

Subjects were recruited through a process of recognizing who encountered the largest financial obstacles as a result of the Great Recession. In a small district the superintendent, treasurer, maintenance and transportation supervisor, and food service director would be contacted.

B. Describe the sample size and characteristics of the subjects. Include age, gender, and/or racial/ethnic affiliations causing them to be included in the study population, institution status (i.e., patients or prisoners), and their general state of mental and physical health. Explain why it is necessary to use these particular population subgroups or special populations.
All subjects are adult men and women. They are all employed in administrative or supervisory positions within the rural school district.

3. Confidentiality of Data

Explain how data will be secured and/or stored to safeguard the identifiable records of individuals. Include how long the data will be stored beyond the required 36 months and how the data will be destroyed.

All data collected will be locked within a safe throughout the process of the study until its completion. After the required 36 months the researcher will personally destroy all documents with a paper shredder before disposing of all material collected.

4. Informed Consent Procedures

A. How will the subject be informed of the nature of the investigation, the reasonably foreseeable risks, and the voluntary nature of his/her participation?

___x___ In writing (attach a written copy of this explanation)

_______ Orally (attach a written copy of this explanation)
B. Once the above information has been presented, will you obtain written consent from the subject (i.e., their signature) prior to their participation?

__x__ Yes (attach a copy of the written consent form)

_____ No (attach a detailed justification for requesting waiver of written consent)

C. Are the subjects: (Check all that apply)

_____ children

_____ persons with cognitive disabilities

_____ prisoners

_____ economically disadvantaged

_____ pregnant women

_____ educationally disadvantaged

_____ other (please specify)__________________________________

Describe from whom consent will be sought and by whom permission will be granted.

N/A

5. Risks to Subjects

A. Describe in detail any immediate or long-range risks to subjects that may arise from the procedures used in the study. Risks may be physical,
psychological, social, legal, or economic. Indicate the precautions you have taken to minimize these risks.

No immediate or long-range risks to subjects exist from the procedures used in the study. There are no physical, psychological, social, legal, or economic risks as precautions have been made to ensure the participants safety.

B. Explain the nature of any deception if it is part of the research design.

No deception will exist at all in any part of the research design.

6. Benefits

Describe the anticipated benefits to subjects, field of study, and to society, from knowledge that may be obtained in this study.

Given the recent modifications in school budgets during the Great Recession, school leaders are evaluating organizations at a non-stop rate. It is necessary to conduct a study that explores the events of creative budgeting within school districts in relationship to transportation, foods and services, utilities, and what will retained after adequate funding returns. This will assist school districts interested in realigning their priorities. With an upgrade in how services are provide, students will benefit from this directly and indirectly.
CONSENT FORM

A. PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

Mr. Shawn Braman, a student in Ashland University’s Doctoral Department in Educational Leadership, is conducting a research study to help understand the “New Normal” in education in a rural school district in Ohio. You are being asked to participate in this study because you may have extensive knowledge on which financial changes were effective and retained after public schools recovered.

B. PROCEDURES

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1. You may be interviewed for no longer than two 30-minute audiotapes.

2. You may be asked to respond to a questionnaire about your reaction to the audiotapes. It may take approximately fifteen minutes to complete the questionnaire.

C. RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

The researcher does not anticipate any risks or discomforts through any participation within the study.
D. BENEFITS

There will be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study. However, the information that you provide may help health professionals better understand how leaders in education learn to adjust and to thrive in conditions of the “New Normal” as a result of the Great Recession from 2007 to 2009.

E. COSTS

There will be no costs to you as a result of taking part in this study.

F. PAYMENT

There will be no payment for your participation in this study. If you decide to withdraw prior to study completion, you are free to do so at any time.

Shawn Braman will be available to answer any questions you may have about this study. If you have further questions, you may call him at 330-573-5372.

If you have any comments or concerns about participation in this study, you should first talk with the researcher. If for some reason you do not wish to do this, you may contact the Human Subjects Review Board, which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. You may reach the board office between 8:00 and 5:00, Monday through Friday, by calling Ashland University at 419-289-4142.
H. CONSENT

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY. You are free to decline to be in this study, or to withdraw from it at any point. Your decision as to whether or not to participate in this study will have no influence on your present or future status as an employee.

If you agree to participate, you should sign below.

Date: ______________________

Signature of Study Participant: ____________________________
APPENDIX C
The Human Subjects Review Board has approved your research study. You may proceed with the study as you have outlined in your proposal. The approval is granted for one calendar year. Research participant interaction and/or data collection is to cease at this time, unless application for extension has been submitted and approval for continuance is obtained.

The primary role of the HSRB is to ensure the protection of human research participants. As a result of this mandate, we ask that you adhere to the ethical principles of autonomy, justice, and beneficence. We would also like to remind you of your responsibility to report any violation to participant protections immediately upon discovery. Likewise, we would like to remind you that any alteration to the research proposal as it was approved cannot move forward. Any amendment to the application must be submitted for approval before the project can resume.

We wish you success in your discoveries,

Carol S. Reece DNP, APRN, CPNP
Ashland University
Chair Human Subjects Review Board
HUMAN SUBJECTS REVIEW BOARD
REQUEST FOR APPROVAL TO USE HUMAN SUBJECTS IN RESEARCH
APPLICATION FOR EXTENSION

Return to: Dean of the Graduate School, 100 Founders Hall, Ashland University, Ashland, Ohio 44805

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR _Shawn Braman________ (typed name)

DEPARTMENT _Educational Leadership________ (typed name)

ADDRESS _280 Meadow Ridge Trail________ EMAIL _shraman@ashland.edu________

CITY Doylestown________ STATE _Oh_ ZIP _44230_ PHONE (_330_) 573-9024________

CO-INVESTIGATOR(S) N/A________ (signature)

(project name) (signature)

PROJECT TITLE _The New Normal after the Great Recession of 2009: A qualitative case study________

HSRB APPROVAL CODE (IF APPLICABLE)_ ORIGINAL APPROVAL DAY _1/22/13________

BEGINNING DATE OF EXTENDED RESEARCH (MONTH/YEAR) _6/16________

ANTICIPATED ENDING DATE OF RESEARCH (MONTH/YEAR) _7/16________

I agree to follow the procedures outlined in the original summary description and any attachments to ensure that the rights and welfare of human subjects in my project are properly protected. I understand that no contact may be initiated with subjects until I have received approval of this extension from the HSRB and complied with any required modifications in connection with that approval.

(Signature of Principal Investigator) ____________ Date ____________

APPROVAL OF FACULTY ADVISOR: Required for all students

(Dr. Wilson will agree to extend) ____________ Date ____________

(Signature of Advisor) ____________

PRINTED NAME OF ADVISOR _Dr. Harold E. Wilson________

□ FACULTY RESEARCH: EXTERNALLY FUNDED YES _x_ AGENCY ____________

□ NO _x_ ____________

□ STUDENT DIRECTED RESEARCH:

□ ADVISOR _______ THESIS _______ DISSESSATION _x_ COURSE REQUIREMENT

□ COURSE # _______ PRACTICUM _______ OTHER (Please Specify) ____________

This project is approved for an extension of up to one year.

□ This project is not approved for an extension. Comments: ____________

Signature of HSRB Chair ____________ Date ____________